From Digital Witnessing to Diaspora Wars: Designing Justice in Global Black Online Communities

by

Tyler Musgrave

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Sarita Schoenebeck, Chair
Associate Professor Erica Edwards
Professor Kentaro Toyama
Assistant Professor Michaelanne Thomas

Tyler Musgrave
tylermus@umich.edu
ORCID iD: 0009-0001-7268-1605

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the digital Black experience as a relational dynamic shaped by global and intragroup dynamics of joy, harm, healing, and conflict–an experience deeply entangled with the socio-technical systems that mediate identity, connection, and power. Central to this exploration is *technomediated justice*, a framework that reimagines how digital platforms can be designed to acknowledge and attune to relational dynamics that shape justice such as conflict, accountability, and differentiation. Technomediated justice is grounded in the belief that justice must be embedded into the architecture of digital systems, not as an afterthought, but as a core design principle responsive to the legacies of carcerality, anti-Blackness, and coloniality embedded in platform governance [24, 44, 183].

Through three interconnected empirical chapters, this dissertation examines how racially Black individuals and communities navigate digital spaces and technologies, honoring the full complexity of Black digital life as both human and technologically mediated. It asks how intimate, culturally grounded, and accountable digital communities might emerge from within—and in resistance to—platforms shaped by Western hegemonic power and global corporate conglomerates.

Chapter Two investigates the emotional landscapes of Black women and femmes on social media, revealing how harm, healing, and joy are simultaneously navigated in often-hostile digital environments. Chapter Three examines global online relationality through the hashtag #diasporawars, tracing how diasporic Black users engage identity, tension, and solidarity across platforms like Twitter/X. Chapter Four deepens the framework of technomediated justice by bridging Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and restorative justice, exploring how justice practitioners working toward relational repair offer critical design insights for socio-technical systems. Chapter Five synthesizes these studies into three culturally grounded

design principles that seek to reimagine the digital experience—particularly for Black users across both global and local contexts.

By holistically defining the digital Black experience through the lens of technomediated justice, this dissertation offers culturally responsive interventions to pressing challenges such as the complexities of networked relationality, and the structural dynamics of platform governance and design. Drawing from the framework of global Blackness, it highlights how diasporic users negotiate identity, misrecognition, and belonging across digital platforms—fostering relational dynamics marked by conflict, care, creativity, and joy.

This research ultimately investigates how socio-technical infrastructures shape the relational dynamics and collective experiences of global Black users online. Grounded in the framework of technomediated justice, it offers empirical, theoretical, and design-oriented contributions that reimagine digital spaces as sites of relational repair and cultural affirmation. Drawing from three completed studies, this dissertation proposes three design principles for building digital platforms that do not flatten Black identity or relationality but are accountable to Black users' histories, cultures, and collective futures. It seeks to shift the socio-technical imagination toward justice—not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived practice embedded in digital design, governance, and community building. In doing so, this work advances pathways for relational, healing-centered, and culturally grounded digital environments that reflect the complexity of global Black digital life.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The digital Black experience is a dynamic tapestry woven by people racialized as Black and their communities as they navigate digital technologies and platforms in this postmodern moment of the 21st century. The experience unfolds within digital spaces where culture, identity, and activism converge to birth varied expressions of Black life, each as unique as it is enduring. These expressions are shaped by both historical legacies of resilience, resistance, and innovation and ongoing confrontations with globalized anti-Blackness and systemic oppression in digital form: through content moderation, digital divides, algorithmic biases, surveillance, and mis/disinformation [44, 183, 24]. Yet, as Maya Angelou famously proclaimed, "Still I Rise. [11]"

While much of this dissertation is grounded in the U.S. context, it challenges the assumption that digital Black life is solely an US.-based or Western hegemonic experience –a framing that persists largely because much of the scholarship and research in this field is produced within the United States. Several scholars have pushed back against this this unintentional narrow framing. For instance, the concept of the *digital Black Atlantic* explicitly resists U.S.-centric narratives in social media research, emphasizing the transnational dimensions of Black digital life and the ways Black communities across the diaspora leverage technology to assert their identities, histories, and resist marginalization [85, 216, 198].

However, the digital Black experience must also be conceptualization through broader global dynamics, dynamics that transcend the *digital Black Atlantic* and its predominant anchoring in the historical narratives of chattel slavery and Middle Passage [198, 85]. Writing from the multifacetedness of Blackness poses epistemological and methodological challenges, particularly when digital expressions emerge from diverse geopolitical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic contexts [38, 91, 174]. This dissertation responds by pointing and subtly shifting beyond a Black Atlantic framework and instead propose *global Blackness* as a conceptual lens, one that connects historical and structural realities Black identity to the relational dynamics of contemporary digital life.

Global Blackness highlights both the shared and localized experiences of Black communities, with particular attention to the intragroup relational dynamics that unfold across digital platforms [91, 174]. Within this framework, the digital Black experience is not monolithic but fluid, relational, and shaped by tensions between imposed identities and emergent solidarities.

Understanding the digital Black experience also requires grappling with the material realities of Black life in the US., where capitalism, race, ethnicity, gender, and class intersect– and where dominant technology conglomerates, rooted in the logic of US. empire, profit from and perpetuate intersecting inequalities as entertainment. Drawing from Black feminist epistemologies, including intersectionality, restorative justice, and global Blackness, this dissertation embraces a non-reductive approach to oppression and diversity.

For instance, the experience of double consciousness , the internal conflict of seeing oneself through the eyes of others [75], persists in digital contexts, where Black users often navigate visibility, surveillance, and self-presentation simultaneously. In an interview on Queer Black joy, Ashon Crawley articulates this condition of digital double consciousness:

> "One of the things that digital space actually makes more available is the ability to connect with, or to at least notice, that other people are making other kinds of choices constantly."

Subjected to the persistent scrutiny of a platformed white gaze, digital Black joy and community become necessary antidotes [224, 162, 187]. Scholars of Black digital culture have examined how users employ platform features like memes, live-streams, hashtags, and stitches, to counter platformed anti-Black joy practices and envision future world-making possibilities that transcend identity politics by centering identity.

At the same time, this dissertation invites deeper exploration into how digital research and online spaces may contribute to the flattening of Black life—where the richness, variation, and intragroup complexity of Black experiences risk being reduced to oversimplified or essentialist representations. Bringing in more questions that fields like Black Studies and Black Feminist wrestle with in their respective fields. This inquiry brings forward questions long considered in fields like Black Studies and Black Feminist thought, particularly around recognition, identity, and relational difference.

One such framework can be found in Franz Fanon's extension of double consciousness in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he articulates a third gaze, not only how the hegemonic society views Black bodies but, also how Black individuals are perceived and judged by other Black people both within and outside their community [87]. These layered acts of perception,

misrecognition, and internalization resonate deeply within platformed interactions, where intragroup tensions are often amplified and misunderstood.

An example of third gaze in the digital is the ongoing *#diasporawars* discourse on Black Twitter (now X), which encapsulates diaspora conflict, solidarity, and misrecognition (see Chapter 3). These digital debates surface the uneven legacies of colonialism, migration, and identity formation, revealing that Blackness online is contested and co-created but, not static or uniform.

This dissertation uses the term *Black* and/or *global Black* as a capacious, all-encompassing concept to symbolize racialized digital experiences. While also, acknowledging that not everyone racialized as Black identifies in this way. I use *Black* as a collective identity rooted in shared experiences of racialization, where strife and communality coexist. Additionally, I deploy *Black* as a critique of essentialist perspectives, whether embedded in digital affordances or research approaches. All while, illuminating the richness and diversity of the (digital) Black experience, where collective and global notions meet individual and local nuance.

By analyzing the digital Black experience through its intersectionality, globality, and creative expression, this dissertation seeks to offer a grounded understanding that embraces the emotional landscapes of Black women and femmes on social media, as well as the contentious diaspora dialogues of *#diasporawars*. It examines how Black identity and community are performed, negotiated, and transformed in digital spaces, and ultimately aims to develop culturally grounded design principles that foster equitable and "Blackity black black" online environments–spaces that reflect the full complexity of (digital) Black life.

Amid this complexity, contestation, and possibility, the dissertation introduces technomediated justice as a critical framework for reimagining digital infrastructures, epistemologies, and research practices that shape how Blackness is constructed and contested online.

1.1 Technomediated Justice

Amid these challenges and transformations, I developed the concept of technomediated justice as a critical intervention that mobilizes socio-technical systems alongside justice theories to confront the legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and carceral techno-politics. Rather than treating technology as neutral or merely reformable, this framework insists on embedding justice as a design imperative—one that actively resists elite capture, extractive systems, and punitive logics, while reorienting digital infrastructures toward a collective, transformative future.

At its core, technomediated justice demands critical structural analysis aimed at disrupt-

ing Western hegemonic frameworks and advancing liberation-centered strategies, including reparative, restorative, and transformative justice, Black feminist care ethics, epistemic disobedience, and anti-colonial design. Following Fanon's diagnoses of a third gaze, this approach acknowledges the psychic and structural wounds, such as cultural betrayal trauma, inflicted by colonialism—not only between groups, but within them—and calls for modes of repair that resist assimilation and remake relational life on freer, de-colonial terms. Within this framework, Black digital life is the focal point of sense-making, relational repair, and communality—a site where the conditions of human connection, justice, and futurity are continuously reimagined.

Technomediated justice is deeply informed by the creative resilience embedded in Black cultural practices, particularly the ways in which Black communities have historically reimagined and repurposed available resources to assert presence, build community, and shape narrative on their own terms online and offline. As one speaker reflected:

> *"And I think Black culture is very good (...) of having to make something out of nothing. And we're very good at repurposing and remixing things in different ways, right? You see that in our food, you see it in our fashion, and you certainly see it in the birth of hip-hop, right, which is like taking James Brown records, taking all these things and, like, rapping, like, over the break beats, right? So we're always taking something and remixing it and repurposing it in different ways."*
>
> — *Prentice Penny on Black Twitter [**?**]*

As Penny suggests, the magic of Black culture lies in its ability to remix and repurpose, a creative ethic mirrored in digital spaces where Blackness manifests as unbounded, borderless, global, and intersectional expressions of identity. This process resonates with the historic experience of Black communities who have long walked a tightrope between marginalization and influence, fixed and fluid identities, and evolving yet familiar cultural expressions. This is why Black life has not only endured but flourished in the digital age—a space rich with contradictions including, conflict, and creation.

1.2 Grounding Research

While much of this dissertation engages the lived experiences of Black users within global digital infrastructures, one study turns to restorative justice practitioners whose work is rooted in Indigenous and Black ethical frameworks but who do not primarily engage digital

Black social media communities. This study provides a critical perspective on how relational repair is operationalized within socio-technical contexts. It functions as a grounding point for examining how justice, care, and accountability can be designed into systems—and is vital to the broader theorization of technomediated justice.

The framework of technomediated justice provides a lens for examining the socio-technical infrastructures that mediate relational, communal, and technical dynamics. It refuses to treat platforms as neutral and instead recognizes them as deeply embedded in colonial, racial, and carceral logics.

This dissertation investigates how the socio-technical infrastructures of digital platforms shape the relational dynamics, representation, and collective experiences of Black users online. Centering the framework of technomediated justice, this research makes empirical, theoretical, and design-oriented contributions to reimagine digital spaces as sites of relational repair, cultural affirmation, and structural accountability. The aim is to promote more equitable, healing-centered, and culturally grounded digital environments that honor the complexity of global Black digital life.

1.3 Positionality of Researcher

I am a first-generation, blue-collar-raised, Black femme Ph.D. candidate whose ancestral roots trace back to the Chesapeake Bay region. My orientation to justice work is inseparable from my lived experiences, cultural lineage, and the communities that have shaped me.

I was fortunate to attend an undergraduate institution rooted in the Quaker tradition—originally Friends World College, now LIU Global. This unique program allowed me, during my formative years, to live and study outside the confines of the United States academic apparatus, which often functions as a vehicle for nationalistic and neoliberal narratives. Spending a year each in Costa Rica, China, and South Africa, I was immersed in educational environments that challenged my worldview, deepened my political consciousness, and introduced me to radically different perspectives on identity, power, and global solidarity. These experiences continue to shape how I approach research, pedagogy, and institutional critique today.

My deepened and applied commitment to restorative and transformative practices came from my lived experience in 2016 during my U.S. Peace Corps service in Cameroon, where I witnessed how local communities responded to both state violence and interpersonal harm during the Anglophone Crisis. That experience marked the beginning of my journey toward understanding accountability, repair, and relational care beyond carceral and colonial frameworks.

After being evacuated due to civil war in Cameroon, I moved to Oakland, CA, where I trained and worked as a restorative justice facilitator and case manager with Community Works West. The restorative justice community in the Bay Area held me through my transition from Cameroon and continues to shape my worldview. While working with youth in diversion programs, I observed how their lives were entangled with the tech sector—both as a source of harm through gentrification and surveillance, and as a source of curiosity and aspiration. In response, I helped organize programs that brought these young people into tech spaces and connected them with digital skills training. This experience seeded my curiosity about technology's role in justice work and ultimately led me to a fellowship at Mozilla, where I began staging restorative circles in virtual reality and co-created RestorativeVR.

These personal and professional experiences deeply inform my scholarly commitments. My dissertation builds on this foundation, developing the framework of technomediated justice, which calls for embedding justice, care, and accountability directly into socio-technical systems. I reject the idea that technology is neutral or merely reformable. Instead, I understand it as a site of contested power—one that must be reoriented toward repair, especially for communities historically marginalized by digital infrastructures.

I now live and teach in Detroit, a city where my imagination and creativity have found home. Detroit holds a deep legacy of resistance, innovation, and Black cultural brilliance that continuously inspires my work. Here, I have encountered new models of community resilience and digital experimentation that affirm my belief in the possibility of building alternative technological futures—ones rooted in care, self-determination, and collective liberation. Detroit isn't just where I conduct research; it is where I feel most creatively alive, most intellectually challenged, and most accountable.

Because I remain closely connected to restorative justice communities, and many of the individuals I interviewed are part of my extended network, I recognize that my positionality may incline me to see promise where others might see constraint. I am also aware that restorative approaches mediated through technology are not universally effective and often introduce new complexities. Throughout the research process, I committed to critical self-reflection, consulted with collaborators, and invited feedback to ensure my interpretations remained grounded and balanced.

Ultimately, my position as a Black femme scholar, community-based restorative justice practitioner, and technologist shapes not just what I study, but how I study it. I carry with me the lessons of my childhood growing up in the Chesapeake Bay, the Anglophone resistance in Cameroon, the radical care of Oakland's justice circles, and the visionary spirit of Detroit. I see research not as extraction, but as an offering —one that must be accountable to the communities from which it emerges and to the futures it dares to imagine.

1.4 Chapter Map

This dissertation explores the digital Black experience as a relational dynamic where elements of healing, joy, conflict, and harm are evident. At the same time, I further develop the concept of technomediated justice, which serves as a critical framework for analyzing and reimagining the socio-technical infrastructures that mediate Black digital life, particularly in response to carceral and anti-black logics embedded in platform design and governance. Through three interconnected chapter studies, I examine how Black individuals and communities navigate digital spaces, addressing their holistic online interactions without labeling anything good or bad, right or wrong, positive or negative because, again, the Black digital experience is complex- the human experience is complex. By focusing on technomediated justice, this work seeks to envision how digital communities can be designed as intimate, accountable, and culturally grounded spaces that resist extractive entities and prioritize relational repair.

Chapter Two examines the experiences of harm, healing, and joy among Black women and femmes on social media, revealing the complex emotional terrains they navigate in digital spaces. *Chapter Three* investigates the global online relationality of Black diaspora communities through the hashtag *#diasporawars*, illustrating how identity, conflict, and connection are negotiated across platforms like Twitter. *Chapter Four* engages the framework of technomediated justice by bridging Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) with restorative justice practices, demonstrating what HCI can learn from practitioners committed to accountability and repair. *Chapter Five* synthesizes these insights to propose three design principles that support relational, equitable, and transformative digital experiences.

CHAPTER 2

Harm, Healing and Joy

2.1 Black Women and Femmes' Joy and Pain[1]

Black women experience myriad forms of harassment, harm, and unwanted behavior online—including racism, threats, stalking, insults, unsolicited sexual photos, and other digitally mediated violence [66**?** , 76, 107, 156, 179]. These experiences are not isolated incidents but rather are endemic to digital life, woven into the design, governance, and culture of platforms. From misogynoir on Twitter [16, 136] to sexual harassment in livestreaming and gaming spaces [107, 108], to disproportionate targeting of Black women journalists and politicians [66], digital environments reflect and amplify offline structures of racialized and gendered violence. These harms are not caused by technology per se, but by the ways technology is developed, deployed, and weaponized within deeply rooted systems of oppression. As Dr. Erica B. Edwards argues in her analysis of #TeacherBae, Black women's digital self-presentation is often misread and regulated through racialized and gendered surveillance, reinforcing the need for justice frameworks that account for how technomediated environments reproduce the same carceral logics they claim to transcend [78].

This chapter centers technomediated justice [177] as a critical framework for interrogating how historical legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and carceral logics have shaped the digital experiences of Black women and femmes. The violence Black people face online must be understood as an extension of the human trafficking and exploitation of Africans, and the enduring systems of economic and social inequality that followed. Digital infrastructures are not neutral—they are shaped by hegemonic power, and often uphold punitive and extractive logics. As such, the online harms Black women and femmes experience are not aberrations but symptoms of a broader failure to embed justice into the design of digital systems.

[1]Musgrave, T., Cummings, A., & Schoenebeck, S. (2022, April). Experiences of harm, healing, and joy among black women and femmes on social media. In Proceedings of the 2022 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems (pp. 1-17).

Yet, even within these inhospitable environments, Black women and femmes have cultivated liberatory digital practices. Scholars of digital critical studies and Black feminist technoculture have long highlighted the dual nature of online platforms as both sites of harm and spaces of survival, resistance, and joy [16, 24, 57, 66, 81, 121, 136, 154, 162]. These platforms have become grounds for digital care work, activist labor, community formation, and what Jessica Marie Johnson describes as "digital femme love practice"[141]. I follow this lineage by asking: How do Black women and femmes not only survive online, but also transform digital spaces into sites of relational repair, healing, and futurity?

In this study, I conducted 18 focus groups with 49 Black women and gender-diverse people—including femmes and non-binary participants—to better understand how they navigate unwanted behavior online and cultivate healing, coping, and joy. I grounded the analysis in Black feminist thought, transformative justice, and restorative practices, approaching the focus groups not simply as data collection, but as acts of care and epistemic resistance. I use the term "Black women and femmes" as an intentionally expansive category that acknowledges those who have been structurally and culturally marginalized at the intersection of Blackness and gender. As Kaila Adia Story research pushes forth, Black femme identity carries revolutionary potential, queer refusal, and the power to reimagine visibility itself [227].

Through this chapter, I argue that Black women and femmes are engaging in technomediated repair: transformative acts of care, community-building, and resistance within—and despite—the digital systems that fail to protect them. Their stories challenge the tendency to pathologize Black digital life solely through the lens of harm. Instead, they illuminate how Black digital life becomes a site of sense-making and survival, where dignity, joy, and radical love are asserted in the face of systemic erasure.

Ultimately, this chapter contributes to HCI and critical computing scholarship by:

- Centering Black femme epistemologies in digital justice discourse,
- Illuminating how technomediated harm is entangled with historical violence,
- And offering a framework for how technomediated justice might be achieved—not only by minimizing harm, but by designing for healing, repair, and communal care.

As the Combahee River Collective reminds us, the liberation of those most oppressed creates the conditions for everyone's freedom [234]. It is from this belief that I invite the reader into the digital lives of Black women and femmes—not only to understand their pain, but to learn from their visions of digital possibility.

2.2 Related Work

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

2.2.1 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 [143]

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 [62]. Black feminism recognizes the subsequent interlocking systems of oppression that Black women experience as a result of historical legacies of subjugation from the economic organization of capitalism in the United States [60, 62]. 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 [21]. 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 an opportunity for further generative action in service to a relational liberatory love politic [22]. Black feminist liberatory politics is as personal as it is a commitment to the beloved community and politics of sisterhood as a force against oppression, carceral logics, and the hegemony [21]. 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 [61, 89, 126, 139, 172]. 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, Black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith, founder of the Combahee River Collective, reflects critically on bell hooks' seminal work Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism—a transformative text that hooks began writing at age 19 while still in college [20, 215]. While Smith agrees with hooks' central claim that the intersectional identity of Black women resulted in them experiencing greater suffering than Black men during slavery, she expresses concern that hooks' analysis underrepresents the ways in which Black men were also subjugated by slavery, colonialism, and systemic oppression [215]. Smith cautions against framing Black men as parallel oppressors to white patriarchal power, arguing that such positioning risks misrepresenting their vulnerability and undermines the goals of Black feminist theory.

More recently, scholar Jennifer Gómez has developed the framework of the 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 [106]. Gómez explains how (in-tra)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 [112]. 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 [23]. Additional critical engagement with the Black feminist framework comes from Joy James and her perceptive class analyses and Jennifer Nash's critical analysis on Black feminism's engagement with intersectionality [139, 180]. 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" [17].

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 [62]. 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 [61, 62]. 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 [62]. 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" [196]. 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 [24].

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 [16]. Tropes weaponized to marginalize Black women include, but are not limited to, the mammy archetype, the sapphire caricature, and the Jezebel [16]. 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 [16, 27, 112]. Unfortunately, new forms of pop culture have not been spared in replicating these harmful tropes; in fact, they have exacerbated their pervasiveness [16, 63, 136, 238]. On social media, for example, platform design and norms are now at the center of culture creation, replication, and dissemination globally [258].

2.2.2 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 [76, 9, 208]. These behaviors can be one-time events, or they can take the form of sustained harassment over long periods [102]. Harassment that is networked—i.e., coordinated by many people—may be especially damaging to its targets [167]. Online harassment has been documented across platforms, including social media like Twitter and Instagram, game platforms like Xbox and Twitch, in journalism, and elsewhere [30, 50, 107, 108, 244]. 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, 48, 56, 86, 102, 140, 207, 208]. 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 [159].

To address online harms, social media platforms typically rely on community guidelines that indicate what kinds of content are 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 [100, 199, 212]. Automated filters rely on machine learning models that attempt to identify content that violates guidelines [51]. 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) [130, 166, 239]. 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 [199].

When content is found to violate community guidelines, platforms typically rely on a few types of sanctions [104]. One is a warning to the account owner, which is used for relatively mild violations and first-time offenders. A second is the 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 on 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 [209]. While punishment may be an effective response, it is also possible that restorative responses like apologies, mediation, or compensation could be effective alternatives [209]. Shame-based approaches have also been proposed as a form of gender-based justice [228]. A second challenge with punitive remedies is that they rely on content deletion, which introduces concerns about rights to freedom of expression and censorship [56, 228].

Social media platforms and their affordances enable harassment that 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 [76, 159]. LGB respondents reported being twice as

likely (57% vs 26%) as heterosexual respondents to not post online due to a fear of harassment [159]. In India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, women experience widespread online abuse, especially cyberstalking, impersonation, and personal content leakages [204]. Specifically, in Bangladesh, gender-based harassment is widespread, and women often seek justice by unveiling harassing content and users to others [229]. A study by Pollicy, a 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 [146].

Though gender-based violence is documented in many countries throughout the world, content moderation policy and enforcement have been largely enacted by a small population of people in Western technology companies, typically led by men who are white or Asian [258]. Taking a global, universal approach to content moderation may result in hegemony, where value systems are enacted by those in power [128]. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that content moderation is an opaque process [206]: 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 racist speech are not sanctioned [166]. While extensive work in HCI has now focused on online harassment and content moderation, little of it has focused on Black women and femmes' experiences in the United States, a pattern of oversight documented in recent years by scholars of race and technology in HCI [43, 120, 122]. 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 [16, 107, 166, 183]. Brandeis Marshall proposes the concept of "algorithmic misogynoir", building off of Moya Bailey's "misogynoir" [16, 166], 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" [113]. Hudson and l'Nasah Crockett began using the hashtag #YourSlipIsShowing to flag faux Black feminist 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 [58]. 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 with Black life [168].

2.2.3 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 the politics of liberation [19, 82, 124]. 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 heteropatriachy [73, 145, 150]. TJ expands on grassroots movements resistant to violence in 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" [145].

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 [171, 172]. 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 [145]. 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 [82], to repair harm after online harassment [210], and to build interventions that support healing while minimizing harm [14].

This notion of accountability is also a part of restorative justice (RJ), an adjacent theoretical praxis to TJ [36, 115, 169]. RJ is a philosophy that centers on healing and accountability to repair harm and wrongdoing, strengthen community, and build relationships between victims, those who caused harm, and their community [246]. RJ begins with the acknowledgement of harm and the desire to take responsibility for those who committed or facilitated this harm in order to begin the accountability, forgiveness, and healing process for all involved parties: victim, community, and those who committed harm. Whereas RJ often

focuses on interpersonal relationships and communities' experiences of harm, TJ addresses 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" [186]. 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 [38]. Scholars have referred to the concept of "sistah circles" where "digital Black femme love practice" is centered [68, 141]. 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 barbershops and Black salons [226].

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" [16]. 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" [16]. Black feminists interrogate issues and resist oppression outside the traditional and hegemonic online public [219]. Steele and Lu describe how traditions of orality like storytelling are rhetorical strategies in online spaces for resistance, expressions of grief, creativity, and joy of each other [162].

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 movements [136]. 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 [58]. Klassen et al.'s study shows how Black Twitter responds to racism with community-based networks of resistance, empowerment, and joy [154].

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 [16, 37, 225, 237]. 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 [42, 111]. 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"[141]. Black women and femmes curate their digital lives, shaping social media platforms to evoke their dynamic selves and collective expressions of healing, communality, self-care, personal reflection, creativity, joy, culture and knowledge production, and digital alchemy [16, 162, 225]. 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 [219].

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" [184]. Brooks describes choosing joy as "living [in] embodiment of our innate birthright of love"; "breathing free from chains" [103]; and living abundantly, with love, advocacy for social change, rest, breathing, and full embrace [39]. Thus, the examination of Black joy on social media platforms is an acknowledgment of the fully human Black experience [39, 162].

2.3 Methods

I 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, I describe the focus groups, recruitment procedures, data analysis, and ethical considerations in planning and performing this study.

2.3.1 Participant Recruitment

During recruitment, U solicited basic demographic information from participants to determine eligibility. I asked about gender ("What is your gender?") and race ("What is your race?") as open-ended questions and about age as a drop-down range. I asked what country the participants lived in and how long they had lived there (to focus on U.S. Black experiences). I 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 the study was that participants must identify within the broad categories of Black or African American, must identify as women, femme, or non-binary person, must be living in the U.S., and must be active social media users. I also selected participants who had experienced unwanted behavior themselves or observed it among other Black women. I chose to include observation as a criterion because observing the harm of others can be harmful for people from similar identities and groups. The 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.

I 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 the recruitment strategy, I 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. I 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 [173]. I stopped recruiting participants when I started to hear consistent themes. In communications with research participants, I attached a "digital care package" that 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.

I conducted 18 focus groups with 49 participants during a two-month period in 2021. The 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 observed a Black woman/femme receiving unwanted behavior. The social media platforms that were reported from the 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).

2.3.2 Focus Group Protocol

I drew on restorative justice practices in the design of the focus groups. Specifically, I 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 the harms caused. Circles can also be used for more general experiences of harm—as was the case in the study of Black women and femmes experiencing online harassment—as a way to come together in a communal context. The 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 among 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].

The focus groups followed elements of RJ circles where the lead researcher played the role of circlekeeper, facilitating the conversation and monitoring the well-being of participants while centering on the restorative values of transparency, mutual care, respect, truth, and safety. While this approach deviates from common approaches to interviews and focus groups in HCI, I chose to center my methods on Black feminist and Indigenous practices. Because I screened participants for experiences of online harassment, I could assume that most or all had experienced or witnessed harassment in the design of the RJ circles. This assumption also shaped my 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 among participants. I revised the protocol iteratively, reflecting on the protocol after each of the first few focus groups and revising questions as needed. I 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. I 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. I 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 discussion of the guiding question, 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. I intentionally encouraged the researcher-facilitators to fluidly shift between the roles of researcher, facilitator, and participant in order to foster self-disclosure and cultivate a sense of support. This approach also served

as a deliberate rejection of presumed objectivity or neutrality—norms often rooted in and upheld by dominant, white epistemological frameworks.

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

As shown in Table **??**, participants reflected diverse gender and racial identities (see Appendix A).

2.3.2.1 Data Analysis

I audio and video recorded the focus groups and stored them in a shared, secure digital folder. I transcribed the videos afterward 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. I debriefed regularly, after every 1-2 focus groups, among the research team. I took a thematic analysis approach to the analysis of the transcripts where I 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.

In collaboration with my research team, I analyzed the emerging patterns in relation to prior scholarship I was building upon, to help identify relevant themes in the data. I also examined emergent themes that I had not looked for explicitly. I shifted which theories and frameworks the research would be drawing from over time as I conducted the focus groups and analyzed the data; for example, I 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. I relied on the open coding to iteratively memo and identify higher-level themes to focus on in this paper. I 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]. The 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.

2.4 Results

Results are grouped into three themes. In the first section, I present a selection of stories of unwanted behavior. I 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.

2.4.1 Experiences of Unwanted Behavior and Online Harassment

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

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 used to post pictures from Black Lives Matter marches I attended in New York City, and from the Million Man March in Washington, D.C. I was really excited to share updates about what was happening in Flint, and I also posted more abstract reflections on racism—where it comes from and how it operates. I tried to critically examine and call out people I felt were engaging in activism only performatively. I'd often get a lot of questions,

especially about the Black Lives Matter posts."

For Mariah, her posts were a way to call out racism, white supremacy, and the performative activism she saw from white acquaintances—people she knew personally who, in her words, were "not being real." She reflected, "Now it seems like liberal and progressive white people have forgotten that there was a time when not all of them supported BLM." In response to her posts, Mariah often received defensive and aggressive comments, primarily from white women and men. These included questions like, "Why do Black Lives matter?" "How am I supposed to respect a movement made up of thugs willing to destroy property?" and "Why can't I say the N-word as a white person?" These remarks appeared directly under her status updates and even beneath photos of marches posted by the same individuals. While a few people expressed support through "Likes," no one ever offered an apology or took accountability. Eventually, Mariah decided to leave Facebook.

Story 2: Tamia

Tamia had three distinct Instagram profiles for food, weightlifting, and personal use. She 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 DMs 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 and 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 among 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 [an] angry Black person. So those were some of the things that 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 no 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.

Shera 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 others wouldn't 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: Tiffy

In 2016, Tiffy 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 Tiffy went to college with commented on her Facebook post that Korryn deserved to die because she was putting her son in danger, along with other harmful statements.

Tiffy 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. Tiffy 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 to 2016, and she posted regularly about her identity and sexuality. She was regularly 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 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 and 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 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 of 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.

2.4.2 Impact of Unwanted Behavior and Online Harassment

In this section, I describe responses to the guiding question: How have these harmful incidences of unwanted behavior and online harassment negatively impacted you? Participants cumulatively expressed emotional, physical, mental, relational, and spiritual impacts associated with unwanted behaviors online. I 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, nonfulfillment, questioning my technological skills, self-betrayal, causing me to be negative, physical health strain like insomnia and rumination.

2.4.2.1 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 de-prioritized Black-centered content, activism, and social justice content, especially on Instagram and Twitter. A couple 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 the 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. Tiffy 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 frontline 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 she 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 group, often taking the form of unsolicited visual content. For example, Alanna, a non-binary participant, shared, "If I feel like I want to subject myself to [harassment], then I'll just hop onto any dating site ever, anytime—my harassment experience jumps 80%." They noted that this often occurred when they matched with cis-het men on dating platforms.

Several participants reported experiencing sexual harassment on Instagram through unsolicited sexual comments and direct messages from men. As described earlier, Tamia shared her experience on a hobby-centered Instagram account. A man who presented as Black initially complimented her on her hobby. When she deflected by saying she was in a relationship and not interested, he responded with sexually aggressive comments about her appearance and sent a "dick pic" via direct message. After she blocked him, he located her other two personal Instagram accounts and continued to harass her.

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, you can report them for a specific reason. And I'll just say like, unsolicited. We're just sexually harassed."

Zariel said social media had made her more suspicious of Black men; she would sometimes bring up controversial topics to "test the waters." She has removed Black men on Facebook and chooses not to follow them back on Instagram. While she emphasized not wanting to be overly distrustful, she also expressed the need to protect herself.

Vanessa experienced street harassment in her hometown from a former boyfriend who, when she was younger, would periodically contact her on Facebook. For her, this "unwanted

behavior online and online harassment stirs up past worries... I have two beautiful daughters and worry about their safety, and hate to post stuff about them online."

2.4.2.2 Relationships and Outlooks

Throughout the focus groups, it became clear that participants' relationships with themselves and others were negatively impacted by unwanted behavior and harassment online. About one-third of participants described experiencing personal distress, including anxiety, self-blame, self-hatred, self-betrayal, comparison, shame, depression, and the internalization of harmful commentary. Rae shared, "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 reflected, "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 explained, "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 the grief she felt from the lack of safety and privacy on Tumblr, while Whitney described residual aggression and anger that spilled over from the combativeness she experienced on Twitter. Deja simply said, "People are committed to misunderstanding you."

Several participants discussed the emotional and relational toll of constantly having to explain and defend themselves online. Mariah described men who used social media to spew ignorant and racist commentary, which left her feeling enraged and betrayed. Whitney shared, "I may be more aggressive due to the inability to have a small discussion online, because it's not just you and the person—it's anybody on [Twitter]." The residue of toxic interactions, such as being called a "bitch" on Twitter, worsened Audria's anxiety to the point that it triggered more arguments with her partner offline. Iesha expressed sadness over the divisiveness and infighting she observed within her Black arts community online. Quintarrah described the outlandish things people in Facebook groups from her hometown said about sexuality and the LGBTQ+ community, noting that their comments often revealed deeper emotions like fear, shame, guilt, and a coercive pressure to conform. Katrina, a frequent churchgoer, shared, "After witnessing racialized political posts from members of my predominantly white church community, people I had once considered friends, I decided to leave the church."

Another common theme was participants' reluctance to share their experiences or fully engage on social media due to fear that their words would be taken out of context or lead to

conflict within their online and offline communities. Veronica described witnessing conflict on Facebook between family members who were later able to reconcile offline; nevertheless, the intensity of the exchange made her fearful for them. Oli shared that she adjusted how she presented herself on Facebook to appease her traditionally African family members.

Participants also discussed the influence of visual societal norms and expectations. For instance, Arianna, a Black plus-sized woman, noted that on social media, praise is often reserved for slimmer women with hourglass figures. She asked, "How do we build confidence while hourglass women are the standard?" Many participants described frequent comparisons—not only related to physical appearance, but also around personal milestones and accomplishments. Mikayla, along with Iesha, shared that during periods of depression, they struggled as creatives: "I didn't want to show anything because I didn't really have anything to show."

Many participants were employed and linked their social media use to their careers or businesses. Niema expressed feeling ashamed of her ambition and desire to gain visibility in her career, knowing it could potentially put her family at risk. Two participants shared experiences of being harassed by coworkers on Facebook. In one case, a participant's post was printed and sent to her workplace, prompting an investigation. She reflected, "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 reflected on the broader political and global implications of online harassment. Alanna, who engaged in political commentary on Facebook, observed that some Americans believe the country has moved beyond racism. She remarked, "Away from racism, but we are in the same spot. This is particularly frustrating and depressing." Nishara shared that social media revealed to her that people outside the U.S. are not necessarily better, as she had also been harassed by individuals from other countries. Her experiences with certain European users and their racist comments led her to view those regions differently. Toya described the identity struggles she faced 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. In the Black American community, I am too African to be Black, reminding me that I don't fit into any box."

2.4.3 Healing and Joy

The final guiding question asked participants how they experience joy, healing, or coping in response to unwanted behavior or online harassment. One focus group offered a clear

distinction worth highlighting: "To heal means to fully address harm. However, coping is working towards healing." According to the data, coping strategies included taking weekly or monthly social media breaks, limiting time spent online, using privacy settings, and consistently blocking harassers—"always block the men harassing and their followers." Andrea noted that coping required building mental resilience, "like celebrities, because they take a beating every day. Their lives are posted everywhere." Alanna described her strategy as "laughing to keep from crying." Zariel found joy in connecting with other Black women who shared similar perspectives and experiences. She recalled receiving apologies from some Black men but emphasized that, without behavior change, the apologies lacked meaning. For Auja, joy came from her "personal curated space"—a digital environment shaped by what she allowed or excluded, which made her experience more enjoyable.

Healing from online harassment occurred both online and offline for participants. Most agreed that healing was an ongoing, nonlinear process. As Quinteya explained, "You learn from the pain, but it's gonna still be present; the ongoing battle equips you for the next battle." Several participants described being active in online community forums for Black women and femmes on Facebook—spaces rooted in Black feminist and queer politics, created to uplift and offer solidarity. Whitney shared that Facebook served as a break from the intensity of Twitter, allowing her to separate her professional identity (maintained on Twitter) from her digital networks on Facebook. Offline, participants coped by taking intentional breaks from social media and engaging in hobbies or spiritual practices, such as biking, watching television, or spending time in nature. Many also found healing through venting to close family and friends; for several participants, their mothers were a key source of support and comfort.

Layla shared that Bumble prompted her to focus more on her offline relationships, which had a net positive impact: "This would be a form of healing—a healing realization for me. Growth." Niema reflected on the potential of social media to contribute to healing, explaining that being reflective and developing confidence in herself was a key part of her process: "Social media can be a part of the healing by strengthening your validation and supporting techniques that foster wellness." Iesha, shaped by her experiences as a bystander to harmful behavior toward other Black women on Twitter, said she had become more mindful of the energy she allowed into her life. She noted that the pandemic made it easier to cultivate this mindfulness both offline and online—especially in digital spaces, where boundaries can often feel porous. Nashelle emphasized the positive impact of becoming more aware of different identities, and Tiffy, a community organizer, said her online experiences affirmed her activist work supporting Black women in her local community.

For Mikayla, Black joy was most visible on Instagram, where images of happy Black

people were frequently shared. Supporting Black creators brought her joy. However, she found the constant stream of news about Black oppression to be mentally exhausting, even when others viewed it as educational. As she put it, "Black people are not here to educate you on their suffering." For many participants, Black joy was rooted in intentionally curating their social media spaces to highlight Black women thriving, communities coming together, humorous memes, and other uplifting content. One participant shared, "It seems like everybody is fixated on Black pain and Black oppression. And I'm like, no—what I'm focusing on is Black joy. So I've protected my statuses. And another friend of mine just posted yesterday, like, 'Listen, all Black things, all Black joy, all day.' Because we already know the pain—we know all of that. But she said, 'Don't bring it to my door. This feed is all about Black people in all their glory, all their joy, all their brilliance. That's what it's about."

Some participants' reflections on joy were rooted in their faith, especially among those in the older age group (ages 51–70). Amery, as mentioned earlier, credited her faith for guiding her decision to spend less time on social media. Katrina shared that she refused to let online harassment diminish her joy, emphasizing the importance of keeping things in perspective. She noted that if conflicts on her church-related Facebook pages hadn't occurred, she might not have learned how to respond to such experiences. Similarly, Veronica expressed that while social media taught her a lot, it never diminished her happiness. She continued moving forward because her faith in God sustained her. Veronica also found joy in her daily bike rides—the music, the scenery, and the sheer ability to ride at age 68. She viewed her health and vitality as reasons to celebrate. Meanwhile, Que described finding joy on Black Twitter, especially through shared experiences and a sense of connection with continental Africans and members of the global Black diaspora.

The decision to center restorative practices in my protocol was grounded in a commitment to Black feminist liberatory love politics. As a testament to this approach, many participants described the study itself as a form of healing. During the focus groups and in follow-up emails, several participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to gather and reflect on their online experiences—something many had never done before. For example, in a follow-up email, Catrina wrote to the 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." Participants valued being in a space that was intentionally structured to be safe, supportive, and reflective. The design of the focus groups, rooted in restorative justice principles, may have contributed to that sense of healing.

2.5 Discussion and Reflections

The results describe the kinds of harm Black women and femmes experience on social media and how they engage with those experiences. Some of the findings echo and expand prior work on Black women's experiences online, especially experiences of misogynoir [16, 166] and efforts to reclaim space through resistance and joy [37, 154, 162]. I reflect here on emerging themes from this 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. I then return to transformative justice frameworks and a provocation: what would TJ look like on social media?

2.5.1 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. I will return to the racism they experienced from white people in. In the next sections, I 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 [104]." 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 are associated with breakdowns of (intra)cultural trust and the development of cultural betrayal trauma [112]. 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 [89, 112, 246]. 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, I had designed the focus group with restora-

tive practices that were designed to support Black women and femmes' disclosures about their experiences. However, revealing my (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 [43, 81], 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 long-standing inequities, and reporting on participants' within-group conflicts is important in illuminating another facet of how discrimination affects communities of color—of any gender. I want to make this clear: disclosures and stories in this study are shared to highlight the nuance of Black women and femmes' digital lives. I 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 intragroup harm happens across identities and can impact communities in profound ways. What I hope readers take away from the explanation of cultural betrayal trauma is that racism and white supremacy have 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.

2.5.2 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 [16]. Many 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 femmes' 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. [58, 108, 226]). 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 [125]." Social media is a form of archiving, and choosing to bring Black feminist epistemology to online harassment is an acknowledgment of whose stories can be told and how, which is necessary for repairing harm [169, 211].

However, these stories are obscured and occluded by existing content moderation prac-

tices. The harm and violence experienced by Black women and femmes are 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 [166], especially through direct messages, and 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" [47].

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 has been targeted by known and unknown users, 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 [62, 20, 21].

However, 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 [34, 206, 208]; it is also important to document, archive, and share the stories that go under-reported 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 [24].

2.5.3 Healing and Joy as Transformative

I return to the transformative justice framework to conceptualize how Black women and femmes leverage Black feminist liberatory love politics—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 [116, 150, 258].

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 [140, 204] and healing rather than scale and profit. Indeed, scholars have called for public interest platforms (e.g. [260] built on design justice principles [63]. According to Johonna Turner, transformative justice posits that "creating safety for ourselves activates our imaginations, strengthens our resilience and cultivates joy and love" [242]. Participants' experiences of harassment online cannot be disentangled from the socio-historical worlds they reside in. Their experiences with sexual harassment from men, racism, and the 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 [38]. As 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. 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 Collins's matrix of domination and transformative justice frameworks [19, 62, 124], I can understand how power relations that exist in society manifest online to enable and feed digital misogynoir as libidinal desire. Yet, as revealed by participants, the digital alchemy and (love) practice of community, activism, joy, and enjoyment experienced on social media is valuable to them as Black women [166] and provides reason to participate on platforms.

2.6 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, I conducted focus groups with 49 Black women and femmes about

their experiences on social media. I show how they experience harassment and unwanted behavior on social media but that they also reclaim those spaces for healing and joy. I draw from transformative justice frameworks to connect experiences of harm with a transformative politic of healing and joy online. I also reflect on the complexities of cultural betrayal trauma, where Black women and femmes experience betrayal with Black men as well as with white men and women. I 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*

CHAPTER 3

Diaspora Wars

3.1 Mapping Diaspora Wars in Black Twitter[1]

Black Twitter[2] is a dynamic online community and a significant cultural phenomenon in the digital age. Research has extensively explored its impact on community dynamics [155], cultural production [37], democratic participation [135], consumer behavior [40], and identity formation [165]. While most studies have focused on Black Twitter within the United States, there is a growing interest in its global relevance [243, 214, 198]. This study contributes to this emerging body of literature by examining Black Twitter's global interactions, particularly through the lens of the #diasporawars hashtag. This hashtag reveals both collective engagement within the global Black community and the distinct, often conflicting, identities that exist within it.

The term "Black" in Black Twitter carries deep historical, cultural, and political significance. Historically, Blackness has been used as a marker of racial categorization within a patriarchal and anti-Black world [254, 93]. Today, Blackness symbolizes a broad spectrum of cultural, social, and political identities, representing both a lived reality and a way of thinking and acting in a world that remains hostile to Black people.

This embrace of Blackness is rooted in a rich genealogy of movements across the African continent and its diaspora that reclaimed it from eugenic assumptions. Movements like the U.S. Black Power Movement (1966–) and South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement (1969–) interconnected in their liberation goals and practices [175] through transnational exchanges that shaped global Black consciousness long before the internet era [92]. In some ways, #diasporawars echoes this legacy of global Black exchange, highlighting the ways Blackness is shared, contested, and reinterpreted among communities worldwide.

[1] Musgrave, T., Ye, Y., Toyama, K., Schoenebeck, S., & Threats, M. (forthcoming, 2025). Exploring #diasporawars on Black Twitter. *Social Media + Society.*

[2] I will use the term Twitter rather than X for consistency and familiarity.

At the same time, the hashtag reveals the fractures in global Black solidarity. Often sparked by cultural misunderstandings, historical grievances, or competing claims over authenticity and oppression, #diasporawars underscores the uneven terrain of diasporic belonging. It illustrates how the afterlives of slavery, colonialism, anti-Black capitalism, and migration continue to inform how Black people relate to one another—and how those relationships are shaped, mediated, and sometimes inflamed by digital platforms.

These tensions are not merely interpersonal; they are structured by the technologies that host them. The algorithmic logics of virality, outrage, and surveillance amplify conflict while rarely offering pathways to repair. In this context, technomediated justice emerges as a necessary framework to interpret and intervene in the dynamics of #diasporawars. Developed in response to these digital conditions, technomediated justice mobilizes sociotechnical systems alongside justice theories to confront the enduring legacies of colonialism, racial capitalism, and carceral techno-politics that shape digital life.

Rather than treating technology as neutral or merely reformable, technomediated justice insists on embedding justice as a design imperative—one that resists extractive, punitive, and elite-driven digital architectures and instead reimagines infrastructures in the service of collective healing and transformation. In the context of #diasporawars, this means shifting the analytic gaze from individual bad actors or "culture war" skirmishes to the systems that foster misunderstanding, reward division, and commodify Black expression.

This framework demands a critical structural analysis that challenges Western hegemonic frameworks and centers restorative and transformative justice, Black feminist care ethics, epistemic disobedience, and anti-colonial design. Black Twitter—and the cultural labor it sustains—becomes more than a platform for expression; it is a contested site of digital governance, identity-making, and potential repair. In this view, Black digital life is not just reactive but generative: a focal point of sense-making, relational negotiation, and speculative futurity where the possibilities of justice are both imagined and tested in real time.

This study examines the #DiasporaWars hashtag as a manifestation of contemporary digital culture wars within the global Black community while also asking: What would it take to move from diasporic rupture to digital reconciliation? Through a qualitative content analysis combining thematic and descriptive cultural analysis with quantitative data visualizations, this research explores how global Black users engage, resist, and reshape the terms of identity on Black Twitter. Recognizing the contextual depth of these exchanges, I acknowledge my limitations and invite readers into this study with curiosity and humility—understanding that #diasporawars is more than a trend. It is a terrain of conflict, memory, care, and possibility that reveals how I might build toward technomediated forms of justice, grounded in the realities and aspirations of a global Black digital public.

3.2 Black Twitter: Place, Practice, and Plurality

Black Twitter is a gathering place [37, 250]—a digital juke joint [38], a front porch [153], a cypher where Black folks come to vibe out, debate, and bear witness to each other's lives. Tressie McMillan Cottom argues that Black Twitter is not a place but a practice and a knowledge repository, where "being good at Twitter" often means engaging in Black communicative cultures [64]. However, this distinction is not absolute. Black Twitter operates as both a discursive space that facilitates cultural production (place) and a set of social and linguistic practices that shape engagement (practice).

But why can't it be both place and practice? After all, what is a Black place, if not the rituals like call and response [37], signifyin' [90], and community [155] that give it life?

And if no one has said it outright yet, Black Twitter is one of the most successful online communities in the social media and information age, particularly in its ability to spread Black consciousness and facilitate cultural exchange [10]. It is also a dynamic space where languages are flexed, power is critiqued, and identities are continually shaped through digital discourse [142, 91, 38]. Harrell (2013) conceptualizes digital media as spaces where narratives and subjectivities are reimagined through computational expressions, a phenomenon reflected in Black Twitter's evolving cultural practices [119]. This plurality is intentional and central to its dynamism.

Black Twitter is not a single community but a network of overlapping, sometimes conflicting, communities—a plurality that is central to the exploration and argument in this study. Cottom's framing of Black Twitter as a practice reminds us that practice is not always harmonious,it involves tension, resistance, and negotiation. This complexity is particularly evident in the platform's relationship with power, where it functions both as a space of critique and a site of internal conflict.

3.2.1 Black Twitter, contd: Power and Exploitation

A consistent attribute of Black Twitter is the critiquing of power, which is part of a long lineage of Black folks speaking truth to power. Research highlights the way in which Black Twitter has become the consciousness of an increasingly controversial platform [91, 160, 59]. For instance, Musgrave's paper interviewed Black women and femme on their experiences with online harassment and harm on social media platforms, including Twitter/X, finding that they described incidences of intra-community harm, also known as cultural betrayal, shifting the conversation to examining where power operates and who is complicit in maintaining it, especially if it is done by folks who look like you [106, 178]. Additionally, power and hegemony benefit from this type of harm within marginalized groups through a divide-

and-conquer strategy [149, 101], where harm is cyclical and reinforced over time in ways that uphold social control.

These internal fractures are not just the result of ideological disagreements but are also actively manipulated by external actors, who exploit historical divisions for political ends. As Lockett (2021) argues, Black Twitter plays a central role in challenging racialized disinformation and countering hegemonic narratives online. However, this resistance also makes it a target for state surveillance, algorithmic manipulation, and external co-option—all of which complicate intra-group and inter-group solidarity [160].

But what if the call is coming from inside the house? Her research highlights how disinformation campaigns, such as those orchestrated by the Internet Research Agency (IRA), have strategically exploited Black Twitter's influence to sow division within Black digital communities [160]. By infiltrating conversations, amplifying controversial hashtags, and manipulating discourse, these actors create fractures that mirror long-standing debates within Black political thought, culture, and activism. This raises urgent questions about how Black Twitter—as both a practice and a place—can navigate these internal conflicts while maintaining its role as a site of resistance and collective knowledge production.

3.3 Black Twitter... Culture Wars

If Black Twitter is where culture is created, shaped, practiced, and negotiated, it is also where it is contested. If it is a repository of Black knowledge, it could become a battleground over who gets to define and interpret that knowledge. Power pulls on the tension between solidarity and essentialism, exposing fractures, revealing differences, and forcing a reckoning with contradictions that have always existed.

Adamu (2023) critiques how race is framed in HCI and digital discourse, warning against essentialized perspectives that risk reinforcing binary narratives of power and marginalization [6]. His work underscores how debates over Blackness in digital spaces, like Black Twitter, are often shaped by broader epistemological and ideological battles over who defines knowledge and whose experiences are centered.

Research on culture wars highlights how online ideological conflicts are shaped by historical power structures and the internet's role in amplifying them. Sotirakopoulos argues that contemporary ideological divisions are rooted in long-standing power struggles and that digital platforms intensify these divisions by fostering tribalism and identity-based conflicts [218]. Black Twitter serves as a digital battleground where users challenge mis/disinformation [182], respectability politics [127], and hegemonic narratives [160]. Starbird et al. (2014) examine how rumors and digital vigilantism influence social media discourse, revealing how

marginalized communities like Black Twitter are often forced to counteract disinformation and political propaganda [222].

Moreover, intersectionality complicates these online conflicts. Rankin and Thomas (2020) argue that intersectional perspectives are often erased or misunderstood in human-computer interaction (HCI) research, reinforcing structural inequalities even in digital activism spaces [195]. Black Twitter's role in shaping digital activism is further emphasized in work by Starbird & Palen (2012), who show how information diffusion on social media can both empower and distort movements [223].

The persistence of racial capitalism and digital surveillance plays a role in these cultural battles. As Cedric Robinson theorized, racial capitalism structures how Black communities navigate marginalization, a dynamic that extends into online discourse and algorithmic discrimination [200]. Kuo et al. (2022) extend this analysis by showing how technocapitalism embeds racial hierarchies into digital platforms, shaping both the visibility and vulnerability of Black online activism [157]. These tensions illuminate why Black Twitter is not only a space of cultural production but also a frontline in the struggle for epistemic justice.

3.4 The Global Dimensions of Black Twitter

> "I define Black Twitter as a temporarily linked group of connectors that share culture, language, and interest in specific issues and talking about specific topics with a Black frame of reference. And when I say 'Black' that isn't just limited to US Blacks, but Black throughout the diaspora..." [194]

Meredith Clark said this back in 2015, defining Black Twitter as a global network that shapes contemporary Black discourse. Fast forward, Black Twitter maintains its glamour in the world as a cultural emblem of the peak internet culture of the information age. Netflix's documentary, *Black Twitter*, does a fantastic job bringing together cultural influences and Black Twitter researchers on the platform to document the evolution, impact, and cultural significance of this Black digital public [38]. It preserves key moments of activism, humor, and resistance that have shaped online and offline conversations. Netflix's approach to Black Twitter didn't touch too much on its global scale, but it seems more important than ever to acknowledge its boundless global nature as a central feature of its importance.

Global Blackness is a dynamic and relational framework that acknowledges how Black identity is practiced, situated, and contested across time, space, and digital geographies in Black Twitter. Michelle Wright (2015) challenges static and linear narratives of Black identity, instead proposing that Blackness is shaped by historical moments and the spatial

contexts in which it emerges [255]. Brent Hayes Edwards (2003) emphasizes that Blackness is not a singular, fixed identity but one constantly rearticulated through cultural and political exchanges across the diaspora [77]. Tina Campt (2017) extends this idea by arguing that Blackness is not just spoken or performed but also felt—an embodied experience that resonates across generations and geographies [47]. Andre Brock's *Distributed Blackness* work does not explicitly theorize global Blackness; his concept of "distributed Blackness" highlights how Black digital culture is networked, collectively shaped, and resistant to hegemonic internet norms [38]. This underscores the role of digital spaces in amplifying Blackness as a lived, relational experience that extends beyond national boundaries, even if its articulation remains largely shaped by specific cultural and political contexts.

In digital spaces like Black Twitter, these conceptualizations become tangible as users engage in real-time negotiations over Black identity, belonging, and historical accountability. Here, Blackness is not simply a racial classification but a lived, fluid, and collectively debated reality, shaped by the tensions and solidarities that emerge within the global Black community. Another term often used in similar analyses is diaspora. However, while diaspora traditionally emphasizes the dispersal of Black communities from a geographic origin, global Blackness better captures the ongoing relationality and negotiation of Black identity in digital spaces, where Blackness is constructed through engagement rather than simply through historical displacement.

This framework allows us to explore how Black Twitter serves as both a site of global connection and a contested space, where cultural ownership, historical memory, and power are constantly renegotiated. Unlike diaspora, which often assumes movement from origin to destination, global Blackness captures the simultaneity of local and global articulations of Blackness in digital spaces. It also enables us to analyze how power operates within Black digital publics, from solidarity-building to intragroup tensions over authenticity, privilege, and representation.

Research on the global dimensions of Black Twitter has expanded significantly, shedding light on how Black communities across various geopolitical contexts engage with the platform to articulate, contest, and negotiate identity, history, and sociocultural realities. Scholars have examined how Black British digital media scholars perceive Black Twitter as an evolving diasporic space, emphasizing its role in connecting Black communities in the UK and beyond [45]. Similarly, studies on Black digital feminist communities in France illustrate how Twitter serves as a counterpublic for Afroféministes, who leverage the platform to challenge linguistic, racial, and gendered hegemonism in the French sociopolitical landscape [191]. In South Africa, Black Twitter has been studied as a critical space where audiences interact with television media to perform and negotiate class, race, and social belonging, particularly

in relation to reality TV culture [214]. Moreover, research on the intersection of Black activism and technology reveals how Black and Tech communities in Brazil and the U.S. use Twitter to challenge racial inequalities in the tech industry, demonstrating the platform's significance as a space of professional and political mobilization[247]. Collectively, these studies illustrate that Black Twitter is not merely a digital extension of the U.S. Black experience but a transnational network where Black identity is continuously constructed, debated, and reshaped in response to local and global sociopolitical forces.

While Black Twitter operates as a global network fostering solidarity across the diaspora, it is also a space where ideological differences, regional perspectives, and sociopolitical tensions surface. Intragroup conflicts arise as different Black communities navigate histories of colonialism, migration, and national identity, shaping their approaches to activism, cultural expression, and political engagement. Harel, Maoz, and Halperin (2020) highlight how ideological divisions within a community can be deepened by external intergroup conflicts, reinforcing polarization even among those with shared identities [118]. This dynamic is evident in debates on Black Twitter surrounding issues such as colorism, regional privilege, or the varying impacts of anti-Blackness across the U.S., U.K., South Africa, and the Caribbean. On the intergroup level, Black Twitter often challenges dominant power structures, resisting hegemonic narratives and disinformation. However, as research on intractable conflicts suggests, external pressures—from state surveillance to platform algorithmic biases can heighten internal tensions, making coalition-building more difficult and creating cultural betrayal [240**?** , 106]. As Black Twitter continues to function as both a unifying and contested space, understanding these tensions is crucial for examining its role in shaping global Black consciousness and solidarities.

In this study, I argue that within Black Twitter, culture wars emerge from the diverse expressions of Black identity across geopolitical, regional, ethnic, and digital lines. While a sense of global Blackness unites these diverse expressions, it is actively embodied, performed, and reinterpreted in distinct ways within each locality. Afrocentric cultural symbolism, shared codes of conduct, collective values ('gospel'), and community-based justice traditions (transformative and restorative justice) persist. Black Twitter serves as a convergence point for global Black cultures, and #DiasporaWars raise crucial questions about the nature of Black digital publics.

3.5 Methods

In the following sections, I outline the data collection methods and analysis approach. Importantly, unless addressing specific intricacies of identity requiring a more detailed approach,

I use 'Black' to describe the participants in the dataset. This aligns with my argument that these conversations unfold on Black Twitter and contribute to the collapse of Black identity, reflecting the racial capitalist legacy embedded within digital platforms. However, Blackness is not monolithic but exists within a global framework of social, historical, cultural, and geopolitical differences when describing identity-based characteristics shaped by ethnicity, nationality, and regional affiliations. I move away from using 'Black' in a singular sense and instead acknowledge the multiplicity of global Blackness as it manifests across the dataset.

3.5.1 Data Collection

In this section, I analyze the #diasporawars phenomenon using a Twitter dataset spanning from March 21, 2006, to December 30, 2022, prior to Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and the subsequent changes in Twitter's API accessibility. The first and second authors, who are active participants in Black Twitter, became aware of this hashtag through their firsthand observations. Data was collected on February 2023 using the Twarc Python tool, focusing on tweets containing #diasporawar(s) or related keywords like "diaspora war" and "diaspora wars." Both singular and plural forms are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

The initial data collection revealed approximately 32,065 tweets since 2006. Tweets from 2006 to 2009 referenced various diasporic conflicts but lacked cohesion, making it challenging to construct a straightforward narrative. As a result, the content analysis did not include tweets between 2006 to 2009. From 2009 to 2016, #diasporawars conversations centered on topics unrelated to African or Black intragroup conflict, such as the planned genocide in Ulster, Exotrust Wars, Star Wars diaspora, the Balkan War, and the Israeli diaspora. Additionally, during this period, discussions on Twitter were focused on physical conflicts unrelated to this paper's topic resulting in not using these tweets for the content analysis. Importantly, the presented quantitative data, including location maps, timelines, and bar graphs, was incorporated only after it was thoroughly 'cleaned' to ensure relevance to this study. This is why insider knowledge of the topic was essential to this paper and data interpretation.

While earlier discussions were more diverse in focus, recent years have seen a more concentrated and recurring theme centered on the dynamics within the Black community globally. In 2017 and 2018, discussions emerged between African Americans (1st and 2nd generation Americans) and Black British individuals about the distinctions between Africans and the broader Back or African-descendant communities. In another round of 'cleaning' the data, I focused on irrelevant content with hashtags and keywords referencing other ethnic back-

grounds, such as "Jewish," "Israel," "Bosnian," "Balkan," "Asian," and "Asian diaspora."

Finally, I refined the dataset to 31,336 tweets from April 15, 2017, to December 30, 2022, which included 225 unique conversations for an in-depth thematic content analysis. This refined dataset became the focus of the quantitative and qualitative analysis, reflecting a more concentrated discussion on Black community dynamics globally.

3.5.2 Data Analysis

I analyze quantitative and content data featuring the #diasporawars hashtag and keywords. For the quantitative analysis, I used Microsoft Excel to mathematically map out 31,336 tweets focused on where #diasporawars (location-based data) and when #diasporawars (time-based data). Additionally, in the qualitative analysis, I leveraged a thematic and descriptive content analysis for 225 unique conversations focused on 2017-2022 data focusing on what's #diasporawars (themes) and who triggers #diasporawars (descriptive).

A central theoretical framework of this work is global Blackness, which I define as an approach to understanding how Black identity is practiced, situated, and contested across ethnic, political, social, geographic, temporal, and digital boundaries. This framework acknowledges that Blackness is not just individually constructed but collectively negotiated within communities, both locally and across the diaspora. These negotiations occur through shared cultural markers, historical memory, and relational dynamics that shape contemporary expressions of Blackness in global and digital spaces.

I apply this framework to #DiasporaWars to examine how Black social media users engage in community-driven identity negotiations on Black Twitter. Through discourse, cultural exchange, and ideological debate, users affirm, contest, and redefine Blackness in response to historical legacies, migration, and digital connectivity. By analyzing the interactions and narratives within these conversations, I uncover how community participation in Black digital spaces influences the articulation of identity, reflecting broader diasporic tensions, solidarities, and cultural transformations.

3.6 Findings

In this section, I will detail the findings beginning with an overview of *what's #diasporawars?* Following that, I describe *What triggers #diasporawars?* and *Who starts #diasporawars?* Afterward, I will explore the themes identified in *What kind of #diasporawars conversations are there?* Lastly, I explore When #diasporwars and Where the #diasporawars participants are located? The findings are structured as a case study to introduce the reader to

#diasporawars, a phenomenon.

3.6.1 What are #diasporawars?

3.6.1.1 Overview.

Within Twitter's amplified and highly visible platform,#diasporawars is a hashtag that organizes discourse marked by cross-cultural "war" or conflict among users with a shared African ancestry, diverse Black or African ethnicities, those racialized as Black, or individuals deeply attuned to global Blackness who culturally and socially engage in the nuanced topics of these discussions. It is an active topic in local Twitter communities such as UK Black Twitter, Naija Twitter (Nigerian sub-community on Twitter), and Caribbean Twitter (users from the Caribbean and its diaspora). This section presents an ethnographic approach to descriptive analysis, including visual examples to illustrate the #diasporawars phenomenon.

3.6.1.2 Initial Post.

In diaspora wars conversations, a user often starts a thread with a provocative statement or question about identity, historical grievances, or contemporary issues affecting the global Black community. The initial post typically doesn't include the #diasporawars hashtag but may use hashtags specific to sub-communities like #BlackTwitter or #BlackUKTwitter. Sometimes, the #diasporawars hashtag is used to respond to a post that triggered a diaspora war. These discussions are often sparked by global topics of interest, such as pop culture, events, or viral influencers.



Figure 3.1: Example of an initial post with a retweet and response where an initial post by CulturalMillenials sparked a #diasporawar discussion.

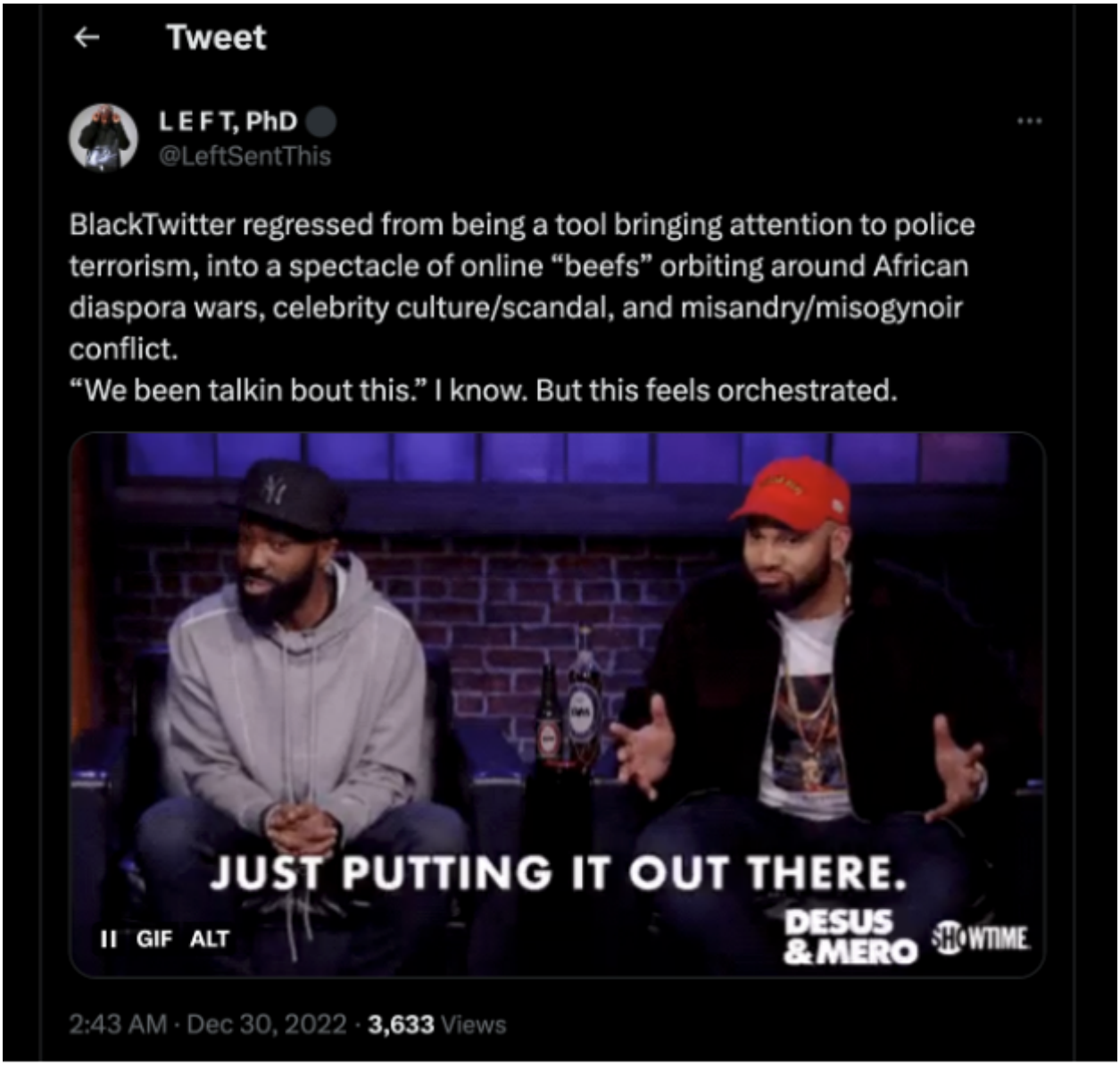


Figure 3.2: Example of a post with diaspora wars and Black Twitter expressing grievance of another post triggering diaspora war conversation.

3.6.1.3 Responses.

Responses to an initial post typically come in waves, with the initial poster's community engaging first due to shared algorithmic commonalities, as shown in Figure 3.3. Due to Twitter's algorithmic curation, these posts can spread either by going viral across broader networks or staying semi-viral within the original community. Responses may vary from agreement to disagreement, depending on the responders' relationship with the initial poster and the topic of #diasporawars. The discussion often evolves into a broader conversation,

with participants sharing anecdotes, opinions, jokes, or even engaging in harassment or bullying. When exchanges become harsh, some users, described in this study as influencers, may step in to mediate, calling out inflammatory posts or reminding others that internal conflicts hinder Black and African liberation and pan-African ideals, as illustrated in Figure 3.3.

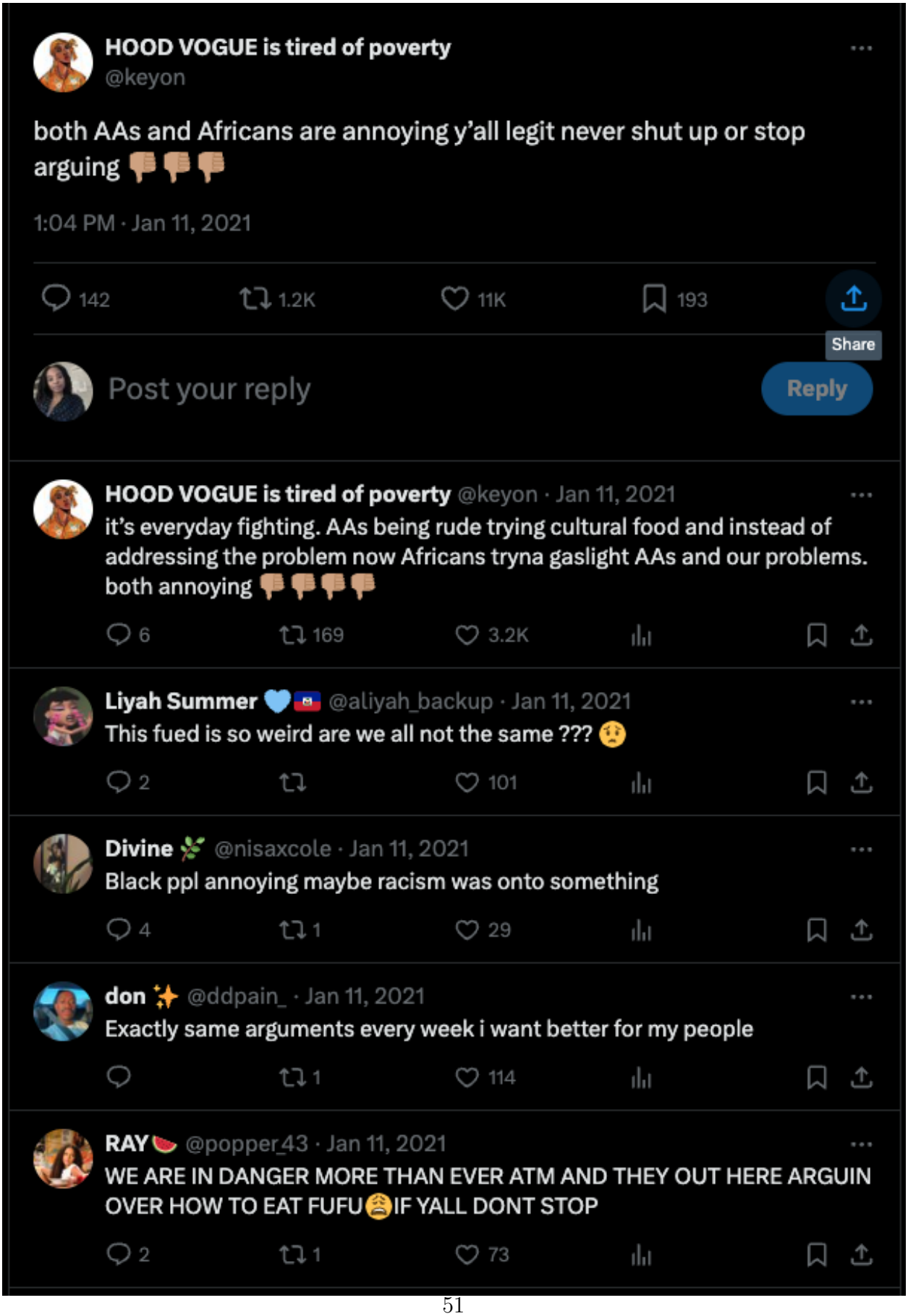


Figure 3.3: Example of a post that has gone viral with responses.

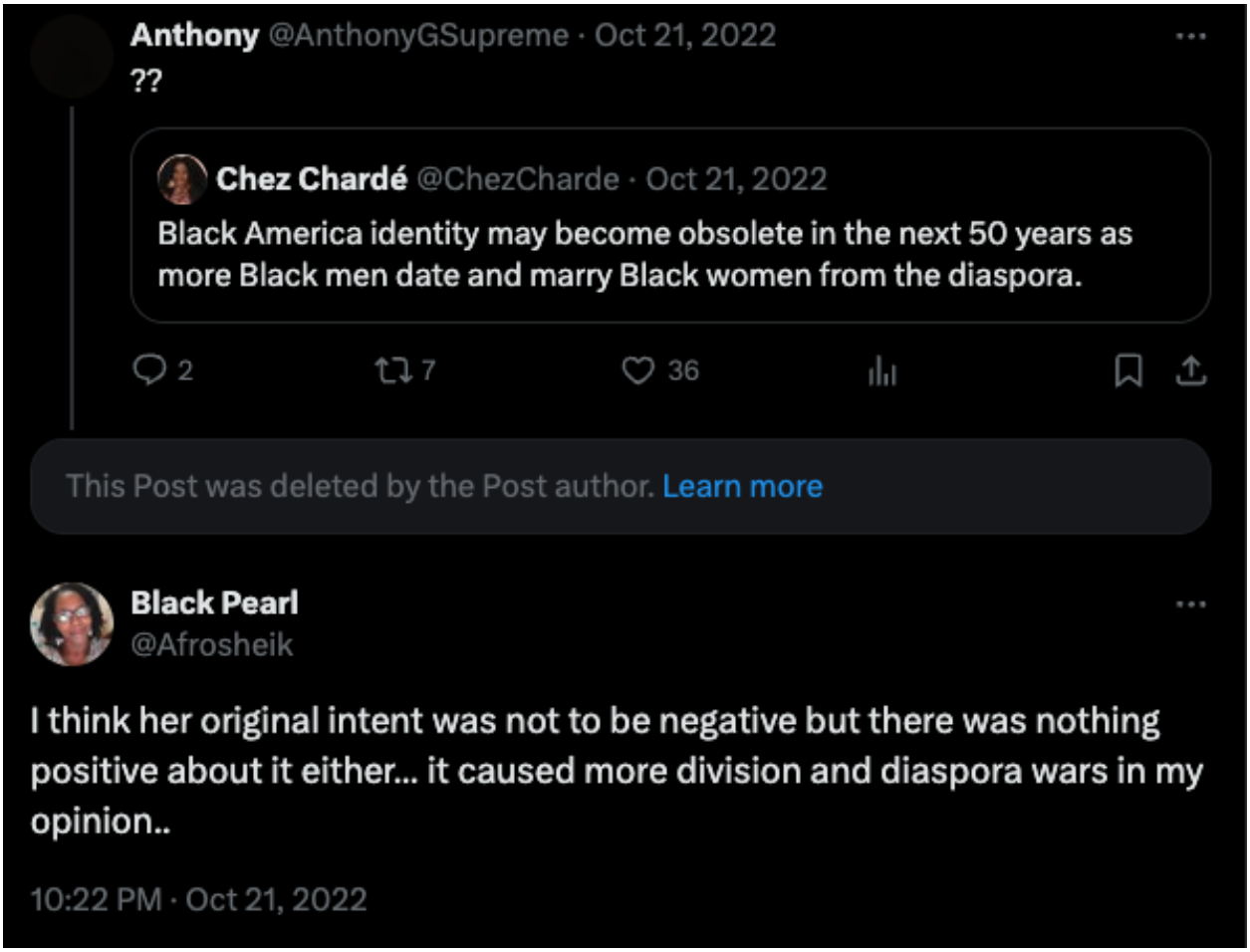


Figure 3.4: Example of a post where a responder calls out an inflammatory post causing division.

3.6.1.4 Reflection.

#diasporawar discussions, though frequent, are typically short-lived on Twitter due to the rapid turnover of trending topics. Frequent contributors often act as mediators, helping to de-escalate heated debates. These discussions sometimes migrate to platforms like YouTube or TikTok, where they can be explored in more depth. Occasionally, old #diasporawars threads resurface when users search for specific topics, but there's a general consensus to move on from past conversations, as shown in Figure 3.5.

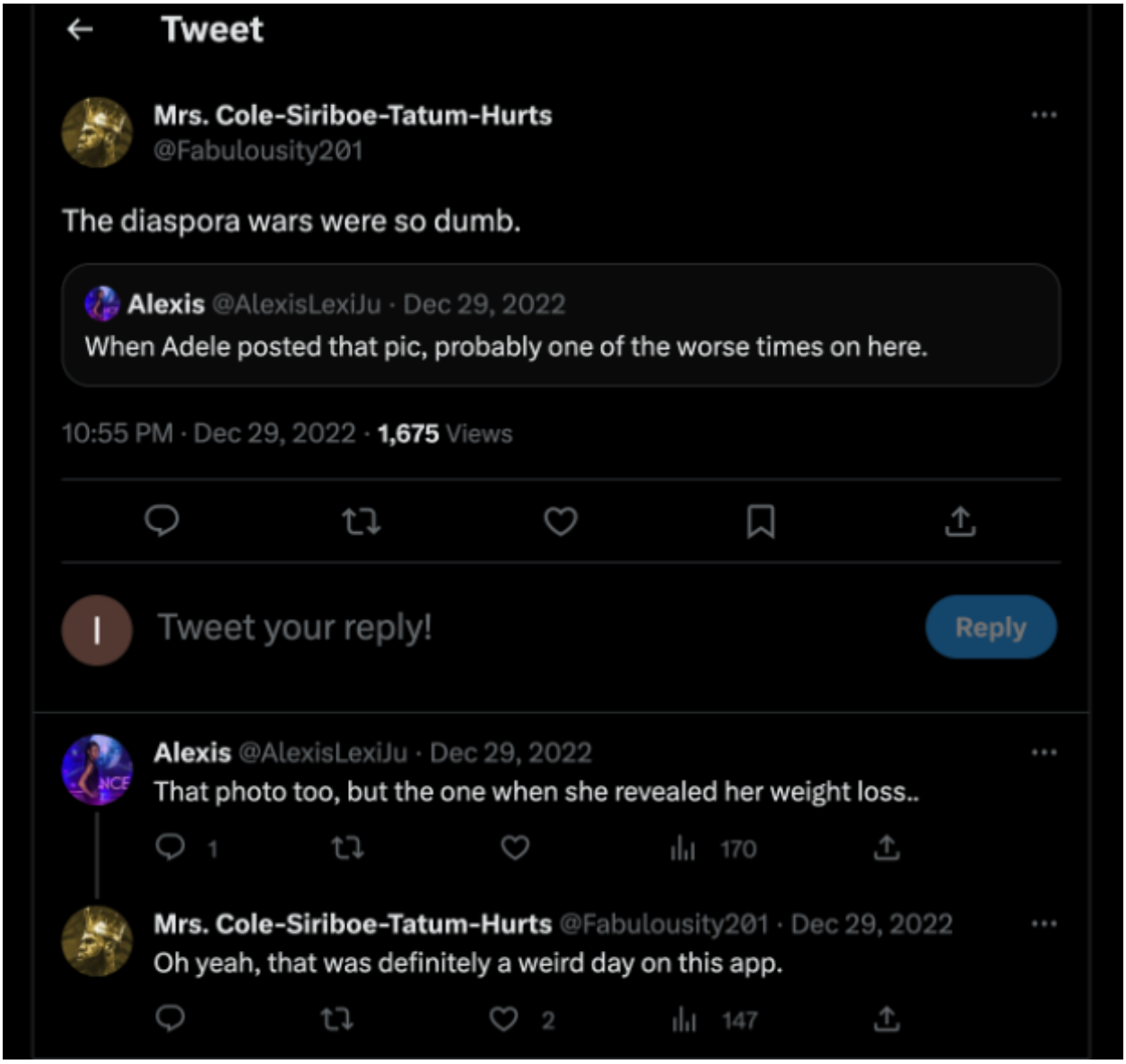


Figure 3.5: Example of a post where an old #diasporawar discussion was resurfaced and, the reposter and responders in agreement that it was good to move on from discussion.

Users often speculate about the origins and objectives of #diasporawar(s). Some suggest outside instigators like Cointelpro, psyops, or misinformation campaigns by Western powers, particularly the US. Others point to inside-group instigators, identifying specific subcommunities as active participants in #diasporawars discussions, as shown in Figure 3.2.

The data reveals sentiments among users participating in #diasporawars discussions suggest a common belief that the ultimate goal is to divide, control, and conquer the global Black population and their movements. Many claim that non-Black individuals pose as Black to further divide the community, as seen in Figure D.2. While some participants question if

#diasporawars extends offline, the consensus is that it remains primarily an online discourse.

The data reveals that users compare #diasporawars to other conflicts like "gender wars," "tribal wars," and "colorism wars," all involving harassment, bullying, and a lack of intervention (see Figure D.3). These discussions provide a platform for identity-driven dialogues, blending cross-cultural and ethnic elements, historical contexts, and personal self-identification, with occasional calls for unity and solidarity.

Although the data is platform-limited to Twitter, users suggest similar discussions occur on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok (see Figure D.4. The #diasporawars hashtag serves various purposes, from calling in or out inflammatory posts to expressing exhaustion towards #diasporawars, discussing origins and solidarities, and assigning blame and antagonizing.

I captured both direct and indirect sentiments about #diasporawars from an expressive demographic. "Global South" users felt a lack of support towards the "Global North" during Global South uprisings, like #ENDSARS in Nigeria, compared to the solidarity seen during the US Black Lives Matter movement (see Figure D.5). Conversations about #diasporawars also triggered feelings of hate, disrespect, and superiority among Black, Caribbean, African diaspora, African, and Caribbean Twitter users.

Direct sentiments in tweets and replies included disappointment, confusion, and exhaustion, while indirect sentiments often conveyed negativity, accusations, or grudges. Despite the negativity, some discussions showed agreeability or healing, and direct sentiments of solidarity and unity were also present. For instance, one user believes diaspora wars are necessary for fostering authentic connections.

Participants in #diasporawars note that the discourse has led to online xenophobia, entertainment, misguided frustrations, identity gatekeeping, and a lack of accountability. It is unclear who the main instigator or victim is, as users often play both roles. While the discourse features anti-Blackness, harmful stereotypes, and harassment, it has also fostered increased dialogue among the global Black community, revealing both shared and distinct experiences of identity (see Figure D.6).

Participants use #diasporawars to call out conversations that spark these conflicts and to express their fatigue with the discourse (see Figure D.7). The hashtag is widely discussed on Black Twitter, with many users calling for an end to the negative impact on the community's well-being.

3.6.2 What Triggers #diasporawars?

This section examines the factors behind the emergence of #diasporawars. The content analysis identifies three main triggers: 1) Events, 2) Individuals, and 3) Communities involved in #diasporawars. I use a high-level descriptive approach, focusing on the phenomenon itself rather than the identities of participants. Although identities were covered earlier, I now provide an overview of the trends without focusing on specific contributors.

3.6.2.1 Events that Trigger #diasporawars.

Among the 225 conversations on #diasporawars, I identified 18 offline events discussed between May 2019 and December 2022. The earliest event, Black Wall Street, referenced in October 2021, occurred on May 31, 1921. The most recent was Meek Mill's visit to Ghana for AfroNation on December 30, 2022. Of the 18 events, 8 were from 2021, with the rest occurring between 2019 and 2022. Most events involved pop culture, politics, or social movements. For a full summary, see Appendix A.

Spike Lee's "She's Gotta Have It" remake featured a scene critiquing the hiring of Black British actors over American ones in films rooted in Black American-related topics ignited controversy on Twitter. This relates to another event that triggered #diasporawar discussion related to Cynthia Ervio's casting as Harriet Tubman in "Harriet." Both events triggered #diasporawar discussions about cultural authenticity and representation of Black identity in Hollywood. Additionally, the data found that events triggering a #diasporawar often involved power dynamics based on nationality, citizenship, Western positionality, and a lack of reciprocity over struggles in Africa. For instance, the murder of George Floyd in 2020 led to global protests and expressions of Black solidarity. However, Africans living in Africa and some members of the African diaspora living in the West felt a lack of support for similar issues occurring in Africa. As one user posted, "Black lives matter until it is Africans, then the whole world develops hearing difficulties." Further, events triggering #diasporawars included comparisons between American athlete Sha'carri Richardson and Jamaican athlete Usain Bolt, as well as Nigerian artist Wizkid's boycott of the BET Awards. These events highlighted disparities in recognition and respect for talent from different regions and their treatment in the sports and entertainment industry. Also, Akon made a comment that sparked a #diasporawar during a YouTube show, claiming Africans are more talented than Black Americans. The resulting discussion touched on cultural differences, xenophobia, and disrespect, with a general sentiment of exhaustion and desire to end #diasporawars.

Discussions surrounding Emmanuel Acho's advocacy for Nigeria following the kidnapping in Kaduna State and Tariq Nasheed's critique of Kanye West's activism, which was seen as

self-serving despite both being Black Americans, raised questions about the responsibilities of prominent figures and influencers within the diaspora. These conversations often led to disagreements over the extent to which individuals should advocate for issues affecting their ancestral homelands or their communities despite differences in class, nationality, and citizenship. Lastly, an event that triggered #diasporawars discussions included the Africa-CARICOM Summit, which aimed to foster unity among African and Caribbean nations. The hashtag highlighted how the summit sought to overcome existing divisions and tensions within the diaspora. Overall, these events triggered #diasporawars by exposing underlying tensions, disparities, and complexities within the Black diaspora, including representation, solidarity, recognition, and advocacy issues. Social media platforms played a central role in facilitating discussions and debates, often amplifying conflicts and exacerbating divisions within the community.

3.6.3 Who Starts #diasporawars?

The data reveals the role of frequent contributors in #diasporawars who became prominent starting in July 2019. Two types emerged: (1) influencers with large followings (around 10K or more) and (2) contributors with mid-to-low followings. Influencers often have a "blue check" for verification, though Twitter's verification system has recently changed.

3.6.3.1 Influencers.

Iidentified 15 #diasporawars influencers, characterized by high engagement and followings over 10K. Their follower counts range from 13K to 700 K. Nine are based in the US and UK, while six have no listed location. Three influencers contributed to eight distinct conversations in the dataset, and the remaining seven participated in at least one conversation.

Two influencers stand out in the dataset. One, with 700K followers, is a Black UK culture influencer. This person has six #diasporawars-related conversations and primarily posts original content with high user engagement. Their discussions, spanning from 2019 to 2021, focus on popular culture, politics, social issues, ancestry, and history (see Appendix A). I classify this influencer as a diffuser rather than an instigator of #diasporawars, as their content tends to de-escalate tensions. For example, a post with 12K likes criticized a 2021 #diasporawar between African Americans and Africans as rude and nonsensical.

The second standout influencer has 300k followers and the most #diasporawars-related conversations in the data set, with eight. Between 2020-2022, this influencer frequently instigated #diasporawars on the Twitter platform. This influencer is known for creating political and racial content and is respected as an active Foundational Black American (FBA) com-

munity member. You will find an American flag on their Twitter profile next to their name. Additionally, these influencers do not hide behind anonymity; their Twitter profile displays an action photo of themselves. Various users actively engage with this influencer's content to either validate and agree or label and call out content as instigating a #diasporawar.

This influencer's eight conversations in the dataset are characterized by an agitated, accusatory, and political tone. Their content covers pop culture, social issues, politics, ancestry, xenophobia, and misinformation (see Appendix A). They are often labeled as state operatives or bots for inciting #diasporawars. For example, they used global Black popular culture discussions to challenge accusations of cultural appropriation, notably questioning Caribbean concerns over a Black American actor's rum named after a Caribbean festival, which led to a rebranding. This influencer has also accused Caribbean Americans of appropriating "Foundational Black American music."

Another key influencer, with 19K followers in the USA, engaged in four #diasporawars conversations in 2022. They have branded themselves as a thought leader on the topic, founding an organization to address the discourse's impact on the global Black community. Describing themselves as an author and publisher, their tone is tired yet peace-promoting. Their content covers misinformation, xenophobia, social issues, ancestry, history, bots, and politics (see Appendix A). Notably, they criticized politically conservative British articles about a US civil rights group refusing to repatriate artifacts, urging against blame on African countries and emphasizing that such actions counteract the reparations movement. They also warned about global conservative interest in #diasporawars.

3.6.3.2 Frequent Contributors

This study reveals a second group of influencers: frequently contributing influencers (or frequent contributors). These contributors do not meet the criteria of high-following influencers, as they have between 100-2500 followers, yet their consistent engagement in the #DiasporaWars discourse allows them to shape conversations and influence narratives. From the sample data, I identified sixteen users as frequent contributors.

The most active frequent contributor identifies as a pan-Africanist and humanitarian and has been present in six separate #DiasporaWars conversations from 2019-2021. Their commentary spans pop culture, social issues, ancestry, and history (see Appendix A for the themes chart). Their influence comes from their persistence in engagement, as they frequently challenge divisive content by promoting solidarity as a tool against #diasporawars. For example, this frequent contributor leveraged a meme to describe the nonsensical nature of #DiasporaWars, critiquing how Nigerians and Black/African Americans (of slave descent) blame each other for their oppression. They commented four times within this post alone,

responding directly to opposing views of the meme. Their response positioned them as mediating between African and Black/African Americans, arguing that neither side is inherently superior.

Despite their small following, their posts received engagement in the form of replies, likes, and retweets, amplifying their influence beyond their immediate audience. Their role in challenging misinformation, introducing counter-narratives, and consistently engaging over time positions them as key discourse shapers within #DiasporaWars, even without the large followings typically associated with influencers. Their influence comes from their ability to sustain engagement over time, repeatedly challenging divisive content and promoting solidarity as a tool against #DiasporaWars.

3.6.3.3 Miscellaneous

The study reveals that #diasporawars is started by the agitations of social media users participating in various African, of African descent, and Black communities online. In the above sections, I highlight specific users who impact the discussion, given their online status and/or frequent contribution. However, #diasporawars are started by many more users who trigger the conversation based on one-off initial posts and comments to initial posts that have an impact. Additionally, I want to acknowledge that #diasporawars as a hashtag is used by this miscellaneous group to call attention to inflammatory #diasporawar posts and comments, too. I reference the theme section to provide an understanding of the topics this miscellaneous group participates in when the #diasporawars hashtag is leveraged.

3.6.4 Communities Engaged in #diasporawars

I aim to overview the most active communities in this #diasporawars study, highlighting their interactions and contributing to a deeper understanding of social media dynamics. Although I have no political affiliations with these groups, I support their right to engage online. The analysis involved examining user tweets and profiles, focusing on six distinct communities based on their presence and relevance from 2019 to 2022.

3.6.4.1 Black Twitter

In this dataset, many users explicitly or implicitly suggested that #diasporawars occur within the discourse of Black Twitter. Figure 9 highlights the topics most frequently discussed on Black Twitter. While #diasporawars is not depicted on this "Wheel of Black Twitter" within the data, there was an extensive conversation where one user inquired about topics that should be included on the wheel but are not. A significant number of users responded by

suggesting that #diasporawars should be added, as it is a topic frequently discussed within Black Twitter. Additionally, #diasporawars was part of a long threaded discourse on topics that Black Twitter would like to move away from because of its stronghold on the community and its discourse. Furthermore, users have suggested that Black Twitter is exposed due to its frequent virality, making it susceptible to trolls, blackfishing, and bad actors who participate in #diasporawars conversations. Lastly, users in the #diasporawars discourse acknowledge that Black Twitter engages with Black, African, and Caribbean communities and individuals outside of the United States while also interacting with sub-communities such as FBA, ADOS, UK Black Twitter, and Pan-African Twitter. These sub-communities and their discourses will be further described below.

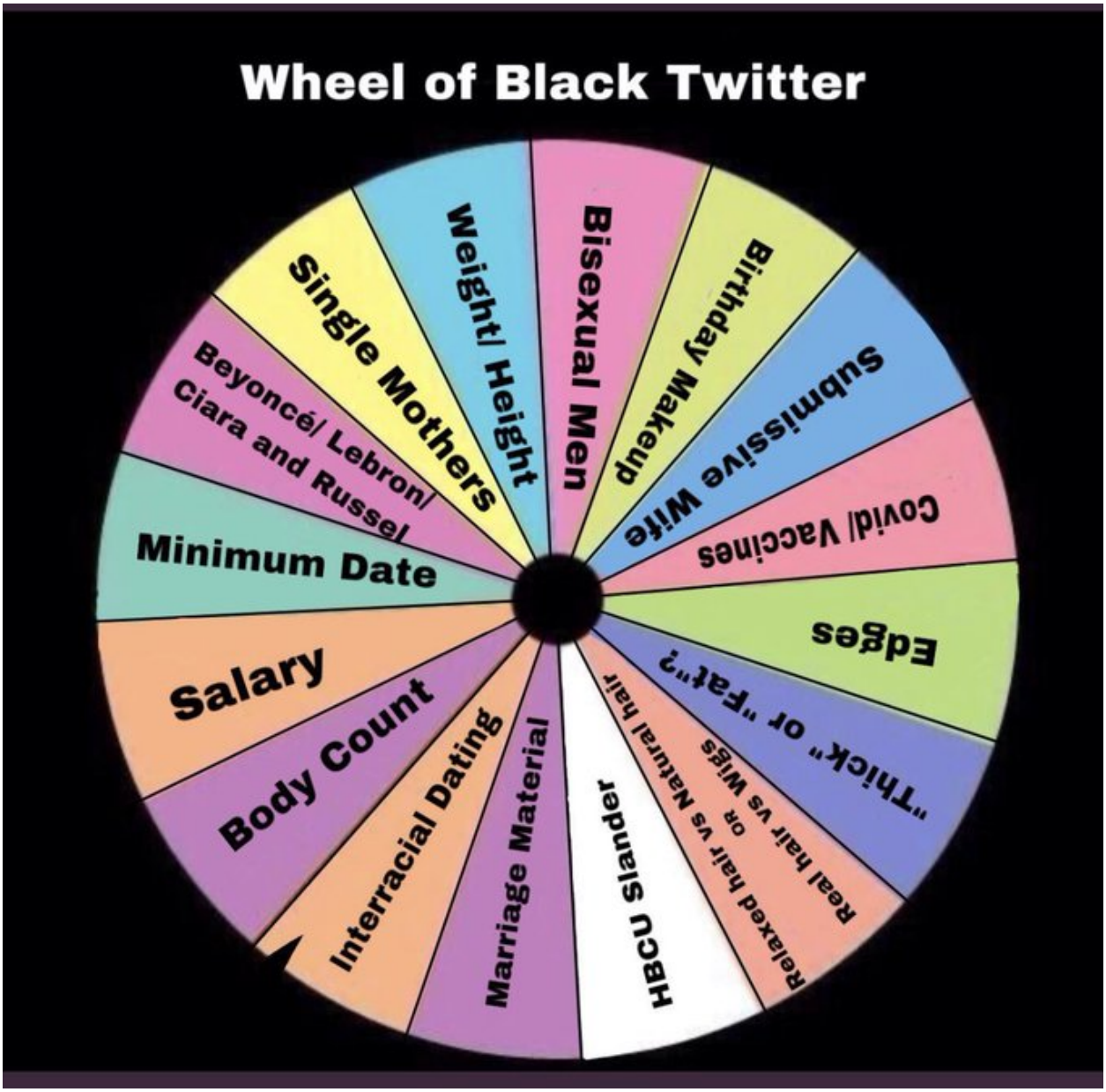


Figure 3.7: Users assert that this is how Black Twitter selects its topics, with several suggesting that #diasporawars and BBLs should be included on this "Wheel of Black Twitter.

3.6.4.2 Foundational Black American (FBA)

Foundational Black Americans (FBA) are involved in #diasporawars as instigators, self-identifiers, and participants in debates. They are associated with conservative ideologies, including opposition to immigration and reparations, which has caught the attention of the DNC, particularly regarding reparations [205]. A key influencer in the dataset, an FBA founder, primarily uses YouTube for communication. FBA members, often descendants of

enslaved people with conservative views, identify as "FBA" in profiles and comments during #diasporawars discussions.

FBA is frequently confused with ADOS (American Descendants of Slaves), though they are separate movements. The dataset shows notable conflicts between FBA and ADOS, with FBA members criticizing figures like Akon for perceived hypocrisy. While not all FBAs oppose immigration, they use the movement to reclaim pride in their ancestry and advocate for unity and reparations for all Black people impacted by colonialism and slavery.

Many view FBAs as instigators in #diasporawars, spreading misinformation about U.S. immigration. Some communities, including Black Twitter and its sub-groups, reject FBA's ideologies, viewing the group as existing only online and targeting non-FBA Black Americans. Users outside the U.S., especially those not identifying as Black American, also dismiss FBA, seeing anti-immigrant sentiments as anti-Black. The data suggests concerns among non-FBA users and Black Twitter sub-communities about misinformation spread by FBA leaders.

3.6.4.3 African Descendants of Enslaved People (ADOS)

The African Descendants of Slaves (ADOS) community is active in the #diasporawars dataset, representing those of African descent, especially from enslaved people in the Americas. ADOS functions on Twitter in two forms: as the ADOS Advocacy Foundation and as a broader community with diverse ideologies, yet both still identify under the ADOS umbrella. Supporters seek to establish distinct ethnic and cultural boundaries from other Black and African identities, often focusing on self-definition. Critics accuse ADOS of spreading misinformation and fostering division, with some alleging that ADOS contributes to #diasporawars instead of promoting unity [181].

3.6.4.4 Black UK Twitter

Black UK Twitter is an online community adjacent to Black Twitter, with users either residing in or engaging with Black UK-related content. Users' behavior may or may not be different than that of users on Black Twitter. However, the content differs essentially since Black UK culture differs from Black US culture. Black UK Twitter conversations frequently exemplify this, discussing the roots of Black Americans or African Americans (descendants of enslaved people), particularly during times when conflicts are happening on the continent. Black UK Twitter has called out Black Americans for their perceived inactivity and silence during issues like #ENDSARS in Nigeria. One user specifically asked UK Black Twitter by tagging its hashtag the most significant issues impacting the online community, and several users stated #diasporawars.

3.6.4.5 Pan-African Twitter

Individuals in the digital Pan-African community often signal their affiliation by including "Pan-African" in their Twitter bio or through content shared on #diasporawars. The data shows that Pan-Africanism spans both online and offline, influencing identities politically, nationally, and culturally. One influencer aligned with this community works to mediate and pacify debates within #diasporawars, emphasizing commonalities among users. This community often speculates on how #diasporawars began, such as a TikTok by a white woman pretending to be Black or rebutting stereotypes about Black Americans. They express exhaustion from the discourse and focus on efforts to end it.

3.6.4.6 Caribbean Twitter

Caribbean Twitter is a large community comprising individuals from countries like Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago. Often referred to as West Indians in #diasporawars, members use flag icons to represent their islands or sometimes the Caribbean as a whole. A significant moment for this community was during Sha'Carri Richardson's race against Jamaica at the USATF Golden Games, sparking #diasporawars debates about the fastest runners. With a large Caribbean population in the U.S., offline conflicts between Black Americans, African Americans, and Caribbean Americans often emerge online. Additionally, debates arise about who can claim Caribbean identity if not born there. The data also highlighted discussions questioning #diasporawars' relevance to global African struggles, referencing historical figures like Denmark Vesey, who led a U.S. uprising despite being born in what is now the U.S. Virgin Islands.

3.6.4.7 Naija or Nigeria Twitter

Naija Twitter, or Nigeria Twitter, is a major player in #diasporawars discussions, involving both Nigerians in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora in the US and UK. "Naija" reflects national pride and cultural identity, and Nigeria Twitter is known for lively debates on politics, culture, and social issues with a unique blend of humor and slang. It is a key part of African and Black Twitter, adding a Nigerian perspective to global conversations.

UK Black Twitter, linked to Nigeria, often engages in #diasporawars by criticizing Black Americans for perceived indifference to African issues, like during #ENDSARS, which was similar to #BLM. Some UK Black Twitter users expressed disappointment over what they see as Black Americans' selective solidarity with Africans, leading to tense exchanges over identity and migration. Despite these conflicts, UK Nigerians and Nigerian Americans generally show strong solidarity and rarely argue among themselves.

3.6.5 What kind of #diasporawars conversations are there?

In this section, I categorize #diasporawars conversations by themes to address: What kinds of #diasporawars discussions are there? This study identified ten themes: 1) popular culture, 2) misinformation, harassment, and xenophobia, 3) social issues, 4) ancestry, history, and traditions, 5) cultural expressions, 6) instigation, bots, and blackfishing, 7) politics, 8) defining diaspora wars, 9) unity and solidarity, and 10) sentiments of detest and fatigue. Chart **??** in Appendix A provides further details and examples of these themes. Multiple themes can appear in a single #diasporawars conversation.

Discussions on popular culture in #diasporawars often involve debates on cultural appropriation, ownership, and artifacts like music and influencers. These conversations typically span multiple platforms, starting on sites like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and frequently intertwine with themes of harassment, misinformation, and xenophobia. Social issues also dominate #diasporawars, with a focus on movements like #ENDSARS and #BLM and topics such as white supremacy, anti-blackness, classism, colorism, and internalized racism. These discussions aim to shift focus from #diasporawars to collective movements affecting Black communities worldwide while also addressing political themes related to Kenyan, Nigerian, Black US, and Black UK politics.

Conversations on ancestry, history, and traditions often address topics like slavery, colonialism, and notable figures such as Kwame Ture and Marcus Garvey, as well as shared roots and denied ancestry among Black people globally. Expressions of culture in these discussions are broader and less focused on popular culture, often referencing shared foods and literature to deepen understanding. In #diasporawars, terms like bots, trolls, and operatives are used to identify intruders and instigators, with Foundational Black Americans (FBA) often singled out as instigators. FBA users, in turn, use the term "FBA" to define their position in the discussions. Additionally, conversations on solidarity and unity are frequent within the #diasporawars dialogue to challenge the #diasporawar.

3.6.6 Timeline of #diasporawars

From 2019 to 2022, #diasporawars featured an annual recurring theme involving Black communities worldwide, including African Americans, the Caribbean, and the UK. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign significantly influenced these conversations from 2020 through 2022. Over these six years, #diasporawars discussions evolved from initial frustration and conflict to eventual peace and compromise. Notably, 2019 is a critical year for #diasporawars.

I also mapped out the number of Tweets correlated with #diasporawar for prior years. Before 2015, the number of Tweets posted each year was lower than 100. The first jump

was from 2016 to 2017, increasing by 186% from 69 in 2016 to 253 in 2017. The second soar was identified from 2019 to 2020, when it doubled from 971 in 2019 to 2,173 in 2020. The #diasporawar conversations kept becoming more involving, vivid, and eloquent.

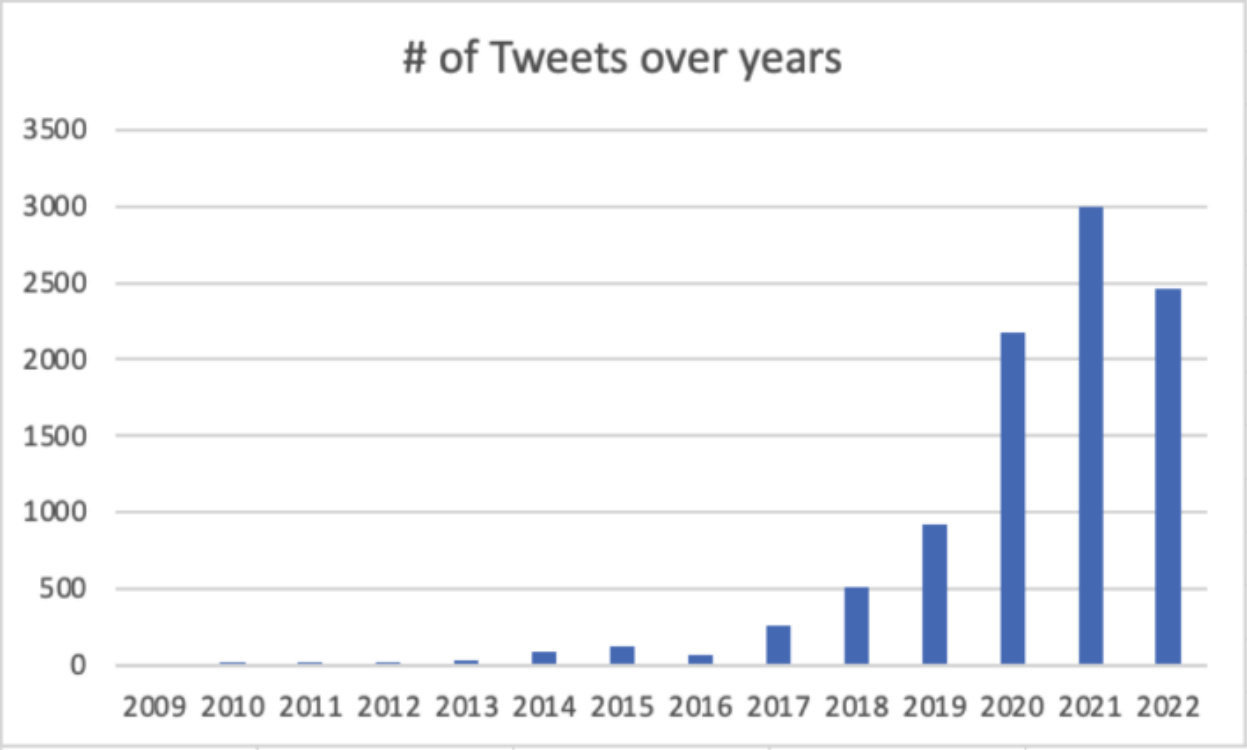


Figure 3.9: Number of tweets by year.

3.6.7 Where are #diasporawars participants located?

After analyzing #diasporawars conversations on Twitter, I examined their geographical distribution by categorizing locations into cities, states (US), and countries. While location data can be ambiguous—since users may mention places they don't reside in—this data, linked to users' Twitter profiles, helps us identify patterns, key regions, and the global impact of #diasporawars conversations.

I examined the user_location field in the Twitter dataset, where profile locations are available if users permit access or specify them. Out of 31,336 tweets, only 695 had accessible profile locations, representing just 2.2% of the data. Despite this, I found that 77.6% of #diasporawars participants are in the US, 7.2% in the UK, 3.6% in Canada, and 5.8% in Africa and the Caribbean.

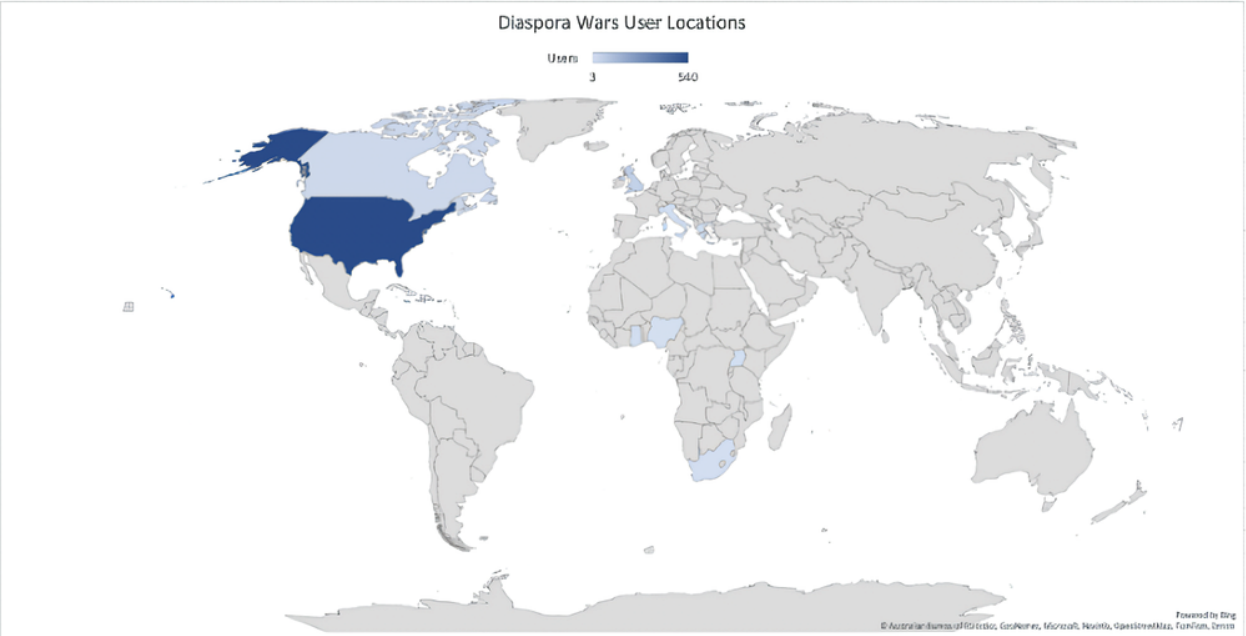


Figure 3.10: #diasporawar user country locations for all tweets in the dataset (N=31,336)

In analyzing 225 unique #diasporawars conversations, I reviewed each tweet's profile location and content. This revealed 305 profile locations. The US led with 71.4% of conversations, followed by 8.2% in the UK, 5.2% in Canada, and 15.2% in other regions, including France, South Africa, Kenya, and several others.

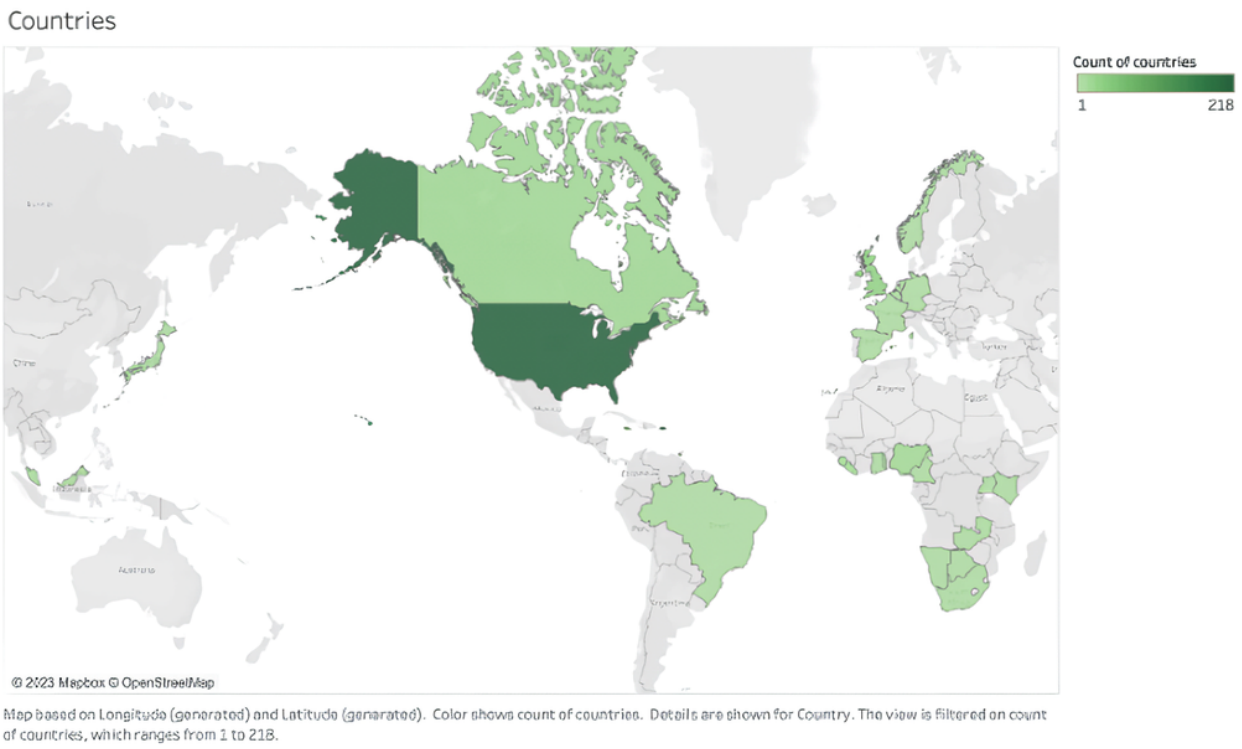


Figure 3.11: #diasporawar user country Locations on profiles - unique conversations

In the US, #diasporawars discussions are concentrated in four cities: New York City (13), Atlanta (12), Chicago (11), and Los Angeles (7). New York City, particularly Brooklyn, is the most active, with Houston and Detroit also contributing. The discussions are more prevalent on the East Coast, Southern California, and the South, with little activity in the Midwest except Detroit. Tweets specifying only states show higher activity in the Eastern and Southern US compared to the West Coast, where only California is notably involved.

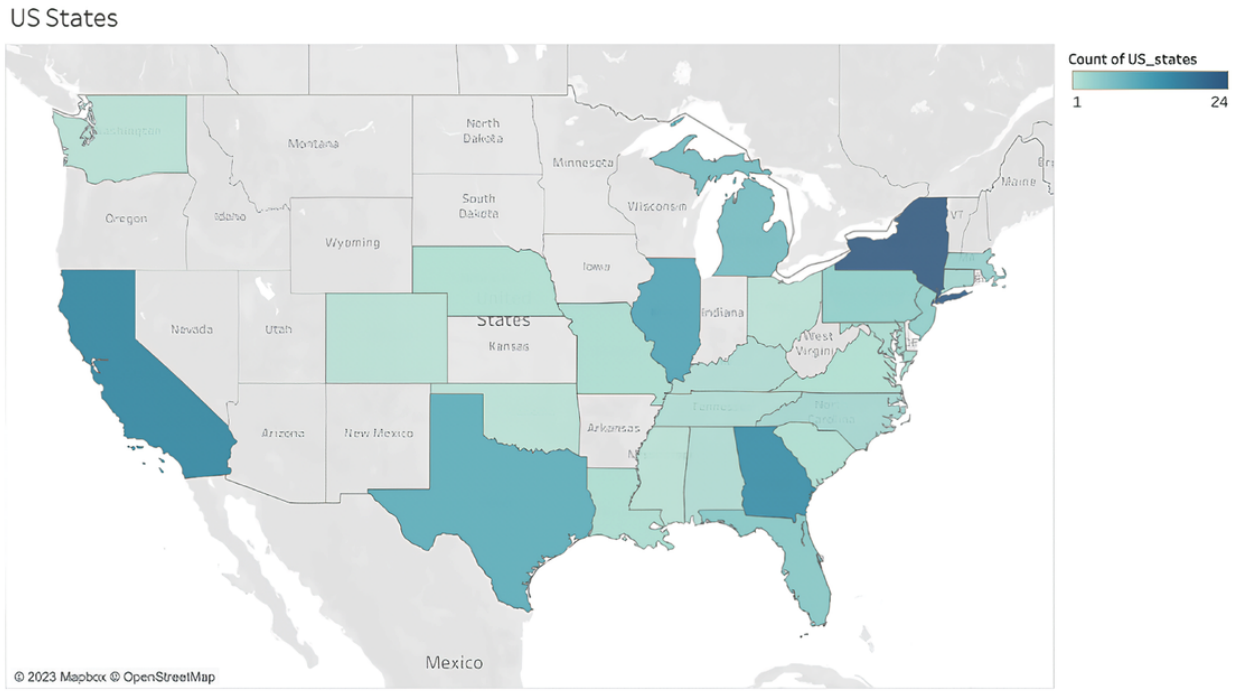


Figure 3.12: #diasporawar US state locations on profiles - unique conversations.

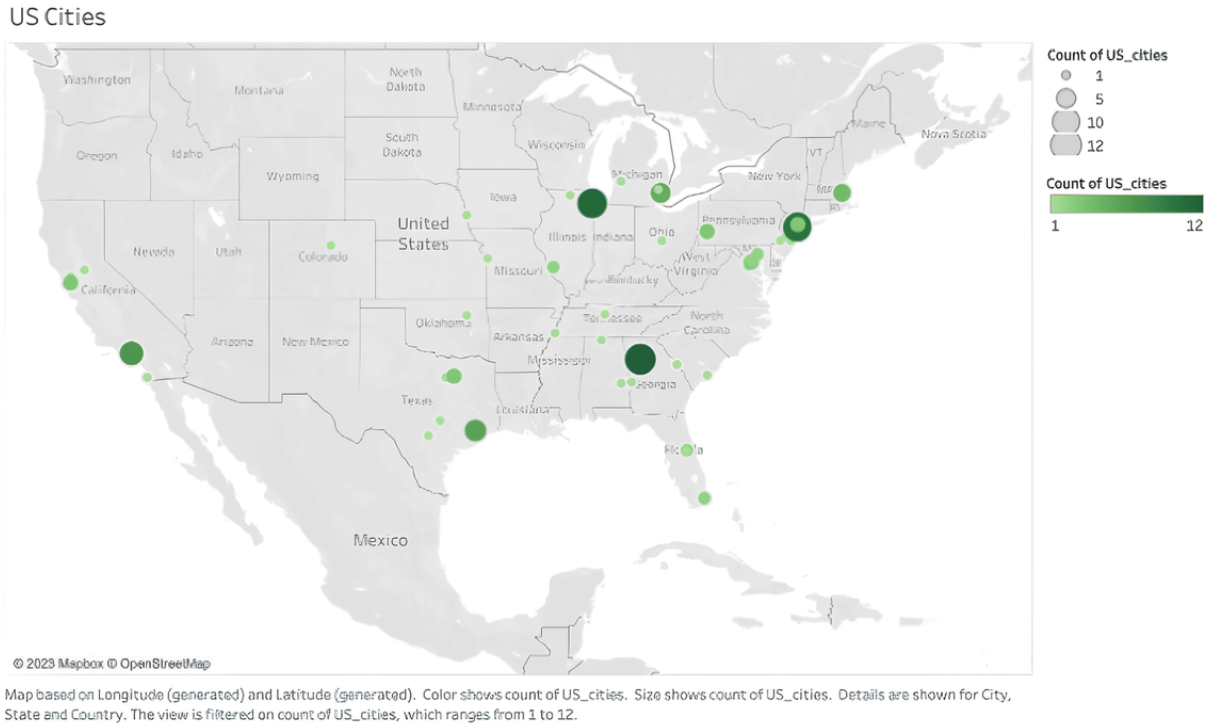


Figure 3.13: #diasporawar US city locations on profiles - unique conversations

In #diasporawars discussions, users also use pseudo-locations on their Twitter profiles to express their identity. These pseudo-locations fall into five categories: 1) cultural or ethnic references, 2) emotional or psychological states, 3) fictional or fantasy places, 4) conceptual or abstract regions, and 5) socio-cultural areas. For instance, the Mason-Dixon line represents historical social divisions, while "the belly of the beast" can refer to a challenging situation or cultural references like Nas's song or Da'Shaun Harrison's book. These pseudo-locations offer insights into diverse Black experiences and the creative use of location to define them.

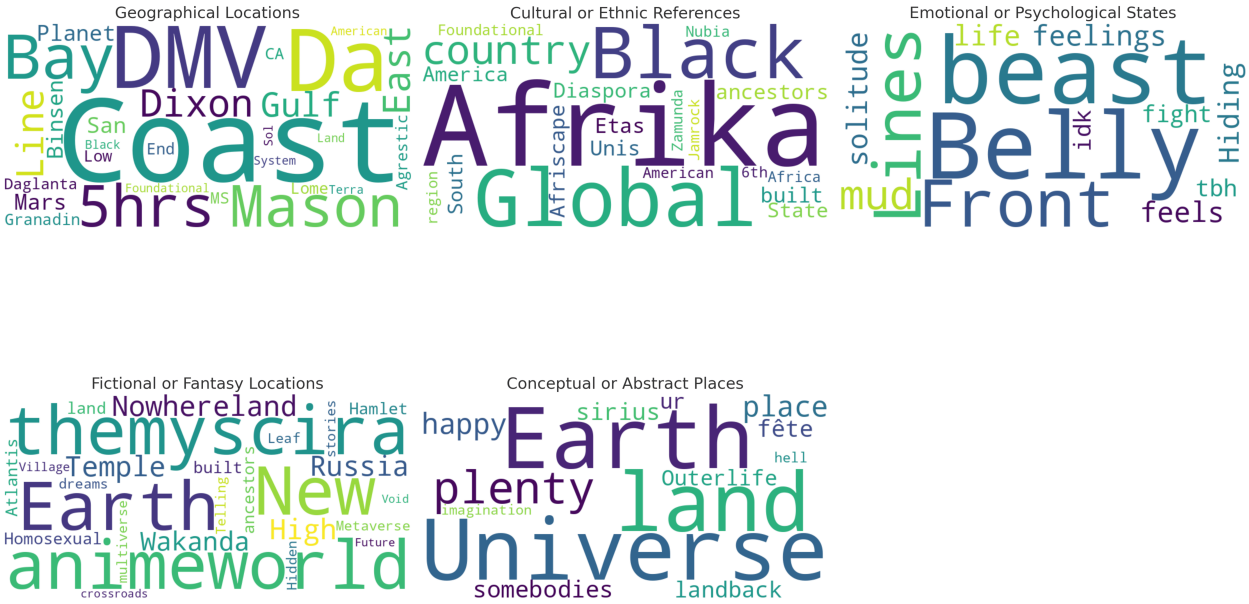


Figure 3.14: Pseudo-locations of users involved in #diasporawars discussions on their profiles.

3.7 Discussion

This study of the hashtag #diasporawars in the global Black Twitter community explores diverse expressions of Blackness and intersecting identities. I find that these hashtags are key to understanding online Black dialogues and the complexities of diasporic and conflictual conversations. The analysis shows that #diasporawars provides critical insights into Black digital life, highlighting how users navigate differentiation and community identity. Adopting an intersectional perspective is crucial for a nuanced view of global Black digital experiences, especially in conflict contexts.

This study shows that discussions on #diasporawars often start confrontational but can end in reconciliation, thanks to informal mediators or community influencers. While some influencers may exacerbate conflicts for attention, there is evidence of effective organic con-

flict resolution without traditional moderation. This indicates that these online spaces can resolve tensions that formal moderation might suppress.

#diasporawars demonstrates the capacity for unity and solidarity within the global Black community. While some conversations begin with inflammatory remarks, they often evolve into broader discussions about global Black identity and solidarity, particularly during significant events like the #EndSARS movement. This evolution from conflict to unity suggests that differentiation, when properly navigated, serves as a foundation for collective identity within the diversity of the Black diaspora.

The findings from #diasporawars challenge the prevailing assumptions in research on online conflicts. Rather than viewing all tense conversations as requiring content moderation, this study suggests that these conflicts can be part of authentic dialogues that contribute to identity formation and community building. This perspective calls for social media platforms to adopt intersectional approaches to content moderation that recognize the complexities of global Black digital life. Such approaches should aim to preserve the authenticity of these dialogues while mitigating the negative impacts of unresolved conflicts.

In summary, #diasporawars reflects a broader sociocultural process where Black identities are continuously negotiated and redefined through digital interactions. The differentiation strategies observed within these conversations align with broader theories of social identity and differentiation, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of online Black communities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more nuanced and effective approaches to managing online spaces, particularly in fostering authentic and inclusive digital communities.

3.8 Reflections

3.8.1 Regional Absence and Politics of Silence

While Americans are overrepresented in #diasporawars discourse, one notable pattern is the under-representation of Detroit and the broader U.S. Midwest. This absence raises important questions about the dynamics of digital visibility and regional voice within global Black discourse. What does it mean for Detroit—a historically significant center of Black migration, labor, and resistance—to be largely absent from a transnational Black debate?

This tension between national visibility and local silence invites deeper interrogation. As explored in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the absence of Detroit may reflect not just algorithmic amplification bias, but also socio-historical dynamics—such as migration patterns, class-based digital divides, or the marginalization of certain Black digital publics. It is possible

that the digital practices of Midwestern Black users are shaped more by local issues, cultural context, and offline organizing traditions than by global diasporic performance.

Moreover, absence should not be mistaken for disengagement. Silence, in this case, may operate as a form of resistance, refusal, or alternative engagement—highlighting the limits of visibility as a measure of participation.

3.8.2 Complicating the Role of Black Americans

While much of the #diasporawars discourse centers Black Americans as subjects of critique or victims of misrecognition, it is also important to name the dynamics of gate-keeping and cultural power. Black Americans—especially those from coastal cities—often set the aesthetic, linguistic, and political tone for Black digital life, wielding disproportionate influence over who gets to speak, be seen, or define "authentic" Blackness.

This complicity does not negate the structural harms Black Americans face, but it does call for a more nuanced analysis of power within the diaspora. Privilege, even among marginalized groups, is relational and contingent. Within the diasporic digital landscape, this means acknowledging the ways some Black communities—intentionally or not—shape, silence, or center themselves at the expense of others.

Future research could address this more directly by gathering data on Midwest digital participation in diasporic discourse, mapping regional content production, or tracing how platform algorithms differentially amplify cultural voices across Black geographies.

CHAPTER 4

Technomediated Justice: Relational Repair with Restorative Justice Practitioners

4.1 Tracing Technomediated Justice[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified our entanglements with digital systems, exposing long-standing inequalities in how care, harm, and repair are mediated online. While many institutions adopted digital platforms as technical fixes to the logical inconvenience disruption caused by the pandemic, Black studies traditions remind us that technology is never neutral. It is always bound to power, surveillance, and the afterlives of colonial and racial violence [24, 183, 44]. This dynamic is especially visible in the hidden labor that sustains digital systems. As Gray and Suri argue in *Ghost Work* , much what appears automated and frictionless is n fact powered by an invisible, precarious, marginalized workforce [110].

Building from this insight, this dissertation introduces the framework technomediated justice as a method for reimagining digital life through the Black radical and feminist traditions insistence on accountability, relationality, and repair [201, 62]. These commitments challenge the logic of digital infrastructures complicit in racial capitalism, carceral logics, and epistemic exclusion [24, 109]. Although the restorative justice practitioners in this study were not Black, their work within digital spaces reveals another dimension of relationality, which this dissertation introduces as the *fourth relationship*: where users and the platforms together mediate experiences of care, harm, and repair. Resonating with Black epistemological traditions described in Chapter in 2 and 3, this relationship calls attention to the affective and ethical weight of digital interaction itself, and will be developed more fully in the sections that follow.

[1]Musgrave, T., Bell, A., & Schoenebeck, S. (2025). Techno-mediated Justice: How Restorative Justice Practitioners Use VideoConferencing Platforms and What HCI Can Learn from Them. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 9(2), 1-31.

These epistemological commitments resonate with the ethos of restorative justice, a practice that similarly centers relational repair, accountability, and community healing. Traditionally rooted in face-to-face dialogue, it now unfolds across screens, raising critical questions about how digital platforms support—or hinder—the emotional and ethical depth required for repair. Prior work in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and social computing has acknowledged both the promise and limitations of videoconferencing platforms. While such tools enable access across distance and crisis [13, 148], they also pose barriers in bandwidth, privacy, user comfort, and platform control [176, 13]. These challenges are especially salient for justice-oriented work where harm, trust, and repair are at stake.

This chapter investigates how restorative justice practitioners use digital platforms to facilitate healing, accountability and repair. Specifically, it asks: How is justice practiced when mediated through technology? How do facilitators adapt digital tools to sustain intimacy, connection, and care in the face of harm? What role do platforms themselves play in shaping the emotional, ethical, and relational contours of justice work? And what can the design of socio-technical systems learn from their practice?

To answer these questions, this study develops the framework of technomediated justice, which bridges restorative and transformative justice with critical perspectives from HCI, Black studies, and information science. Rather than viewing technology as neutral or merely functional, technomediated justice recognizes it as a relational actor—one that co-shapes ethical life, responsibility, and repair. This framework calls for design approaches rooted in care, anti-colonial resistance, and the dismantling of anti-Black structures, especially in digital environments where historically marginalized communities, and Black users in particular, navigate harm, seek accountability, and imagine more just and liberatory futures.

This research offers three key contributions:

- An empirical study of how restorative justice practitioners use videoconferencing platforms in the aftermath of harm to facilitate repair. offering insight into the material and emotional labor required in technomediated justice;

- The theoretical development of technomediated justice, a framework shaped by Black epistemologies that treat justice as a relational, affective, and historically situated project. Rather than abstracting justice into design features or metrics, this approach centers the conditions under which people can live well, online and offline. As part of this framework, the dissertation introduces the concept of the *Fourth Relationship*: a user-platform dynamic that mediates experiences of care, harm, and repair—further elaborated in the conclusion through the lens of infrastructure and accountability.

- A call for HCI and social computing scholars to move beyond optimization toward a politics of co-witnessing, where platform design becomes a site for reckoning with harm and building collective futures.

Ultimately, this work argues that intimate, justice-centered digital experiences are not only possible but urgently needed—and that restorative justice practitioners have much to teach us about designing for connection, accountability, and repair. The Fourth Relationship, further elaborated in the conclusion, offers a critical lens through which to reimagine how platforms participate in the ethical and emotional dimensions of justice work.

4.2 Background

This background section outlines the key frameworks that inform this study's analysis of restorative justice work in digital spaces. It begins with Black epistemologies to foreground how Black folks ways of knowing challenge dominant narratives about justice, technology, and repair. These epistemologies, rooted in diasporic memory, embodied knowledge, and intergenerational critique offer a critical lens for understanding how justice is practiced and imagined beyond state-sanctioned or technocratic approaches.

The section then distinguishes between two often conflated terms: restorative justice and restorative practice. While the study engages with both, understanding their differences is essential to appreciating how facilitators approach digital justice work. Finally, I turn to videoconferencing platforms—the primary technologies under study—to examine how their affordances and limitations shape the relational and emotional labor of justice facilitation online.

4.2.1 A Closer Look into Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) addresses harm, crime, and injustice, primarily fostering repair, accountability, healing, and a sense of justice within a community and relationships. It diverges from a blame-centered or overly punitive stance, emphasizing acknowledgment of wrongdoing through a relational lens between individuals rather than framing it as a violation against the state. Restorative justice is the foundational concept from which restorative practice originates, which I discuss in the following subsection.

The field of restorative justice involves critical evaluations of the practice. For example, one critique challenges the perceived exaggeration of Indigenous influence in restorative justice (and practice). Criminologist and activist Juan Tauri, a member of Ngati Porou

from New Zealand, contends that claims of "Indigenous influence in the design of restorative justice programs have been overstated, potentially hindering Indigenous people's self-determination in the realm of justice" [233]. Ngati's point speaks to this over-emphasis on Indigenous influence in restorative justice where legal systems might simplify or generalize these contributions, leading to superficial or biased interpretations that do not truly represent Indigenous perspectives to serve the interests of the hegemonic culture subsequently, diverting attention from the systemic issues affecting Indigenous people. Another critique explores restoration terminology, raising questions about what needs restoration, mainly if the original system or relational experience was initially unhealthy. Lastly, there is a widespread critique concerning the gap between restorative justice in theory and its practical application [65].

Within the United States, restorative justice is crucial in recognizing harm within communities or relationships, providing alternative avenues distinct from the traditionally punitive practices ingrained in the criminal justice system [8]. Practitioners and researchers in the field offer varied definitions and approaches, emphasizing its role as a journey toward forgiveness and reconciliation, though without guaranteeing these outcomes. Restorative justice does not aim to restore the past, replace the legal system, or inherently align with abolitionist principles [131]. Its commitment to understanding the roles and needs of the community, addressing victim needs, and recognizing the requirements of those responsible for harm to establish a path toward accountability remains unequivocal. However, questions raised by the victim advocacy community regarding restorative justice's assertion of centering victims bring attention to concerns about the potential overemphasis on the needs and capabilities of offenders [259].

Restorative justice methods and processes exhibit resemblances to restorative practice, albeit with subtle distinctions in purpose, intent, and execution. Regarding purpose, applying a restorative justice approach can be relevant wherever conflict, crime, or harm has occurred. Circle processes and conferences are intentional methodological tools to facilitate restorative dialogues, promoting repair, healing, and shared accountability. Conferences, predominantly utilized in restorative justice, can manifest as victim and offender dialogues crafted to address crime, harm, or conflict through reparative approaches and outcomes.

The implementation of restorative justice conferences involves pre-conference or preparatory meetings involving all relevant parties. Facilitators assume a crucial role in these pre-conferences, evaluating the participants' willingness to engage, providing education on restorative practice, attentively listening to their narratives, and assessing their preparedness to share their stories. While debates persist regarding the victim-centered nature of restorative justice, the pre-conference serves as a crucial moment to discern the necessary

support for the victim and determine the suitability of a conference as a response. Within the pre-conference, facilitators collaborate with victims on crafting impact statements, articulating their perspectives on the inflicted harm and its repercussions while collectively generating ideas for repair. Simultaneously, with the individual responsible for the harm, the pre-conference acts as a platform to gauge their willingness to assume responsibility through responses to restorative questions. Additionally, the pre-conference allows facilitators to organize the logistical aspects of the ensuing conference.

The delivery of a restorative conference can adopt a circular, in-person format or, as explored in this paper, leverage technological mediums for restorative approaches. Another crucial aspect is the establishment of shared community values, collectively determined by the participants, outlining the conduct of the conference or circle. This is a commitment to co-created rules guiding their behavior throughout the process. Subsequently, the post-conference process involves summarizing the details, encompassing a reparative action plan co-signed by all parties involved. Such actions include an apology letter, community service, financial reparations, etc. The post-conference phase also provides an opportunity for feedback on the process, further participant discussions, and, occasionally, a shared communal meal.

Much like restorative practice, restorative justice finds application across differing fields wherever injustice prevails, and repair is imperative. Interestingly, integrating restorative justice has yielded innovative insights and solutions for addressing various forms of online harm. Current research explores the intersection of restorative justice and identity in the digital realm, such as understanding the experiences of Black women and femmes with online harm, utilizing the circle process as a qualitative method for digital research [178]. A study focusing on Muslim American women revealed the limitations of social media platforms in addressing online harassment, proposing restorative justice frameworks for solutions, including the implementation of a graduated privilege tool [203]. Another study took a restorative justice lens around youth and online harm, showing that they do not trust social media companies to address online harm [210]. Understanding youths' perspectives on their requirements during online harassment, including sense-making, emotional support, safety, retribution, and transformation, is a crucial focus of restorative justice research [257]. Investigations into incorporating restorative justice into academic settings, using various online and face-to-face instructional modalities, reveal the creation of effective restorative androgyny (i.e., helping adults learn) [99].

One of the aims of this study is to illuminate the resourcefulness of restorative facilitators in integrating technology with these values and principles to effectively engage their intended community. This study aims to glean insights from restorative justice practition-

ers to establish safe, connected, and effective environments that foster repair, healing, and accountability. By positioning these practitioners as technologists, this study seeks to build upon prior online research in restorative justice, incorporating the perspectives of those deeply engaged in this critical justice-focused work.

4.2.2 A Closer Look into Restorative Practice

There is no standardized or consistent definition of restorative practice in the literature. However, three distinct approaches typically characterize restorative practice: 1) in contrast to restorative justice, 2) in broad conceptual terms, or 3) described by its method. The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) approaches restorative practice as "focusing on reinforcing relationships among individuals and enhancing social connections within communities"[220]. Another perspective on defining restorative practice comes from the Global Alliance for Restorative Justice and Social Justice, a consortium of practitioners and researchers from the Restorative Justice Council, Howard University, and the University of Gloucester. The collective definition characterizes restorative practice as an "ideology grounded in relationships, enacted through positive communication, bringing individuals and communities to a place of awareness and accountability" [193]. Similar to IIRP, the Global Alliance's approach is broad and ideological, with less emphasis on detailing the methodology. However, terms like accountability are typically present, reminiscent of how restorative justice is approached. One K-12 educator and practitioner of restorative practice takes a value-driven, descriptive approach, defining restorative practice as "a set of principles and processes based on an understanding of the importance of positive relationships as central to building and maintaining inclusive community, including processes that aim to restore relationships" [18]. Despite assertions that restorative practice is "ill-defined" [192], the unique focus on proactively building community and relationships distinguishes it from restorative justice, which tends to be a reactive approach activated when conflict has already impacted an environment, community, and relationships.

In the existing literature, restorative practice finds application in various settings, including higher education institutions [5], K-12 schools [67], workplaces [79], social support services [253], prison life [230], and storytelling[28]. Beyond the overarching goal of strengthening communities and relationships, leveraging restorative practice can yield disparate outcomes. These outcomes may encompass addressing conflict and repairing harm, facilitating community engagement, promoting positive social norms, building social capital, nurturing empathy, fostering creativity, encouraging participatory learning, and influencing decision-making [190, 28, 249]. The distinctive emphasis of restorative practice on strengthening

communities and relationships contributes to what Ted Wachtel, the founder of IIRP, terms a "restorative milieu, an environment that consistently fosters awareness, empathy, and responsibility" [248]. In simpler terms, this corresponds to cultivating a restorative mindset [202].

Restorative practice (RP) encompasses varying methods and processes tailored for specific settings, including restorative conferences, circles, participatory action, formal theoretical models, and informal approaches like impromptu restorative responses. While processes like circles are commonly associated with restorative justice, restorative practice utilizes circles to cultivate positive cultures and enhance social capital [84]. A restorative circle is an adaptable restorative practice method, offering participants an intimate, secure, equitable, and open space for sharing perspectives through storytelling – an antidote to socialized punitivity or building communities based on compliance [28, 190]. Most punitive systems in the United States are built on shame. Both restorative practice and restorative justice allow us to examine shame, a deep emotion that hinders our ability to care for, repair, and take accountability in relationships [147]. Brene Brown, an expert on shame, defines shame as: "Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection"[41]. The experience of shame disrupts intimacy significantly. Intimacy, a distinct form of connectedness, can result from restorative practices, including approaches like circle processes. Nurtured through dialogue that involves varying levels of reciprocal self-disclosure, intimacy is intertwined with values such as safety, belonging, and affect, all of which are prevalent in this context [55, 129]. The adaptability of the circle method arises from its varied purposes, spanning healing circles, peacemaking circles, listening circles, self-expression, information exchange, conflict resolution, support circles, and workplace meetings [190].

Additionally, a centerpiece and altar may be present in a circle process, adorned with sentimental tokens representing the four elements: air, water, fire, and earth. Another vital element of the circle process is the facilitator or circle keeper [190]. The role of the circle keeper includes guiding the circle with encouraging restorative dialogue – non-reactive, vulnerable statements, and engagement [202]. For instance, healing circles might involve a facilitator navigating sensitive dialogues, reading body language, and tailoring guiding questions appropriately. The questions posed during the circle, known as restorative questions, are carefully curated to align with the goal of healing, community-building, or addressing potential harm [252, 248]. There are many similarities between restorative practices and restorative justice, including the interchangeable use of circles and conferences to meet the community's and individual's needs and values [88].

As mentioned, there has been a notable increase in applying restorative justice frame-

works within the digital realm. However, as outlined briefly in this section, implementing the restorative practice approach in the digital environment, specifically as a preventive measure and framework for constructing online communities, remains relatively unexplored. With this in mind, the focus of this research study, centered on restorative practitioners, is to investigate how they utilize restorative practice to reshape their digital environments and adapt videoconferencing platforms to meet the requirements of their facilitation and communities. Though the focus is on restorative practice, it overlaps with and draws heavily on restorative justice. The subsequent section will provide a brief overview of research on videoconferencing platforms.

4.2.3 Overview of Videoconferencing Platforms Research

Over the past decade, the landscape of videoconferencing platforms has expanded significantly, and its use cases and usability have undergone substantial changes, especially during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. Videoconferencing technology facilitates real-time communication through audio, video, and written modalities to allow communication among individuals in various locations accessed via mobile, desktop, or immersive technologies [105]. Over 30 years ago, video channels offered the ability to "show understanding, forecast responses, give non-verbal information, enhance verbal descriptions, manage pauses and express attitudes" [134]. Today, as decades ago, the usage of this technology depends on factors such as computing devices, bandwidth, and networks, with users digital literacy adding layers of complexity to user access (see [72]). However, videoconferencing platforms have become integral to navigating various facets of communication and connections within everyday life [144]. Research on video conferencing platforms has found their usefulness in building and maintaining connection and rapport [31], bridging geographies during remote work [185], facilitating education during the COVID-19 pandemic [46], and as a tool to facilitate research ranging from qualitative studies to remote co-design studies [158].

Skype, Jitsi, Google Meets, Zoom, Webex, and Microsoft Teams are among the most prominent videoconferencing platforms in use today. These platforms will likely evolve as technology advances, incorporating more features and enhancing the virtual meeting experience. Zoom, in particular, stands out for its user-friendly platform and quick adaptability. Its minimal barriers to usage and entry make it accessible to many users [13]. Zoom's key features include desktop sharing, breakout rooms, scheduling integrations, virtual background, collaborative tools, chat, and end-to-end encryption, to name a few [29]. Zoom experienced unprecedented growth during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the rise in remote work, virtual meetings, and online education [163]. In the early months of the pandemic, Zoom faced

scrutiny over security and privacy issues in the form of Zoombombing or unauthorized access to meetings [80]. With that saying, there is room for other video platforms to carve out a niche and stand out from Zoom's dominance. By offering unique features, enhanced security, or specialized services tailored to specific industries or user needs, these platforms can establish a competitive presence in the marketplace. For example, the Jitsi platform prides itself on its open-source and encryption capabilities; it's a free and straightforward platform [164]. However, it lacks most of the collaborative features touted by Zoom. Similarly, the Microsoft platform, a widely used video conferencing solution, exhibits notable distinctions. It is an integral component of Microsoft's extensive 365 subscription plan, offering advantages such as adherence to HIPAA and GDPR compliance, a strong emphasis on team collaboration, and seamless integration with productivity tools [132]. However, its cost and user interface present challenges for independent users seeking accessibility [25].

Technical difficulties with videoconferencing platforms vary. For example, the digital divide in the United States has impacted bandwidth and networking capabilities, which are necessary for videoconferencing platforms. Low bandwidth or network latency leads to video and audio lag, pixelated video quality, or disruptions in communication, ultimately leading to a poor videoconferencing experience for users on both ends. Additionally, recent research into videoconferencing software used on mobile devices highlights challenges with hardware, including a significant 40% battery drainage after one hour on a budget phone, which can be mitigated to some extent (30%) by turning off the camera [52]. Turning off the camera can hinder the ability to connect effectively online, making it difficult to use videoconferencing platforms as a substitute for in-person interactions. This poses an intriguing challenge given that 85% of Americans possess smartphones, surpassing the ownership of desktops or laptops (77%) and tablets (53%) [1]. Fascinatingly, studies indicate a correlation between network latency and Zoom fatigue [96]. The exhaustion associated with spending extended periods on video, known as Zoom fatigue, was studied by Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction lab, finding that prolonged eye contact, continuous self-observation on video, diminished mobility, and increased cognitive load exacerbate it [15].

Furthermore, socio-cultural factors impact videoconferencing usage, such as muting mics and using emojis, which vary among users. These behaviors have enormous implications for mutual awareness among users sharing a videoconferencing connection [114]. The following section will summarize my methodological approach to this detailed study on how restorative facilitators leverage videoconferencing platforms to facilitate justice-related work.

4.3 Method

I conducted semi-structured focus groups to explore the experiences of restorative practitioners using videoconferencing platforms in their justice-related work. In the following sections, I describe the study's focus groups, describe the recruitment procedures, and explain the data analysis.

During the recruitment phase, the focus was explicitly on restorative justice practitioners, and most of the study participants identified as such. Interestingly, I discovered that restorative justice and practice were often used interchangeably in practice (even if they are not in the literature). Many participants engaged in and with both frameworks, as revealed through interviews.

The study investigates how the transformation of digital environments into spaces that nurture safety, connection, and support, which are crucial for restorative practice. My methodology and findings sections do not differentiate between restorative justice and practice, as I view these terms as complementary and overlapping. I use "restorative practitioners" or "restorative facilitation" to avoid this distinction. I introduce the term techno-mediated justice, defined here as the use of digital technologies to facilitate justice practices such as restorative justice. In contrast to carceral justice, typically enforced through law enforcement or military mechanisms, this techno-mediated justice emphasizes the values, practices, and principles of alternative non-carceral justice frameworks within digitally mediated environments.

Throughout the paper, I reference "techno-mediated justice" to clarify that videoconferencing platforms do not inherently embody restorative values. Instead, I emphasize the ingenuity of restorative facilitators in integrating technology with these values. This study seeks to gain insights from restorative justice practitioners to create environments that foster repair, healing, and accountability, positioning these practitioners as technologists. I aim to contribute to social computing and HCI by providing a nuanced understanding of the restorative justice and facilitation landscape.

4.3.1 Participant Recruitment

The recruitment strategy involved disseminating digital flyers to restorative-justice-focused organizations and listservs, supplemented by leveraging the first author's network, drawing from their prior role as a restorative-justice facilitator. The recruitment criteria requested that individuals be residents of the United States, aged 21 or above, with experience in facilitating ten or more virtual restorative processes and a recognizable or current connection to restorative justice. The recruitment survey encompassed details regarding participants'

location, age, and interest in the 90-minute paid focus group alongside other restorative facilitators. I also inquired about the platforms they use for virtual restorative facilitation.

It's crucial to note two key points. Firstly, the recruitment messaging specifically said "restorative justice" to draw in participants, resulting in a group exclusively self-identifying as restorative justice practitioners. Secondly, participants' technological backgrounds were not the primary focus of recruitment; instead, I prioritized their varied experiences with digital technologies in delivering justice-related work.

A total of thirty individuals expressed interest in participating in this study. Following a review of the recruitment survey responses, eight potential participants were disqualified due to residing outside the United States or not meeting the experience threshold required by the study criteria. I selected twenty-two participants, and upon confirmation, they received a comprehensive "You're Invited" email. This email included details about the research appointment time, compensation plan, consent form, and a detailed welcome letter offering additional insights about the study. In the welcome letter, I detailed the research, including the research questions and abstract, biographies of the research team, and practical tips for using Zoom during participation. The study unfolded over two months, between June and July 2023, with six focus groups.

The twenty-two participants' ages ranged from 24 to 64 years, and although I did not explicitly inquire about gender, race, or ethnicity, the group exhibited some diversity in these dimensions. Additionally, participants were located throughout the United States (see Table **??**). The predominant platform used was Zoom (N = 16), followed by Google Meets (N = 5), Microsoft Teams (N = 3), the Circl.es app (N = 1), and one undisclosed platform. Participants brought a diverse set of experiences, having conducted virtual restorative facilitation sessions ranging from ten to one hundred. The March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic was the primary cause of the shift toward virtual facilitation for all participants. Additionally, participants embraced virtual facilitation as a courageous response—considering their varying levels of technological familiarity—to meet the pressing needs of their communities, either as volunteers or as paid facilitators.

As shown in Table **??**, participants reflected in the study on their use of videoconferencing technologies (see Appendix E).

4.3.2 Focus Group Protocol

Restorative facilitation methods served as the cornerstone for shaping the structure of focus groups, and these methods guided the virtual facilitation of the sessions. For example, I created a pre-conference 'Welcome Packet' to provide participants with a detailed overview

of what to expect. During each focus group, I actively co-created community agreements. Participants introduced themselves, shared their connection to restorative justice and practice, and, if they chose to, participated in a land acknowledgment. To foster an inclusive and collaborative conversation, I implemented a co-managed speaking order. In recognition of the participants' time and contributions, each individual received a compensation of $60 after the focus group.

I also guided the discussions using open-ended questions. The questions covered topics such as getting to know participants, video conferencing platforms, affect and emotion within digital environments, and restorative facilitation. Although I initially planned 4–5 related questions for each topic, I opted for an iterative and adaptive approach based on the ongoing discussion. The focus groups, each comprising 2–5 participants, were organized according to the participants' availability.

4.3.3 Data Analysis

I am committed to knowledge production over scientific generalization, focusing deeply on understanding subjective, specific, and local technological experiences. This approach aims to accumulate richly detailed cases that reveal socio-technical agency as it takes shape in particular contexts. Here, knowledge is "digital knowledge"—insights that serve academics and practitioners, including care workers, restorative justice practitioners, and communities who may not typically engage in technological research or design. This inclusive approach recognizes that valuable, practical knowledge emerges from real, context-specific interactions.

I used the Zoom platform to conduct the focus group discussions, obtaining participants' permission to record the sessions, which were then securely stored in a shared digital folder within Google Drive. Subsequently, the first author oversaw transcription using the Otter.ai platform and cleaned up the transcripts for readability. The research team extensively reviewed the recordings and transcriptions from the six focus groups. Employing a thematic approach to analysis, I iteratively developed a codebook and used the NVivo platform to code the data, with the first author conducting the coding [4]. The first author has extensive training and experience in restorative justice theory and practice. The last author also has training and expertise in restorative justice. I triangulated the analysis and interpretations of the data with my experience in RJ as well as with scholarly literature. I chose to have the lead author code the data because I wanted to prioritize their expertise and their understanding of participants from conducting the interviews [170]. The coding process revealed several prominent themes, such as using videoconferencing platforms, challenges and distractions faced by facilitators, and the core elements of building trust, safety, connection,

accountability, and healing. Additionally, the analysis explored the translation of ceremony, the measurement of success in virtual facilitation, and the impact of change—both positive and negative—in virtual facilitation.

4.4 Findings

In this section, I will explore the themes of the focus group interviews, shedding light on how restorative practitioners harness videoconferencing platforms to be conducive to techno-mediated restorative practice. According to participants, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a pivotal moment when their offline justice-related work transitioned online, with limited time and support to acclimate to the technology. For example, one participant detailed taking an online course on moving circle practice hosted by the Restorative Justice on the Rise network, expressing how it enhanced their proficiency with Zoom and enabled them to create a more intimate and brave virtual space (Participant 9). More generally, three themes emerged to explain participants' initial and ongoing utilization of videoconferencing platforms: 1) addressing clientele needs, which included bridging the geographical distance between participants and facilitators, cost constraints preventing time off from work, and the comfort of being at home; 2) responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the imperative to maintain distance; 3) to deploy national training sessions and supportive gatherings for restorative facilitators.

However, three years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, most participants have adopted a hybrid format, integrating videoconferencing platforms to streamline the offline restorative process. Participants described a hybrid facilitation format from the focus groups that involved leveraging videoconferencing platforms for pre-restorative logistical communication, pre-conference meetings, and post-restorative facilitation follow-up. The actual restorative circle, conference, or meeting typically occurred in person unless there was explicit communication for an online option. This section will unpack findings organized into two overarching themes: videoconferencing platforms and digital tools and translating restorative practice in the virtual.

4.4.1 Videoconferencing Platforms and Digital Tools

In this section, the guided question explored the following: Which videoconferencing platforms and the accompanying digital tools do US restorative justice facilitators employ for virtual mediation?

4.4.1.1 Videoconferencing Platforms and Digital Tools

To summarize the findings, most participants favor the Zoom platform for their justice-related endeavors due to its accessibility, widespread acceptance among their clientele, and overall manageability of its features. Although Zoom was preferred, participants used Google Meets, Microsoft Teams, Webex, Jitsi, and Circle virtual software to host their restorative practice work. Participants extensively utilized digital tools to oversee their justice-related tasks, with Google Suite products emerging as the frontrunner in the frequency of use. These Google Suite tools included Google Email for communication, YouTube for its videos can create ambiance, Google Slides, and Google Docs for sharing documents. In terms of hardware, participants incorporated accessories like headphones, and a few mentioned using the Owl Labs meeting camera (a 360-degree videoconferencing camera).

Many acknowledged that they explored other available video platforms only a couple of years post-pandemic and after extensively using Zoom. Participant (8) articulated, "90% over the last three years of the online facilitation, I've done via Zoom... I find that it's the simplest, the lightest weight, and the most intuitive for people." During discussions, participants explained their preference for Zoom due to its swift adoption amid the COVID-19 pandemic, noting its ease of download, cost-effectiveness, adaptability, and accessibility among available platforms, particularly emphasizing its capability to support restorative practices online, a subject to be further detailed in the subsequent section. Additionally, several participants attributed their adoption of the Zoom platform to workplace standards, especially in educational and corporate settings where Zoom was the established norm:

> "I use almost exclusively Zoom... I would say 99.9% of the time Zoom and that's because my school district where I work that's what we use and have a free account with them. I can be on it as long as I want without getting kicked off. And now I know how to use it pretty well and can do circles on it pretty well." (Participant 20)

Finally, participants discussed how Zoom's integration features seamlessly integrate with digital tools like Google Suites to plan and coordinate their facilitation sessions, "It is my company's laptop... so whatever they [give] me, I use... for scheduling circles... then I use Google calendar invites... Zoom can be embedded in your Google calendar" (Participant 16).

Participant (5) from New York mentioned that WebEx is the preferred method for state agencies but called WebEx "too cumbersome to share with clients." A participant highlighted specific concerns regarding the privacy and security of video conferencing platforms, leading them to favor Jitsi as their preferred choice, "I have found secure success with the platform

Jitsi, which is more open-source... comes as an app or online... and supports relative anonymity for security" (Participant 19). Reportedly, Jitsi Meet abandoned its commitment to complete anonymity in 2023, now mandating users to establish a meeting room using a Gmail, Facebook, or Github account [164]. Another participant, affiliated with a higher education institution, brought attention to the videoconferencing platform Circl.es. The Circl.es community platform and The Circl.es System are promoted on its website as a platform focused on the "age-old tradition of storytelling and gathering as community" [70]. The Circl.es Video Space is highlighted for its features, such as 1-click participant access, a secure environment, 1:1 private links, encryption, no recording access, and an upcoming mobile app [70]. Participant (8) shared insights from their workplace experience with the Circl.es platform,

> "... it's not specifically designed for circle practices as we do as restorative practitioners, but it's more non-hierarchical, egalitarian sort of digital meeting space, that you can arrange all of the images in a circle... there are tools that allow you to automatically create a talking order, lets everyone see and visualize the circle. It brings people to the center when they're talking... I was excited about it, although skeptical about its ability to do good circle work online. It's a bit unwieldy and unfamiliar to a lot of people. You have to go to their website and download the platform, create a personal account... so we stopped using it because it had some helpful tools but, we were also doing circles via Zoom – It was more familiar".

In addition to videoconferencing platforms, participants discussed employing digital tools that enhance their digital facilitation. The most frequently mentioned digital tool package was Google Suites, particularly Google Docs, which was utilized for uploading conference or circle resources with convenient access and asynchronous activities, "I am like the queen of Google Docs because I like to be able to share at the same time I am presenting" (Participant 5). Google PowerPoint served a similar purpose to Google Docs, offering an option for sharing content with the entire group asynchronously. Participants utilized various other digital tools, including Google emails, Google Calendar, WhatsApp, text messages, and voice notes to invite and coordinate their participants, ensuring they attended meetings at the scheduled time with the videoconferencing platform URL linked for easy access. Lastly, participants frequently cited Google's YouTube as a tool to establish a welcoming ambiance before facilitation by broadcasting tunes through the share feature of the videoconferencing platforms.

4.4.1.2 Challenges as Virtual Facilitators

Participants shed light on their challenges and distractions by sharing their experiences with virtual restorative facilitation. Throughout the study, participants addressed questions posed by the researchers about their experiences conducting virtual restorative justice facilitation, elaborating on challenges even when not explicitly asked about them. Challenges became apparent, especially in workplaces and educational environments, where established values and norms posed difficulties.

One notable challenge highlighted by participants in such settings was the resistance to camera usage among their participants. Participant (1) articulated the challenge of navigating office policies wherein employees are not required to turn on their cameras during regular meetings. This leads to resistance when prompted in a restorative facilitation context. Multiple participants, particularly those in educational institutions working with students, echoed similar challenges. Additionally, the attendance of participants in virtual restorative facilitation varied based on how the virtual process was linked to their workplace and educational commitments, either as a requirement or as frequent reminders were given.

Secondly, participants raised concerns about environmental and social challenges, such as the absence of privacy and the need to manage personal surroundings during Zoom sessions. In particular, students and young individuals engaged in virtual restorative facilitation encountered many challenges stemming from needing more control over their environments.

Participant (3) explained the difficulties of youth having the privacy needed during facilitation and how it's a challenge for them to navigate as facilitators,

> "Even as a facilitator, it is a distraction when they happen to be in a place where their family or parents are there or pop up as if its normal, online conversation they're having with their friends... they have not to spill the full information they haven't shared with their parents."

Lack of privacy hinders the RJ facilitator from being able to fully support the student in the restorative process and reveals how videoconferencing may bring on added layers of privacy concerns, particularly for student users who do not have control of their environments. Similarly, another participant expressed challenges in managing the coexistence of physical and virtual environments in asynchronous workplaces. Participant (18) emphasized the nuanced balance required to maintain professionalism and order virtually, acknowledging the ongoing realities of her own life and those of the participants:

> "Obviously, when I'm facilitating a circle, I'm being paid to do so to find a quiet space and to make sure my kids are with somebody else... but life happens, and

> things happen. And so if that happens for me, I try to give grace... it humanizes me as a facilitator a little bit and lets them know whatever they're dealing with is fine... But it's kind of walking in that line of like let's try to be focused.

Moreover, one participant acknowledged the challenge of accommodating diverse learning styles, especially when facilitating alone without technical support from a colleague, "some people are visual learners, some people are auditory learners, so just understanding that... the people specifically that are coming into the circle, you have to differentiate the tools that you utilize to reach them or repeating myself" (Participant 9).

Conversely, a participant provided specific insights where their participants appeared bored as a challenge to navigate as a facilitator. They described interpreting expressions that seemed devoid of emotion or interest, "I think people look incredibly bored... that's the kind of visceral experience I have with Zoom. I don't feel comfortable keeping people on Zoom more than about two hours" (Participant 10).

Another challenge involves the difficulty of holding space comparable to an in-person restorative process, especially regarding the vulnerability it can evoke. As described by Participant (18), "its really hard for me as a facilitator [when we have an emotional experience online]... in-person, I would normally take a break or pause things, ask someone if they need a hug, offer a tissue." Many participants find that interpreting body language and physical cues poses a unique challenge in online facilitation, "people have shared with me, in our prep meetings, like, Oh, this is a sign when I'm super anxious or being triggered. And I was like, I can't read that sign over Zoom" (Participant 16). Some participants highlighted the challenge of managing virtual facilitation while "reading the [virtual] room" to determine the significance behind turned-off cameras, whether due to uncomfortable emotions from the discussions or technical difficulties like network latency, "it's okay for us to have our feelings and to have them on camera and welcoming people back in. And sometimes I don't know if that's what's going on, or if it's the WiFi, and so they're turning off their cameras" (Participant 11).

Thirdly, participants noted the technical challenges and difficulties, as well as how these challenges intersect with the digital divide and digital literacy as facilitators and their participants. In other words, some participants mentioned age-related challenges, particularly among older individuals using Zoom, the primary videoconferencing platform in this study. Participant (16) says, "Especially when I was working with older adults, they had issues with camera angles. That seems small, but like talking to someone's chin is not it or if they don't have a laptop." This study reveals a variety of digital literacies between facilitators and participants as they strive to navigate a swiftly evolving digital landscape to do restorative work. This includes facilitators managing hardware devices and various videoconferencing

platforms, adapting to system updates, and remembering how to use all the added features to establish an environment suited for restorative work.

Further, Participant (9) highlighted the challenge of accommodating a group of individuals with various levels of digital literacy and familiarity with videoconferencing platforms,

> "individuals have various levels of savviness with Zoom. Some people had never used Zoom before and were thrust into this environment. So sometimes the mics wouldn't be turned on, a lot of times. They'll start talking muted. It's just always being aware."

Some participants emphasized the difficulties of facilitating online. They dealt with issues such as managing their microphones while facilitating, managing the waiting room, and seeking permission to enable video simultaneously. Participant (15), in particular, candidly shared how the transition to virtual restorative facilitation intensified a sense of self-consciousness regarding restorative facilitation and their self-image on Zoom as a result of the self-view feature. Other challenges included technical issues, including frozen screens, dropped Zoom calls, and weak connectivity, as expressed by several participants, disrupting the flow of virtual facilitation. Specifically, Participant (2) mentioned, "where somebody has to get off or even like having our cameras on that takes up a lot of internet usage... so a lot of people need to leave their cameras off." Internet connectivity highlights the varying degrees of privilege and resources among virtual restorative facilitators and their participants in addressing technical issues, with weak connectivity often tied to financial constraints and limited access. Facilitators also encountered technical challenges related to access, such as being unable to afford technical support for managing unexpected issues.

4.4.2 Translating Restorative Practice

In this guided question, we explored the following: How do restorative justice practitioners employ restorative practices in their virtual facilitation? In brief, the focus group discussions unveiled three primary themes.

The initial theme centered on translating restorative practice and justice into the virtual realm, illuminating participants' diverse approaches to crafting a digital environment conducive to restorative principles. Participant 20 succinctly encapsulated the sentiments expressed by many: "I do think I have done some very powerful transformational circles on Zoom, but the ceremonial aspect, it seems a little bit is lost not being in-person." The second theme highlighted virtual restorative facilitation's nuanced positive and negative impacts on the restorative process. Participants acknowledged the differing manifestations of restorative facilitation, shaped by factors such as the facilitator's style, the specific process

and purpose, the participants involved, and the virtual setting, as elaborated in the related literature section. Lastly, participants emphasized the continuity between online and offline formats, stressing the need for thoughtful translation of their in-person restorative practices to align with the virtual format.

4.4.2.1 Translating Restorative Practice

As the literature outlines, the standard restorative facilitation follows a structured sequence comprising three main stages: pre-facilitation preparation, the restorative process, and, depending on the type of process, a restorative agreement [259]. These stages are interconnected and build upon one another to ensure a comprehensive and effective restorative experience.

The *pre-facilitation stage* involves intentional measures to prepare participants and facilitators, setting expectations, clarifying objectives, and addressing logistical aspects to lay the groundwork for a smooth and productive process. The *restorative process stage* encompasses an opening ceremony to set the atmosphere, introductions to foster community and trust, restorative dialogue where participants engage in structured conversations to address issues and work towards resolution, and a closing ceremony for reflection and closure.

In-person facilitation may extend for several hours, with pauses or conclusions determined by consensus. The group may decide to continue the conversation on another day or to conclude once *restorative agreements* have been formulated and accepted, signaling the end of the restorative process. Facilitators play a crucial role in managing time and ensuring the process progresses smoothly and efficiently. By following this structured sequence, each stage reinforces the next, creating a cohesive and supportive environment that facilitates healing and resolution.

Virtual facilitation follows the standard restorative process, but what I found from participants is that translating it to fit the online format does take some effort. One notable translation is time. All of participants noted constraining virtual facilitation to 2 hours. If the process was not able to complete in this time frame, a consensus conversation took place between parties on how to continue until the set goals were met.

Further, the virtual pre-conference or pre-work meeting serves as a preparatory session for all involved parties. The purpose is to familiarize participants with the facilitation process, set expectations, address needs during the event, and discuss restitution logistics, where applicable.

Some participants emphasized using digital scheduling tools as an improvement over traditional word-of-mouth scheduling in offline restorative facilitation. They explained the integration of meeting planning tools, such as the When-to-Meet platform or Google Calendar, to schedule sessions. These tools allowed for linking videoconferencing platform URLs

to the calendar and emailing invitations to participants and co-facilitators.

During these pre-work meetings, one participant provided detailed insights, highlighting how this phase aids in the seamless coordination of online restorative facilitation, "I always explain in pre-circle on Zoom with cameras turned on to give the sense and time to explain what the circle is about... there is so much unknown, and the process is not linear online" (Participant 7).

Facilitators used pre-conference calls or emails to inform participants about the essentials needed for comfortable engagement in virtual facilitation. They reminded their participants to pick and keep their talking piece nearby (depending on the facilitator's type of facilitation or style), secure private space for participation, download the Zoom platform on their phone or computer, and, have a snack and water readily available.

Following pre-work and coordinating the scheduling of the date for the restorative facilitation, participants are considered ready to engage in the virtual restorative dialogue. On the day of the restorative dialogue, participants sign on to their videoconferencing platform of choice and prepare for the opening ceremony.

The opening ceremony involves several steps. The process of setting the environment begins as participants enter the virtual space. Some participants highlighted the intentional use of the waiting room feature on the Zoom platform, considering it an invitation to welcome people collectively into the space rather than individually.

Participants set up the virtual environment by preparing their restorative media to be shared from platforms like YouTube and Spotify — a song, poem, reading, or video to establish a warm and uplifting ambiance when transitioning from the waiting room to the virtual restorative room occurs.

Participant (20) shared a video they often utilized to establish the desired mood at the start of facilitation,

> "I've shown videos as an opening. There's one video I just love by OkayPlayer called *Passage*, which is a black-centered meditation. I love to show that because it's beautiful, it's visual, it's meditative. I can put the link in the chat." (This focus group collectively decided to listen to OkayPlayer's Passage meditation and were optimistic about the experience).

An important part of the ceremony, online and offline is the centerpiece. It holds significant importance in restorative facilitation, but it proves challenging to replicate online, as it traditionally involves a co-created altar at the center of a physical circle.

Some participants shared strategies, such as using the shared screen feature on Zoom to display a photo of a centerpiece or transforming it into a community-building activity

through tools like JamBoard or Padlet. These digital platforms allow participants to contribute virtual sticky notes and construct their centerpieces collaboratively. Another method highlighted for creating the right environment and ambiance involved reminding participants to be in a private space, with facilitators leading by example.

Participant (17) talked about how they preferred not to use the blur background feature on Zoom as it distracted from the ambiance, "that's just me." It's only for transparency. I want people to know that it's just me here." Additionally, Participant (17) shared the practice of promoting the use of emojis as a means to foster a warm and uplifting environment, particularly effective when engaging with youth, "I'll say [to participants] you can put a heart, a little 'like,' you can put whatever. I encourage them to use that so that people can see on the screen that they're not just talking and are engaged in the content of the conversation."

During the opening ceremony, personal introductions are shared so everyone is familiar with each other. Introductions are done orderly to create a non-hierarchical structure, with one person speaking at a time and translating the circular pattern into offline restorative facilitation. Participants shared methods of recreating this non-hierarchical structure online. This involved using talking order templates created on platforms such as Google Slides, Google Docs, and Prezi, (Figure 4.1, below), which were then shared on Zoom using the screen-sharing feature.

Some facilitators employed the chat feature to determine the speaking sequence of participants, ensuring it followed a structured order that looped back to the beginning for a continuous restart —like a circle. Emphasizing the facilitation style and environment vary depending on numerous factors, but mainly the facilitator.

Participant (13) described the introduction prompts they used to begin fostering connection virtually, for example, "My best days I am (fill in the blank), tell a story about an engagement with one of the elements, what's challenging/breaking your heart? It's about introducing ourselves without our titles and sharing a story as a ritual of reconnecting and remembering what it's like to be humans online and offline."

A concluding element of the opening ceremony, preceding the dialogue, involves establishing community values or norms. This process is a co-creation by the community, serving as an agreement on how everyone intends to interact with each other, regardless of the online or offline setting. Many participants highlighted using tools such as Google Docs and Google Slides to create and present these values and norms collaboratively. They would type in real-time while sharing their screen on Zoom, allowing everyone to witness and contribute. Specific questions are posed in both online and offline facilitation to understand what is necessary to achieve the desired outcome,

> "[We] co-create norms and community values together as we're trying to cultivate the virtual space together, so how can we do that? [I ask them] What makes you feel comfortable in this space enough to share vulnerability, or what makes you feel like you're protected in the space? Questions like this try to get to norms" (Participant 18).

Importantly, it involves maintaining community agreements and co-created values easily to access or visible to serve as a reminder for participants, "so if someone isn't abiding by norms, we put them back on the screen to be able to remind and refresh folks" (Participant 18).

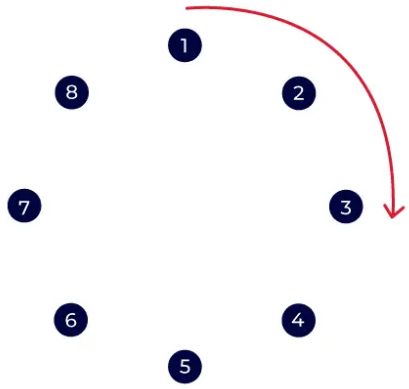


Figure 4.1: Talking Circle Order.

The preparation and opening ceremony transition into the restorative dialogue, which varies in content based on the type of restorative process (either reaction to harm or building community), its purpose and requirements, and the facilitator's approach.

Earlier, I explored the techno-mediated talking order, and alongside this, there's the techno-mediated use of the talking piece. Participant (18) emphasized preparing participants to have an item near their device when it's their turn to speak, providing an example of the flow they would create in virtual facilitation,

> "So here's my talking piece, and I'm going to pass it to [this person], and then [they] would pick up their talking piece next to them [in their physical environment]."

Maintaining the talking piece in virtual facilitation carries symbolic significance, preserving restorative traditions from being lost in the digital realm.

Many participants found Zoom's breakout room feature to be a valuable tool in facilitating restorative dialogues, "I like the breakout rooms because circles turn into a long dialogue, we need a break, or a need to have a mini educational moment and someone can jump to the breakout room – it's pretty smooth and seamless" (Participant 16).

Again, Zoom chat emerged as a beneficial feature during virtual restorative dialogues. On the one hand, it proves advantageous for private conversations with the facilitator, allowing participants to seek breaks or support. Conversely, one participant noted it presents challenges as participants may engage in one-side conversations in the chat, distracting the virtual facilitation.

4.4.2.2 *For Better or For Worse: Virtual Restorative Facilitation*

To grasp the impact of virtual restorative facilitation on the restorative process, a participant highlighted a crucial caveat regarding the increasing demand for restorative facilitation during and after the pandemic, asserting that it has little to do with the modality:

> "the willingness for people to consider restorative justice increased considerably during the pandemic. Separate from the modality, whether it is virtual and/or in-person, just the idea that we could approach harm, community, conflict, healing, and accountability in a different way than sort of the dominant modality increased a lot after the pandemic. So I think it's just a coincidence that the pandemic took us online" (Participant 7).

This intriguing perspective emphasizes the sought-after demand for online or offline restorative processes and facilitation. While participants in this study acknowledge the challenging techno-mediation of restorative facilitation in the virtual realm, the vast majority assert that virtual restorative facilitation has enhanced the restorative process.

Participants elaborated on how virtual restorative facilitation has effectively bridged geographical locations and increased access to the restorative process. Some participants elaborated on how virtual facilitation has effectively reduced barriers to attendance for their participants,

> "[it] has allowed us to have more community members participate in conferencing if they can't get away from their office or leave work to come to participate but, they might be able to do it over their lunch even if they only had 15 to 20 minutes, they could share in it – they could still participate" (Participant 5).

Some participants highlighted how virtual facilitation has expanded the ability of restorative practitioners from different parts of the country and the world to exchange information about their practices and provide supportive community spaces.

Virtual restorative facilitation has also introduced an additional layer of techno-mediated safety and comfort. In cases involving participants with disabilities or those addressing incidents of sexual harm, virtual platforms offer a space where participants can engage while prioritizing their specific needs. Moreover, participants specializing in Title IX and sexual assault support highlighted how virtual restorative facilitation provided an alternative when in-person facilitation was not recommended, allowing their participants physical distance from the traumatic event and aiding the pursuit of resolution.

One participant in the study, mainly focused on supporting sexual assault survivors, highlighted how Zoom and virtual facilitation have provided a conducive environment for survivors to share their stories "...because they don't have to come to my office and be on display, and my office is tiny and its location within the school... some people that I've worked with literally told me that they're thankful that they were able to do [virtual restorative facilitation] in the comfort of their bedroom" (Participant 3).

Another participant elaborated on how virtual facilitation has assisted their participants in managing anxiety, empowering their ability to express themselves, and offering an additional modality through chat participation, "verbally speaking on harm is very difficult for some people, and they do better with writing. So, being able to put it all in the chat box was really helpful, which allowed for time to read, process, and talk about it" (Participant 6).

Virtual restorative facilitation served as an outlet during social upheaval and distancing, allowing individuals to engage in conversations when the need to connect was crucial. All participants recounted how the transition to virtual facilitation supported the holding of space when in-person dialogues were less feasible, "... people are really coming to this [virtual] space because they're needing this connection, they're needing to share what's going on for them, they need to be heard" (Participant 12).

Regarding social upheaval, the tragic murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, marked another moment when responsive circles took place for community support. One participant shared their experience in creating virtual response and healing circles, highlighting that "over 70 people participated every week because they needed an outlet, they needed to talk to somebody, we [were] all watching the news all the time... we [were] so surprised how genuine the connection [was] virtually" (Participant 5).

A few participants mentioned that virtual facilitation enhanced their restorative delivery and deepened their appreciation for the process. One participant highlighted how they started allocating time to send feedback surveys to participants on Zoom for the first time, initiating a formal collection of satisfaction data, "we don't send them a day later. We are now in the session asking to take five minutes just to complete the survey... this is

something that we've implemented" (Participant 17).

Another participant detailed how virtual facilitation has created this opportunity to trust the restorative process even more,

> "allowing for more uncertainty and hope that the circle provided in some way even if I was able to see their face, see them afterward and check-in with them... but really trust that we had this time together and make it to create something healing or powerful or supportive or something for people to think about" (Participant 12).

In summary, participants were surprised to find that virtual facilitation provided a space where both facilitators and participants could experience personal and emotional growth, accountability, and safety, ultimately contributing to a positive overall impact.

Regarding downsides, a significant challenge highlighted was managing moments of disconnection. The virtual setting grants participants autonomy over their presence (a great thing!); however, it allows actions such as turning off the video or stepping away from the discussion, which departs from the in-person dynamics and connectivity. One participant elaborated, "When you are in a [physical] room, and there's conflict, the desire is to want to resolve it, or you're less likely to get up and walk out. I've had experiences where people turn their video off or don't like what is being said then leave [the virtual call]" (Participant 1).

Another challenge involves disconnection when facilitating large groups, as having a comprehensive view of all participants on a single screen becomes difficult. When all participants are on one screen, the layout of face icons may become too small for effective facilitation, "I'm trying to see everyone, and I have misgendered someone using the wrong pronouns, and it caused a lot of harm" (Participant 5).

In this study, participants discussed missing the tangible connection with others from in-person restorative facilitation. Many acknowledged the significance of sharing physical space, which proved beneficial for their role as facilitators and participants' interpretation of each other's emotions and body language. One participant explained that the concluding ceremony of in-person restorative facilitation involved "maybe people would want to hug each other, somehow acknowledge or greet each other, and they can't do that virtually... it's a core need to be able to see and hear and address the thing and not run away from it" (Participant 11). On the other hand, there's a sense of awkwardness in virtual facilitation dynamics, manifesting as prolonged pauses or silences due to muting most of the time. The virtual environment necessitates ongoing chatter to counteract the perceived awkwardness of these pauses or silences.

Several participants concurred on their heightened awareness of time limitations in virtual facilitation. They collectively expressed that preparing for and conducting virtual facilitation demands more time than its in-person counterpart, and the passage of time is more palpable in the online setting. In essence, there was a consensus among the study participants that organizing virtual facilitation requires more deliberate scheduling to gather participants, unlike the ad hoc nature often possible in school or work settings for in-person restorative facilitation.

Additionally, sustaining engagement for a 3+ hour virtual restorative facilitation is more challenging than in-person facilitation, where this timeframe is the norm. Most participants in this study capped their virtual sessions at 2 hours to prevent fatigue or Zoom fatigue. Nevertheless, this limitation resulted in the accidental outcome of potentially extending sessions, resulting in increased fatigue, reduced participation, and leaving virtual sessions unresolved until the subsequent session. There was uncertain optimism that the group could reaccess the previous dynamics.

4.4.2.3 Affect, Safety, and Connection

In this segment, I sought to evaluate how videoconferencing platforms contribute to realizing the intended goals outlined by restorative practitioners and their clients, specifically focusing on safety and connection within the virtual realm. I found how participants strategically managed, maintained, and acknowledged disruptions to connection in the context of virtual restorative facilitation. Secondly, participants recounted how the restorative process in virtual settings creates unique opportunities for vulnerability and emotional expressions. Lastly, I will highlight participants' insights on trust and safety within the digital environments where they conduct their justice-related work.

4.4.2.4 Connection

Connection in HCI refers to the sense of connectedness or engagement that users feel when interacting with a technology or system, including videoconferencing platforms [231]. Connection entails feeling linked to the interface, content, or other users, fostered by design elements like social features [256]. Overall, it enhances user engagement, motivation, and enjoyment.

Specifically, in this study, I establish the concept of connection based on the participants during the retelling of their virtual restorative facilitation experiences. In this context, connection encompasses links to the virtual restorative process, fellow participants, the facilitator, and, importantly, a deeper connection to oneself. Participants drew upon their

restorative facilitation skills and experiences to manage the restorative process, virtual environment, and its connections.

For instance, their restorative training adapted to the virtual setting enabled awareness of their own and others' body language, expressions, and nonverbal cues while discouraging assumptions about participants' experiences, emotions, and truthfulness. Participant (3) describes, "I chose not to put my thoughts and assumptions onto them....[I would say during facilitation] this is what I see on my screen, please let me know if this is not true. But I don't want to put assumptions on how they're processing and receiving things."

Another strategy for managing connection, as shared by participants, involves offering financial compensation for participation in the circle. Participant (13), for instance, detailed a practice of providing $100 for an hour of circle participation. This compensation acknowledges the value of their participants' time. It enables those, particularly bereft communities like formerly incarcerated individuals, to negotiate for a quiet space, allocate time effectively, and fully engage within their environment. Participant (13) says,

> "they can tell their wives that: I need you to take the kids over to Sally's house for an hour, all right, I'm getting 100 dollars. We can buy groceries, we could do whatever we're going to do. I just need a quiet space so that I can be here for this thing. And you know what their wives say? Awesome."

In the pursuit of managing connection, a key quality involves adaptability, such as knowing when to change up their facilitation style to fit the needs of their participants for the best outcome. This skill by facilitators displays confidence in knowing when to transition between in-person, online, and hybrid approaches,

> "Now it is very case-by-case. I like to give people the option of if they feel [restorative justice facilitation] is most relevant or important to do it in person or digitally. You know, some people might need disability accommodations. Some people might have different kinds of processing. So I think a really important part of it is figuring out which tools you use and understanding that people have different needs and styles of communication. So I like to get a feel for that before I bring everybody in together" (Participant 19).

A key aspect of a successful restorative process is the participant's ability to connect with their emotions and the restorative process itself. To illustrate, one participant in this study elucidated how the virtual format influenced their participants to explore their vulnerability, "[One participant said to me] I can turn off my camera, I can sit there and cry. I think the virtual format gave [me] bravery... The emotionality from the ability to be remote was

more fluid online compared to in-person" (Participant 9). This viewpoint, which emphasizes connection when the camera is off, contradicts the prevailing perspectives in the study that the camera is off, creating difficulty in virtual facilitation.

The choice between mobile and desktop devices also influenced the engagement with videoconferencing platform features that foster connection, specifically to the restorative process, the facilitator, and others present, as one participant noted:

> "[some] groups like using the reaction buttons... if you have a group they're on their phones, and its harder to use reaction buttons as opposed to your computer, then if there's less interaction especially in a large group with no camera's on its difficult to see who is following, so we invite people to have their cameras on as a way to manage and gauge connection." (Participant 5)

Reaction features, like emojis, on videoconferencing platforms, become an interesting opportunity to gauge connection, as witnessed by participants in this study, "there is something really sweet when someone shares something that's hard for them and a bunch of hearts pop-up. I feel like, yeah, this is one of the magic I think of virtual facilitation" (Participant 11).

4.4.2.5 Affect

Affect is pivotal in HCI research because it enhances understanding of how users emotionally perceive and respond to technology, including the online mediation of human interactions, expressions, and identities, such as through videoconferencing platforms [188, 74, 232]. In the context of videoconferencing platforms, affect can impact user engagement, satisfaction, and overall user experience.

In this study, I define affect as the emotional experiences expressed by participants within the context of their virtual restorative facilitation, including both their own personal emotions and their perceptions of their participants' emotional experiences.

Specific participants described their emotions as facilitators due to the virtual format, employing descriptors such as deceptive, displeased, unnerving, and pining. For instance, one participant conveyed the unnerving feeling of not knowing the physicality of the individuals they were engaging within virtual restorative facilitation but acknowledged how it contributes to maintaining privacy,

> "We'd been meeting a year, and I thought we were all the same height. And she's like, I'm 4'10. I was like, I'm 5'10. And it was unnerving for me because I thought we're all the same" (Participant 1)

Height can play a significant role in shaping social perceptions and interactions, influencing how individuals are perceived and treated in various settings. When someone's actual height differs from the mental image formed through online interactions, it can create a sense of dissonance, contradicting the expectations built about that person. This mismatch may lead to feelings of distrust or a lack of authenticity, especially in pronounced cases. Such experiences align with research on online dating and self-disclosure, which examines how discrepancies between online personas and physical appearances can impact first impressions and relationship dynamics.[98, 97].

As previously stated, virtual restorative facilitation comes with its highs and lows. A recurring emotional sentiment among participants in this study is a longing for in-person facilitation, especially when virtual is the only available mode of delivery. One participant elucidates this longing and shares their strategies for navigating it,

> "That feeling like I would love to be able to sit with someone if they want some kind of loving touch. When it's obvious I can't do that, I try to convey that through voice and talk with presence being all I can offer" (Participant 11).

The study revealed many sincere moments as participants candidly shared their true sentiments about virtual facilitation and its impact on them as individuals and restorative practitioners.

At other times, affect was felt between the virtual restorative facilitators and their participants as a response to the restorative process. A few participants disclosed witnessing the emotional experience of their participants.

For instance, Participant (6) shared mixed feelings experienced when cameras were off and highlighted an interesting aspect of the virtual setting: it allows individuals to express themselves without interruption, such as the offering of a tissue or hug for comfort that can interrupt someone's ability to care for themselves and go through their emotional process,

> "I have had people cry in virtual spaces. They tend to turn the camera off, which I have mixed feelings about, but maybe that is what they need. On the other hand, it could be a form of hiding. There is something really important about being open and authentic in front of others... however, Zoom allows for somebody's expression or process without interrupting others because they're crying.

Another poignant experience shared by a participant in this study involved bypassing an in-person group restorative facilitation in favor of a one-on-one online restorative dialogue. This decision arose after a participant realized during their online pre-conference that they did not require accountability from the person who had harmed them.

Comfort and ease were some of the reasons individuals chose to bypass in-person group restorative facilitation and explore the impact of harm with a restorative facilitator on Zoom. This setting allowed for engagement with less pressure than in-person interactions can sometimes impose, enabling them to proceed with the process on their terms in the comfort of familiar settings..

Participant (3) received an email from a participant on the impact virtual one-on-one restorative dialogue had on them, and they described how this email impacted them as a facilitator,

> "when I got that email, I cried because I know how much that meeting meant for them. I was just there for them, and I think about them from time to time because literally through that hour and a half, we processed many things... I don't think if they had traveled to my campus, they would not have made this decision" (Participant 3).

Participant (3) describes the emotional impact felt as a facilitator when connecting with a participant during their virtual restorative processes. They note that technology (via email) can mediate these vulnerable exchanges effectively, breaking down barriers of power between facilitator and participant and even overcoming the limitations of being Zoom in some cases. This vulnerable process, online and offline, has a significant impact on all involved, fostering deeper connections and understanding.

4.4.2.6 Trust and Safety

Trust is a core concept in HCI, reflecting users' confidence in the reliability, competence, and integrity of a technology or system [197]. The study acknowledges restorative practices and circles as original forms of Indigenous technology and explores how these are mediated through videoconferencing platforms. Restorative practice centers on building trust, a process essential to its effectiveness [35, 94, 161]). Videoconferencing platforms play a crucial role in facilitating this trust, relying on consistent internet and technical performance, transparency, security, and privacy. These factors are pivotal for user acceptance, adoption, and satisfaction. Ultimately, the ability of technological systems to foster, develop, and sustain trust is foundational to restorative trust.

This research explores how restorative facilitators nurture trust despite the challenges of online mediation through videoconferencing. While participants emphasized their role in fostering trust through restorative practice, they also highlighted the nuanced interplay between their efforts and the technical affordances of the platforms they use. Understanding

how videoconferencing features either enable or hinder trust-building is essential to bridging the gap between human facilitation and technological mediation.

Throughout the interviews, participants detailed strategies for fostering trust and safety across different stages of their virtual restorative process. They particularly underscored the significance of being attentive during the virtual pre-conference or circle preparation meeting. In this phase, participants explained their approach of asking specific questions to understand needs and build rapport. Emphasizing the need for all restorative processes and communication to feel at ease and comfortable, Participant (3) stressed the importance of ensuring a supportive atmosphere. In other words,

> "I'm asking them what they wish to share, how they wish for me to support them individually, also informing them how I intend to support them individually so they understand and feel the need for space. Also, supporting them to ask the other participant questions".

Participants consistently underscored the universal importance of trust and safety across all restorative processes, regardless of the medium. In virtual settings, they emphasized the need to explicitly define these concepts by asking direct questions during pre-conference meetings or group activities. This approach ensures that facilitators understand participants' individual needs and expectations, laying the groundwork for a supportive and effective process. Participant (10) asks, "To put it blunt, I ask, what trust and safety mean to you, what are your needs around it, what does it look like?"

Another way of establishing trust and safety was knowing when to use restorative skills, tools, and prompts within the digital sphere. As a restorative facilitator, one skill is understanding that it takes courage to participate in a process. In other words, it means acknowledging courage and understanding care and boundaries are co-existing requirements for this role, "You know, how do we build that care collectively as a group, so that we're caring to ourselves and each other like weaving a web of support for what's going to happen" Participant (8).

Moreover, building safety online looks like the facilitator encouraging participants to bring a piece of themselves to the process, such as offering a personal token to place in the "altar" or leveraging restorative tools like the talking piece to manage discussion by separating speaker and audience or encourage virtual gifts to increase positive emotions,

> "I asked people to bring something to the circle space, something they can talk about... I ask people to bring something special to the circle space to share and something they want to pass on to someone, so it's a virtual gift" (Participant 9).

Another critical restorative skill identified by participants was active listening, combined with mirroring back what was heard. This technique fosters trust, safety, and accountability, particularly in virtual settings where non-verbal cues may be less prominent. As Participant 11 explained,

> "often just saying to people it makes sense to me what you're saying, or I understand where you're coming for and what you're going through, and then inviting them into their own leadership and ownership of the process as a listener trying to understand the other person or their people involved. Asking questions like, what do you think happened in the situation? What do you want people to understand about your experience? What do you want to understand about other people's experiences? What is your role in this? Inviting ownership at the same time acknowledging and affirming their experience" (Participant 11).

Restorative skills include recognizing the body's role and empowering individuals to self-soothe dysregulation, enabling them to engage effectively in facilitation. One proposed tool to support this during online restorative facilitation is the use of guided meditation,

> "[meditation] helps people level out their nervous systems and kind of deepen in this sense of connectivity, also gives them a little bit more time to think about and feel through what they want to say, and how they want to approach" (Participant 19).

Participant (19) leads guided meditation before facilitating most restorative dialogue, intending to help everyone settle into the virtual space and align their offline and online energies. This approach is notable because participants enter the virtual space from their offline lives, bringing diverse, energetic frequencies, environments, and motivations.

Aftercare or post-session support was also emphasized as an essential tool in the virtual restorative process for fostering safety and trust,

> "to follow up with like an email, I'll send out like some descriptions of what happened [during facilitation], some sense of the tools we use, what people could use going forward, and the agreed upon next steps if that's appropriate... this is different from in-person (Participant 11).

Several participants in this study shared insightful perspectives on the virtual facilitator's role. One noteworthy insight emphasizes that the facilitator's responsibility isn't to force healing but to establish a conducive, safe space where the virtual modality serves as a mediator for healing, "I've seen how people are impacted by just hearing words and feeling more

safe and secure in the relationship to move forward" (Participant 6). Another perspective suggests that it's a misguided approach for the facilitator to assume the power to create a safe space for people,

> "No matter how clearly communicated the community agreements are, there are chains of significance that differ depending upon your culture and socialization. So, the more diverse our community, the more conflict is inevitably going to arise. So we move at the speed of trust. What I do is model vulnerability because I know that where my power is and, sometimes has a domino effect. We all know that we care about each other, otherwise, we wouldn't have been in space together" (Participant 13).

As previously mentioned, participants discussed using videoconferencing platform features to co-create community agreements and expectations to foster safety and trust,

> "I have a Google slide that says, please mute yourself when you're not speaking. That way, you know, eliminates background noise. Those kinds of things help everybody in the space so, nobody else is hearing other people's conversation that tries to help build that safety and trust" (Participant 5).

Below, Participant 19 details how adding audio like music and song within online restorative facilitation can create the opportunity for trust and safety during a virtual restorative process,

> "I don't like to bring people into the digital space so hard that they start to dissociate how they're feeling. And, processing what they're saying is important. I use song a lot, coming from more an Indigenous perspective, but I will straight up bust my drum out because people singing together helps on a physical level" (Participant 19).

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of establishing clear protocols to create an environment conducive to trust and safety in virtual restorative processes. Protocols like having designated emotional support personnel or creating breakout rooms to manage discussions were considered invaluable. These strategies, while sometimes resource-intensive, provide facilitators with flexible tools to maintain a supportive and inclusive environment. As Participant 19 noted,

> "the breakout room allows for an opportunity for participants to talk without interrupting the flow of the space too" (Participant 19).

The use of breakout rooms depends on various factors, including the facilitator's abilities to manage the feature and the presence of an additional facilitator to assist, which can be tedious and costly. Despite these challenges, the breakout room feature is considered a valuable asset in supporting the restorative process because it allows for more flexible dialogue management. This flexibility is not always achievable in in-person facilitation, where maintaining integrity in one space is typically preferred.

To conclude, the findings from the interviews with restorative practitioners about their experiences with video conferencing platforms provide invaluable insights and key takeaways that I will discuss further in the next section.

4.5 Discussion

Building from the epistemological grounding in Black radical traditions, where care, memory, and repair are treated as both political practices and modes of knowledge production. This chapter turns to the everyday labor of restorative justice practitioners. While the majority of facilitators in this study were not Black, their work nonetheless enacts principles long championed by Black thought and practice: centering relationships, rejecting carcerality, and pursuing accountability through community. Their digital adaptations are not only logistical responses to pandemic-era constraints but reveal how justice work persists and evolves in mediated environments. By examining how facilitators uphold relational justice online, this chapter explores what it means to practice care, connection, and repair in the "in-between" of users and platforms—advancing the concept of technomediated justice as both theory and method.

The study's findings with restorative practitioners highlight the instrumental role of videoconferencing platforms in their justice-related initiatives. All participants unanimously acknowledged videoconferencing as a valuable asset to their practice despite the challenges of transitioning to digital platforms. Although many practitioners have resumed in-person facilitation with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions in the United States, the decision to continue virtual facilitation is made on a case-by-case basis, considering factors such as distance and availability. The transition back to in-person meetings has created a hybrid approach to restorative processes: pre-conference or pre-circle meetings occur primarily online, while the subsequent restorative dialogues and facilitations, conferences, or circles have returned to in-person.

The findings suggest that restorative practitioners have successfully transitioned many aspects of their work to online formats while maintaining core restorative values and principles. Despite the limited sample size of practitioners in this study, it is evident that this group will

continue to integrate videoconferencing platforms and digital tools into their justice-related work, both now and in the future.

Therefore, I argue that videoconferencing platforms are indispensable tools for restorative justice facilitators, offering opportunities to uphold restorative values and practices despite the challenges of transitioning to digital platforms. This aligns with the concept of techno-mediated justice, which emphasizes the use of digital technologies to facilitate justice practices in ways that prioritize accountability, healing, and connection. It is essential for the HCI and design fields to engage with the restorative justice field, not only as a theoretical framework but also as a collaborative community, to design technologies that more effectively support restorative processes and to continue exploring ways to integrate the principles of restorative practice and justice into technological processes and design.

In the next section, I will detail how restorative practitioners uphold the essence of restorative practice and justice online through its core values, processes, and dialogue, demonstrating their ability to adapt and innovate within virtual environments.

4.5.1 Key Findings

4.5.1.1 Maintaining Restorative Values Online.

Despite the shift to online platforms, RJ practitioners successfully maintained restorative principles and values like connection, accountability, affect, and safety in their digital practice [152]. Participants have creatively leveraged videoconferencing tools to foster dialogue and community, ensuring that the restorative process remained effective and meaningful even in a virtual environment.

4.5.1.2 Challenges and Adaptations.

RJ practitioners faced several challenges, including issues related to bandwidth, connectivity, privacy, and digital literacy. However, they demonstrated resourcefulness in overcoming these obstacles. Their strategies included doubling up practitioners, with one facilitating and the other focused on technology and logistics, conducting pre-conference technical checks, referencing more data-secure platforms (such as Zoom), and providing digital literacy support to participants to enhance their skills as active participants in the virtual restorative dialogues.

4.5.1.3 Building Virtual Intimacy and Trust.

One of the significant insights from the study is the ability of RJ practitioners to cultivate intimacy and trust in virtual settings. By leveraging video conferencing features such as breakout rooms and chat functions, they created spaces that mirrored the safety and openness of in-person restorative interactions. This finding is particularly relevant for HCI researchers interested in designing technologies that support deep, meaningful connections online.

4.5.2 What can HCI Learn from Restorative Practitioners

4.5.2.1 Designing for Restorative Interactions.

The experiences of RJ practitioners underscore the need to design videoconferencing platforms and digital tools that effectively support restorative interactions. Human-computer interaction (HCI) researchers can learn from RJ practitioners' adaptive strategies to improve platforms used in sensitive contexts like mental health support, dispute resolution, and peer support groups. Suggested design elements include:

- Low-bandwidth modes and adaptive streaming adapted to restorative processes to prioritize accessibility
- Live support and feedback mechanisms to provide real-time technical assistance and improve user experience during facilitation
- Breakout room templates for intimate and structured group interactions
- Digital facilitation tools for guided and intimate conversations, including prompts, timers, and built-in facilitation aids
- Privacy and confidential settings tailored for sensitive discussions and data management to foster trust and ensure safety
- Gamification elements or community-building features to encourage engagement, foster connection, and sustain long-term participation

These features, informed by RJ principles, can make platforms more inclusive and responsible for users' nuanced needs in restorative and supportive interactions.

4.5.2.2 Enhancing Digital Literacy and Accessibility.

Ensuring that platforms can effectively engage in online restorative practices underscores the need for accessible and user-friendly digital tools. HCI researchers should prioritize creating

intuitive interfaces that accommodate varying levels of digital literacy while addressing the unique needs of participants who may be inexperienced with technology. It is essential not to assume that all users have similar technology usage patterns, particularly with videoconferencing platforms. This involves designing navigation that is clear and easy to follow, as well as providing interactive tutorials or onboarding sessions that help users gain confidence in the platform without feeling overwhelmed. In addition, tailoring resources to specific populations can enhance the user experience. Implementing these strategies could reduce the time spent for restorative justice practitioners managing and teaching digital literacy to instead focus on guiding participants through the restorative process in a virtual setting.

4.5.2.3 Privacy and Security Considerations.

The privacy and security concerns raised by restorative justice (RJ) practitioners are critical for the broader HCI community. Developers must ensure that digital platforms used for restorative practices are secure and capable of protecting sensitive and evolving information shared among various entities, including institutions, individuals, and organizations. This includes implementing end-to-end encryption, secure log-in processes, and transparent data management and storage policies tailored to the unique needs of RJ practitioners and related care workers. In addition, integrating online dispute resolution tools could facilitate secure communication between parties, ensuring that sensitive discussions remain confidential while fostering trust in the virtual environment.

4.6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitization of justice-related practices, compelling restorative justice practitioners to adapt their methods to videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Webex. This study investigates how these practitioners—particularly within the U.S.—navigated this shift, illuminating how core restorative values of repair, accountability, and relational healing were sustained and, in some cases, deepened through digital means.

Rather than viewing these adaptations as temporary responses to crisis, the findings reveal restorative justice practitioners as de facto designers of technomediated care. Their practices offer a powerful counternarrative to the dominant punitive logic embedded in much of today's digital infrastructure. By cultivating online environments rooted in safety, trust, and emotional resonance, these practitioners demonstrate what it means to embed justice as a design imperative.

This research contributes to the broader HCI and socio-technical design communities in three key ways: (1) offering an empirical account of restorative justice practitioners' digital adaptations during the pandemic; (2) identifying design principles that center affective safety, accountability, and community-building in virtual environments; and (3) calling for deeper collaboration between HCI researchers and justice practitioners as co-creators of digital systems aimed at transformative repair.

These findings also introduce what this dissertation calls the Fourth Relationship: a user-platform dynamic in which care, harm, and repair are not only mediated through technology but with it. This concept is further theorized in the dissertation's conclusion, where it becomes a central dimension of technomediated justice.

Future work should expand the field of technomediated justice by learning from frontline restorative and transformative justice efforts, particularly those led by Black, Indigenous, and other historically marginalized communities. Such collaborations can help us reimagine what infrastructures of accountability might look like when informed by Black feminist care ethics, abolitionist values, and community-based knowledge systems. As we rethink the digital public sphere, it is not enough to design for access or usability—we must also design for healing, accountability, and the long-term work of repair. This requires us to reconsider not just what technologies do, but who and what they are designed to remember, repair, and relate.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion: Principles for Technomediated Design

This dissertation builds on a lineage of Black thought that positions Black people as central to both modern and pre-modern industrial and technological revolutions in the Western Hemisphere. Foundational works like DuBois's Black Reconstruction in America, C.L.R. James's The Black Jacobins, Charlton McIlwain's Black Software, and Howard French's Born in Blackness collectively foreground Black labor, imagination, and resistance as engines of modernity — forces too often erased from dominant technological narratives [138**?** , 93**?**].

Together, McIlwain and French re-center Blackness within the histories of technological modernity, foregrounding the centrality of Black labor, knowledge, and resistance in shaping the digital and industrial revolutions of the Western Hemisphere. In parallel, Albert Cherns, an early sociotechnical theorist, emphasizes that human dignity, autonomy, and participation must be integral to system design—not afterthoughts—laying a foundation for ethical engagement with sociotechnical systems [53]. Bridging these perspectives, Kentaro Toyama's concept of *technology as amplifier* offers a critical insight: technology does not independently solve social problems but magnifies existing human intentions, institutional capacities, and systemic inequities [238]. His work cautions against the technocratic assumption that digital tools inherently produce justice or equity, particularly in contexts lacking robust social infrastructure.

In alignment with Cherns' emphasis on participatory design, Toyama reminds us that technology reflects who we are before it reforms what we do. Together, these thinkers challenge the invisibility of Black labor and ethical vacuums in dominant sociotechnical systems. This dissertation builds on their work by advancing technomediated justice into the digital era.

At the same time, design justice movements led by scholars and practitioners have offered blueprints for ethical systems grounded in lived experience, cultural specificity, and community care. The *Black Experience in Design* explicitly challenges the presumed neutrality of

design by showing how Black creatives and technologists have long engaged design as a mode of survival, resistance, and relational meaning-making [26]. Rather than treating justice as a post-hoc consideration or aesthetic layer, this body of work frames justice as an embodied, iterative, and historically informed design imperative. These contributions expand the scope of sociotechnical critique by foregrounding how Blackness informs not only what is designed, but how, why, and for whom. Technomediated justice draws from this lineage, treating design not simply as a technical task but as a site of power, accountability, and potential repair.

These design justice approaches are echoed in and expanded by recent HCI literature. Costanza-Chock's foundational work on design justice emphasizes community-led design processes that resist structural inequality and center collective liberation [63]. Harrington et al. extend this by exploring participatory design through Healing Justice and Afrofuturist feminism, offering frameworks for co-design that address systemic trauma and racialized harm in marginalized communities [33]. Klassen and Fiesler imagine speculative platforms like *The Stoop*, designed by and for Black users, to counter online harm and celebrate Black joy, creativity, and resistance [153].

Anti-racist HCI, as articulated by Abebe et al., advances critical technical practices aimed at dismantling racial oppression within systems themselves not just correcting bias [3]. Dillahunt et al.'s Afrofuturist speculative design workshops in Detroit demostrate how Black and Brown working-class communities envision alternative economic futures grounded in care, sustainability, and community governance [71]. Tunstall's *Decolonizing Design* offers both an institutional critique and roadmap for re-centering Indigenous, Black, and non-Western ways of knowing to the core of design theory and practice [241].

Further expanding these paradigms, To et al. advocate for "flourishing in the everyday" as a design imperative in BIPOC communities—shifting focus from harm reduction to joy, rest, and cultural heritage [236]. And Harrington, Klassen, and Rankin propose Afrofuturist and Black feminist frameworks to reimagine speculative design, challenging who gets to "future" in HCI and how those futures are constructed [123].

Yet despite these foundational critiques, the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) has remained largely disengaged from Black epistemologies and structural critiques of digital infrastructure. Recent scholarship underscores the need for more theoretically grounded, structurally attuned design frameworks. Chordia et al.'s systematic review of social justice in HCI reveals that justice is often referenced implicitly or normatively, but rarely defined with conceptual rigor or applied with methodological consistency [54]. Similarly, Kim et al. find that equity is frequently flattened into static goals like "access" or "inclusion," with limited engagement in "the social, political, and historical contexts that shape inequities in

the first place" [151]. These critiques are amplified by Garcia's call for research practices that attune to positionality and power in research design practices [95]. Building on this work, technomediated justice emphasizes relational accountability as an ethical stance grounded in context, care, and structural critique as core design imperatives [54, 151, 95].

Technomediated justice views the space between people and technology not as a void, but as a dynamic, co-constituted relationship: one where care, harm, and repair are not simply things that happen to us, but processes co-created with the platforms we engage. It resists the notion that digital systems are neutral or passive, instead treating them as participants in relational life that shape how we connect, misrecognize, support, and harm one another. Justice, in this framework, is not an add-on or afterthought; it is a design imperative, informed by enduring legacies of anti-Blackness, coloniality, and carceral logics.

This conception resonates with Thylstrup et al.'s assertion that infrastructures are not inert, but rather serve as "conditions of possibility for both harm and care" [235]. Their framing of the archive as a site of both epistemic violence and reparative potential deepens this view, urging us to recognize how digital infrastructures actively shape the memory, identity, and justice work of our time.

Indeed, social media platforms, key contemporary digital infrastructures, do more than transmit content; they are active, relational systems that structure how memories are created, accessed, contested and orchestrated [189, 213, 137]. They influence how identities are formed and performed within platform logics, often shaping self-understanding and community belonging in ways that are both affective and algorithmic, especially for Black users [217, 10, 198]. Justice, too, is mediated through these infrastructures — enacted, suppressed, or reimagined through platform architectures, algorithmic governance, and networked activism [32, 136, 133, 117]. As such, social media platforms must be understood not merely as tools, but as memory institutions and relational infrastructures with material consequences for whose narratives are preserved, centered, or erased.

Technomediated justice builds on this provocation by insiting that platforms be accountable not only for the harms they enable, but for the possibilities of repair they co-create. This leads to what I call the **fourth relationship**— one that complements the more commonly examined relational layers in digital justice work:

- Person-to-person relationships, where technology mediates interpersonal dynamics such as dating and solidarity often through social media, messaging platforms, or algorithmic feeds;

- Person-to-community relationships, where platforms shape the norms, expectations, and collective practices that guide accountability and community in digital spaces;

- Person-to-self relationships, where platforms technologies mediate self expression, identity construction, and affective experiences including, internalization of platform logics, metrics, and surveillance;

The fourth relationship centers the person-to-platform dynamic, recognizing platforms as active mediators of care, harm, and repair. While the first three emphasize, interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics shaped by technology, this fourth relationship reframes the platform itself as a co-constituting agent. Drawing from HCI and media studies scholarship, this perspective rejects the notion of technology as a neutral intermediary. Instead, positions digital platforms as *relational infrastructures*, systems that participate in shaping ethical life, emotional resonance, and possibilities for justice.

Carvalho's analysis of Black queer Brazilian councilwoman and human rights advocate who was assassinated Marielle Franco's digital memorialization demonstrates how platforms mediate not only grief but also collective resistance, transforming memory work into an ongoing practice of justice [69]. Another example, Erstad et al. explore "platformed relationality" within family contexts, showing how platforms both enhance and complicate intimacy and care [83]. Together, these studies underscore the idea that platforms are not neutral conduits, but co-actors in digital life. his dissertation builds on that insight by introducing the fourth relationship: a person-to-platform dynamic that positions platforms as affective and epistemic agents governing how conflict emerges, how accountability is structured, and how repair might unfold

To guide this inquiry, I propose two interrelated questions that reflect both the structural and relational dimensions of technomediated justice as applied to digital design:

Question 1: How can the complex dynamics of Black digital life inform the development of technomediated justice design principles for reimagining HCI, platform governance, and community moderation as sites of equity and cultural accountability?

Question 2: How can design principles rooted in the global Black digital experience foster repair, nurture belonging, and support culturally grounded online communities aligned with the values of technomediated justice?

5.1 Design for Relational Conflict

Conflict in digital spaces often reveals underlying social tensions — fractures that, when surfaced and addressed, can lead to more cohesive and resilient communities. While harm-

ful behaviors such as harassment, bullying, and misinformation require mitigation, conflict itself should not always be treated as a problem to be eliminated. In a intragroup context, especially a globally Black online communities, conflict functions as a diagnostic: exposing systemic inequities, misaligned expectations, or unmet needs.

5.1.1 Conceptual Reflections

Across this dissertation's three studies, conflict emerged as a revealing and necessary component of digital life often exposing deeper structures of harm, identity and relational tension. *In Chapter 3: Harm, Healing & Joy*, Black women and femmes described navigating online spaces where they experienced sexual harassment and emotional abuse, often at the hands of other Black men (or whom assert themselves as Black men online). These conflicts were compounded by expectations to remain silent in the name of racial and ethnic solidarity, generating a profound sense of cultural betrayal. Speaking up about harm led to secondary forms of harm, such as being labeled as disloyal or divisive, underscoring how digital conflict is not just interpersonal but political and gendered [178]. In *Diaspora Wars*, intragroup conflict is at the centerfold between Black users from different global regions, particularly, African American, Black American, Afro-Caribbean, Nigeria and Afro-British communities through shade, humor, and debate. These exchanges were frequently misread by outsiders as toxic or trivial, but they served as complex acts of diasporic boundary work and intragroup identity negotiation. In *Technomediated Justice*, restorative justice practitioners used videoconferencing platforms to facilitate difficult conversations around harm and repair. While not all participants identified as Black, facilitators drew on justice frameworks that aligned with Black feminist care and relational accountability. Rather than suppressing conflict, they designed digital session to hold emotional intensity using shared community agreements, digital talking pieces, and visual cues to sustain dialogue across rupture [177].

Together, these studies reveal that online conflict is not always pathological; it can be a powerful diagnostic for what communities value, where harm persists, and needs to be repaired. Digital systems must be designed to hold conflict, not erase it.

Recent HCI and design justice research echoes these insights, calling for a re-framing of design as a site of cultural specificity, affective presence, and community-driven imagination [33, 153, 3, 120, 241, 236, 123]. However, much of this work has emphasized design for flourishing, resistance, or institutional transformation, with less focus on the complex dynamics of intragroup harm — especially when betrayal, silence, or identity-based expectations are involved.

5.1.2 Design Implications

Platforms should be designed to hold intra-community harm as a valid and complex experience, recognizing that harm does not only occur between dominant and marginalized groups but also within communities that share a common identity. This is particularly nuanced in Black communities, where shared ancestry and the lens of global Blackness can lead to a flattening of identity on social media platforms. In cases of cultural betrayal, platforms must move beyond generic harassment taxonomies that obscure relational and historical nuance. Design should support both dissent and solidarity without defaulting to punitive logics or demanding artificial harmony. Instead, platforms should create space for users to express betrayal, emotional complexity, and diverse modes of Black communication—while fostering accountability across intragroup lines.

Moderation frameworks must be attuned to power differentials within intragroups, including those shaped by gender, class, nationality, proximity to whiteness, and platform visibility (and this isn't an exhaustive list). Tools should be co-designed with impacted communities to create affordances for calling in (not just calling out), context-aware content labeling, and restorative interventions. Without this, platforms risk replicating harm by either silencing survivors of intra-community violence or erasing the specificity of their experience under the guise of community cohesion.

The essential outcome these design principles are attempting to achieve is repair, which occurs across three interdependent levels: user, platform, and community governance. Below are defined scaffolding of these levels:

- Person-level repair: this is where harm is felt and expressed. Users, especially those harmed, initiate or opt-in to repair, and design focuses on mutuality and shared responsibility. Their responsibilities would be to choose whether and how to engage; sharing their needs and boundaries; and participating in structured amends (if desired). Risks include, overburdening harmed users, especially Black women, femmes and minorized people withe emtional labor.

- Platform-level repair: Enable users to report intra-community harm if need be and the platforms training their systems to acknowledge intra-community harm to tend to its specificity.

- Community-level repair: Repair lives in community norms, shared agreements, peer stewardship such as, mediator roles and informal conflict traditions (memes). Responsibilities include, recognizing and affirming attempts at repair; nominating and supporting peer mediators; and holding space for re-entry, reflection, and conflict without

shame. Risks are re-inscribe gender or racialized expectations of emotional labor if not intentional.

5.1.3 Design Recommendations

Conflict online is not inherently toxic. It often reveals deeper truths about belonging, power and intragroup community health. Designing for conflict means creating space to navigate it, not erase it. The action-oriented takeaways mentioned below work across the user, platform and community governance:

- **Conflict-aware moderation:** Tools that allow users to flag emerging tension not for immediate deletion, but for facilitated dialogue or peer-supported review. Instead of automatic removal, this approach proposes workflows for review, pause, and reflection. Inspired by Gmail's "undo send" feature, one idea includes using AI-driven sentiment detection to trigger delayed-posting prompts. However, recognizing that existing sentiment models often misclassify Black diasporic expression as toxic, this design principle proposes building a custom dataset grounded in diasporic conflict and cultural nuance. Based on findings from the Diaspora Wars study, this dataset acknowledges that while some expressions are misread due to cultural unfamiliarity, others do contain real harm, often rooted in misogyny, colorism, xenophobia, or cultural betrayal. By holding space for both cultural specificity and accountability, this system aims to distinguish between difficult but meaningful dialogue and harmful patterns that require repair or intervention.

- **Mediator Recognition System:** A tagging feature that identifies users who consistently engage in conflict de-escalation, bridge-building, or culturally nuanced dialogue. Unlike influencer metrics, these tags are nominated by their peers or detected through behavior patterns that reflect balanced, thoughtful engagement. This system offers a counterweight to default valorization of visibility or virality, shifting recognition toward users engaged in relational work online, and helps surface trusted voices during tense discussions. With the intent to moving online culture towards a sort of conflict literacy.

- **Contextual Annotations:** Similar to Twitter/X's community notes, annotations allow users to add narrative context to reported content (ex., "this is an intra-commnunuty disagreement rooted in..."), giving moderators more nuance. Gives users the ability to explain why a post might seem harmful, which empowers users to frame their own interactions and resist misinterpretation by moderation systems.

Repair is a shared cultural and infrastructural responsibility. Users initiate it, platforms scaffold it, and communities sustain it. Stewardship must be designed as distributed because relational repair is collective, contextual, and continuous.

5.2 Design for Global Blackness

Design for Global Blackness centers the epistemological and aesthetic multiplicity of Black digital life. Rather than assuming a universal Black identity online, this principle insists on contextually grounded engagement that honors diverse linguistic, cultural, and political expressions. It challenges the algorithmic pressures of homogenization, and affirms that diasporic difference is not fragmentation — but a generative condition for global solidarity, relational recognition, and cultural specificity. While grounded in the digital experiences of the Black diaspora, this approach holds relevance for other intragroup communities navigating misrecognition, tension, and cultural complexity online.

5.2.1 Conceptual Reflections

Findings from the *Diaspora Wars* chapter reveal that tensions often emerged when Black users across geographic regions misunderstood each other's digital expressions, humor, or political references. For example, conflicts between African Americans and Afro-Caribbean users frequently involved divergent expectations around tone, solidarity, or historical memory. Many users felt compelled to defend their cultural authenticity or correct perceived disrespect, escalating otherwise minor disagreements into prolonged, often hostile threads. Although identity performance was not the primary focus of this chapter, it was common for Black users to visually signal their ethnic or national affiliations in their profiles through emojis, flags, and usernames, or aesthetically within comment threads using hashtags like #FBA (Foundational Black Americans), #ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery), or #AfricanTwitter. These signals served both as markers of pride and as boundary-drawing mechanisms, shaping how solidarity, legitimacy, and difference were negotiated in real time.

Several users in the *Diaspora Wars* dataset appeared to be misread not only by others from different diasporic contexts but also by platform moderation systems that lacked the nuance to distinguish between in-group play and harmful speech. In one widely circulated tweet, for example, a user's use of regional slang was flagged as aggressive, while similar language from non-Black influencers went unchallenged—highlighting racialized double standards and a pattern of diasporic misrecognition. These moments reflected broader tensions about who gets to define Blackness online, and whose cultural codes are seen as

legitimate or threatening within platform governance systems.

In *Harm, Healing & Joy*, Black women and men similarly expressed frustration with the erasure or simplification of their identities. Several participants articulated feeling caught between defending Blackness as a collective project and negotiating intra-racial forms of exclusion—especially when their cultural practices or identities (e.g., African immigrant, queer, disabled) were marginalized within dominant narratives of Black digital culture. This was particularly evident in moments of cultural appropriation, diasporic tension, or hypervisibility, where participants felt pressured to perform a narrow version of Blackness that could be easily consumed but not fully understood.

Despite these tensions, both chapters highlight moments of meaningful connection, often forged through shared rituals—such as music battles, prayer threads, meme remixes, or language play—that allowed participants to affirm their roots while remaining open to others. The ability to "explain where they were coming from" was not just about identity clarification, but a relational practice of digital hospitality and diasporic negotiation. This suggests that cultural legibility—more than sameness—is central to designing systems that honor the full spectrum of global Blackness.

Additional insights from the *Technomediated Justice* chapter further underscore the importance of cultural legibility in digital systems. Restorative justice facilitators working across varied racial, regional, and social contexts emphasized the need to adapt language, pacing, and emotional tone to fit the cultural frameworks of their participants. Their work revealed how digital environments can hold space for plurality when intentionally designed for interpretive flexibility and contextual awareness. Facilitators treated moments of misunderstanding not as disruptions to be suppressed but as openings for relational repair—often using digital tools like breakout rooms, multi-threaded dialogue, and emotional check-ins to navigate difference without erasure. These practices offer an instructive model for how platforms might build in affordances that support diasporic plurality, translating restorative principles into everyday online interactions across the global Black community.

5.2.2 Design Implications

Platforms should be designed to recognize and support the full spectrum of global Black identities, acknowledging that Blackness is not singular but shaped by layered histories, cultural practices, and geopolitical contexts. While diasporic users may share common experiences of anti-Blackness, their digital expressions — including language, humor, political discourse, and aesthetics—reflect specific regional, national, and cultural frameworks. These differences are not merely stylistic but structural, signaling how identity, belonging,

and resistance are lived and communicated.

When platforms collapse these distinctions into a singular "Black" category, they risk amplifying misrecognition, fueling conflict, and perpetuating erasure—particularly when moderation systems lack the capacity to parse intra-diasporic nuance [See Chapters Two and Three]. This echoes broader calls in HCI to move beyond damage-centered frameworks and to center cultural specificity and interpretive justice in design for BIPOC communities [236, 123].

To address this, platforms must resist cultural flattening by integrating flexible identity signaling tools, contextual language frameworks, and cultural annotation systems. These tools can allow users to express where they are coming from without being reduced to stereotypes. Visual tags, dialect-aware interfaces, and customizable profile elements such as, flags, language preferences, or affiliation hashtags help users communicate their cultural standpoint in ways that build understanding rather than deepen division. Moderation systems must also be able to distinguish between diasporic play and genuine harm by drawing on community-informed guidelines, dialect-sensitive models, and appeals processes that affirm cultural specificity. For example, the term *n*gga* illustrates the need for linguistic and cultural nuance in moderation systems. Within the global Black diaspora, this word carries a complex range of meanings—from expressions of solidarity or cultural intimacy to moments of conflict or exclusion. Its usage is deeply contextual and often debated within and across diasporic communities. However, while these internal dynamics require thoughtful engagement, it is unequivocally inappropriate for non-Black users to use the term. This example highlights how platforms must be able to distinguish between intragroup vernacular and cross-racial harm—an interpretive capacity that current moderation tools often lack.

These systems should be co-developed with diasporic Black communities across regions, especially centering those most frequently misread or marginalized — such as Black immigrants, queer and disabled users, and those at the intersections of multiple cultural identities. Designing for global Blackness is not merely about recognition; it requires creating space for contradiction, evolution, and cultural hospitality. Without these affordances, platforms will continue to replicate colonial logics, privileging dominant diasporic narratives while silencing others in the name

Importantly, this design principle extends beyond Black digital life and can be adapted to support other intragroup communities navigating misrecognition, tension, and cultural complexity online. Designing for global Blackness thus becomes a model for liberation-centered digital systems: infrastructures that treat cultural nuance not as an afterthought, but as a core condition for justice, safety, and belonging.

5.2.3 Design Recommendations

Designing for global Blackness requires treating diasporic difference not as a disruption, but as a foundation for digital hospitality, solidarity, and cultural specificity. Key actionable takeaways:

- **Cultural Annotation Layers:** Build an optional metadata field annotation layer into platform interfaces that can be tagged by the users as brief cultural or contextual notes to posts—similar to "alt-text," but for cultural nuance (e.g., "Caribbean proverb," "South African slang," "in-group joke"). This helps mitigate misreadings without forcing over-explanation or identity performance.

- **Diasporic Consent in Moderation AI:** Integrate a user-driven UI consent toggle into content moderation or reporting that asks: "Should this post be reviewed with diasporic context in mind?" If toggled, posts are routed through models trained on a dataset derived from #diasporawars with dialect variation and Black cultural expressions. This does not shield harmful content, but increases interpretive accuracy and increasing trust in AI.

- **Dynamic Identity Signals Toolkit:** Offer users a dynamic toolkit (rather than static profile fields) to express shifting cultural affiliations across time. Examples include flag overlays during national holidays, temporary region-based tags, or playlist-style "identity stacks." These tools reflect that Blackness is dynamic and that belonging can be situational, not fixed.

Designing for global Blackness requires action at multiple levels: user expression, platform moderation, and community governance. While users should be empowered to articulate cultural context, platforms must build the infrastructure that interprets such input meaningfully and responsibly. These systems should not rely solely on AI classifiers but must incorporate community-informed models and feedback loops.

5.3 Design for Relational Repair.

Online communities need systems that facilitate accountability, not just enforcement. Drawing from restorative justice, technomediated design should offer pathways for harm acknowledgment, community-supported amends, and long term repair tracking that empower users and avoid platform paternalism.

5.3.1 Conceptual Reflections

The *Technomediated Justice* chapter offers rich insight into how relational repair is already practiced by restorative justice facilitators using digital tools. Facilitators frequently used Zoom features like breakout rooms, shared documents, and time-stamped follow-ups to maintain trust and track commitments to amends. Importantly, facilitators noted that repair was not linear: users often needed space to process, re-engage, and be witnessed multiple times over weeks or months.

In one example, a participant who had experienced harm chose not to engage in a direct conversation with the person who caused the harm, but continued communicating with the facilitator over time. The affordances of Zoom—such as joining from the safety of one's home, turning off the camera, and controlling the pace of conversation — allowed the participant to remain connected without pressure. The facilitator emphasized presence and gentle check-ins, which enabled the harmed party to process and reflect in their own time. This example illustrates how digital systems can support relational repair by offering flexibility, pacing, and consent-based engagement.

Facilitators also described harm acknowledgment as a layered process. It was not just about saying "I'm sorry," but naming specific impacts, taking aligned actions, and offering follow-up conversations. They emphasized the importance of shared accountability tools—like repair agreements, peer witnessing, and emotional reflection prompts — as necessary scaffolds for digital repair.

In *Harm, Healing & Joy*, several participants shared how digital platforms rarely supported these kinds of nuanced accountability processes. Harassment reports often went unanswered, or abusers were banned without transparency or opportunity for community-supported repair. One participant described an instance where a well-known figure returned after a public scandal without any visible process of restitution, which left her feeling that "nothing had really changed" and that digital communities were "stuck in cycles of harm." Others expressed interest in processes where they could opt in to conversations about harm and healing—but only if they felt safe and supported.

In *Diaspora Wars*, while the primary focus was on conflict emergence and misrecognition, traces of repair-seeking behaviors were visible across threads. Users sometimes returned to previously hostile exchanges with clarifying posts, context-setting threads, or explicit invitations to "talk it out" in comments or direct messages. Others attempted to diffuse tension by posting memes that reframed the disagreement through humor or cultural translation. In one example, a user created a remix meme blending African American and Afro-Caribbean references after an argument, which others interpreted as a gesture of goodwill. Though informal and often unacknowledged as "repair," these acts signaled a desire to restore dignity, offer

clarification, or make space for mutual recognition. Yet without structural support—such as mechanisms to flag moments as potential openings for repair or to invite a mediator—these gestures often went unnoticed or unraveled under the weight of platform virality. This highlights the need for platform infrastructures that can identify, support, and scaffold everyday repair practices that already exist in nascent, user-driven forms.

These studies show that repair requires both structure and softness: systems that make long-term engagement possible without making it mandatory, and that treat harm as an opportunity for growth — not just discipline.

Design justice literature affirms the need for repair systems grounded in lived experience, cultural specificity, and collective accountability. Scholars like Costanza-Chock [63], Harrington et al. [33], and Klassen Fiesler [153] model design practices that center trauma-informed co-creation and healing in marginalized communities. Their work, along with Abebe et al. [3] and Tunstall [241], frames repair not only as interpersonal reconciliation but as a structural intervention aimed at confronting histories of harm, epistemic erasure, and systemic injustice.

5.3.2 Design Implications

Platforms should be designed to support the slow, nonlinear work of relational repair, recognizing that healing and accountability often unfold outside of the punitive timelines imposed by most moderation systems. Across the *Technomediated Justice* chapter, restorative justice facilitators described how digital tools — like Zoom breakout rooms, shared documents, and time-stamped agreements—enabled them to scaffold trust, clarify harm, and track commitments to repair without forcing premature resolution. In one case, a participant declined to meet with the person who caused them harm but continued engaging in dialogue with the facilitator. The digital environment provided space to process and reengage on their own terms, illustrating how repair systems must allow for emotional pacing and interpretive flexibility.

The *Diaspora Wars* and *Harm, Healing & Joy* chapters also reveal that users already engage in informal acts of repair. Some revisited posts to clarify intent, used humor to defuse tension, or extended invitations to "talk it out" via direct messages. Others crafted remix memes or cultural references as gestures of goodwill. While these actions were not always acknowledged as repair, they signaled a clear desire to restore dignity and understanding. However, without supportive platform infrastructure, such as mechanisms to flag conversations for repair, invite a mediator, or preserve context, these acts often unraveled under the pressures of virality and misrecognition.

To address this, platforms must build systems that hold both harm and healing as valid, complex, and interconnected experiences. This includes affordances like opt-in "pause and reflect" nudges before posting, visible markers of repair commitments, or features that allow harmed parties to control the visibility of reconciliatory posts. These tools must avoid replicating carceral logics or re-traumatizing those impacted. Instead, they should reflect the principles of technomediated justice: prioritizing consent, pacing, clarity, and community support.

Importantly, we must name that these design moves are culturally disruptive. We do not currently live in a society that values repair—digitally or otherwise. Designing for relational repair, then, is not just a technical challenge but a cultural intervention. Platforms willing to take on this work must co-develop tools with communities most impacted by harm, and invest in a long-term shift from enforcement to accountability. Without this, digital spaces will continue to treat harm as a problem to erase rather than a relationship to transform.

Designing for relational repair requires multi-level interventions supported by a distributed model of responsibility. At the user level, features like intent-signaling tags and pacing controls empower individuals to engage in repair when ready. At the platform level, infrastructure such as nonlinear repair timelines, witnessing affordances, and context-aware moderation workflows must scaffold the slow work of re-engagement. Finally, at the community governance level, platforms must partner with impacted communities to define what counts as harm, how repair should proceed, and when a process can be considered complete. This layered ecosystem ensures that no single actor bears the full burden of healing—and that digital spaces are designed not only for enforcement, but for transformation.

Relationship Between Design Principles

Design for Relational Repair is not a standalone intervention, it synthesizes and builds upon the earlier principles of Design for Global Blackness and Design for Relational Conflict. Where Design for Global Blackness addresses the epistemological, aesthetic, and cultural specificity needed to recognize misrecognition across the diaspora, and Design for Relational Conflict calls for systems that can hold complexity within communities, Relational Repair pushes further: it asks how digital systems might facilitate the work of healing once harm has occurred.

Together, these principles reflect a shift away from extractive and punitive logics toward liberation-centered infrastructure that:

- Recognizes plural identities (Global Blackness),
- Holds intra-group tension with care (Relational Conflict), and
- Supports accountability and re-engagement over time (Relational Repair).

This progression embodies technomediated justice as a framework that sees repair not as a final step, but as a design imperative woven through every layer of interaction—from recognition to rupture to reparation.

5.3.3 Design Recommendations

Relational repair in digital spaces requires platforms to move beyond punitive models, embracing designs that honor the complexity of harm, support ongoing accountability, and foster a culture of care even in societies unaccustomed to such practices. Actionable takeaways:

- **Implement Flexible Repair Mechanisms:** Develop features that allow users to signal intent for repair. Such as repair intent tags as interface buttons or drop-downs that allow users to flag their own comments/posts with intentions like "clarifying," "acknowledging harm," or "seeking dialogue." These tags would enable users to navigate conflicts at their own pace, without mandating immediate resolution. This would be at the user-level.

- **Co-Design with Impacted Communities:** Engage directly with communities most affected by digital harm to co-create tools and guidelines. This collaborative approach ensures that platform interventions are culturally sensitive, contextually relevant, and more likely to be effective in fostering genuine repair. This would be at the community governance-level.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: Toward a Culture of Technomediated Justice

This dissertation has explored how digital platforms can be reimagined to support justice, equity, and cultural specificity, particularly within the global Black digital experience. Through empirical studies on *Technomediated Justice, Diaspora Wars, and Harm, Healing & Joy*, I have examined the complexities of online conflict, the nuances of diasporic identities, and the processes of relational repair. These investigations have led to the development of three interrelated design principles:

1. **Design for Global Blackness:** Recognizing the multiplicity of Black identities shaped by diverse histories, cultures, and geopolitical contexts, and resisting the homogenization of Black experiences online.

2. **Design for Relational Conflict:** Viewing conflict not merely as a disruption but as a diagnostic tool that reveals underlying tensions and opportunities for growth within communities.

3. **Design for Relational Repair:** Supporting the slow, nonlinear processes of healing and accountability, and providing digital infrastructures that facilitate ongoing engagement and transformation.

Collectively, these principles advocate for a shift away from punitive, one-size-fits-all approaches toward more nuanced, culturally responsive designs that honor lived experience. Still, the author remains sincerely pessimistic about the future of social media platforms—whether mega or niche. Many of the proposed interventions rest on the assumption that the (global) Black community is, in fact, a coalition of communities or a singular community. Yet the strength of these social ties remains fluid and uneven.

From speculative visions like *The Stoop* to grounded research in Detroit [153, 71], it is clear that Black communities are not monolithic. For these systems to function meaningfully,

they must be grounded in more than technological design. They require users to feel a shared sense of responsibility toward one another—even across diasporic lines. But years of colonialism, slavery, migration, and systemic violence have left no one unscathed. Cultural betrayal, intragroup anti-Blackness, and misrecognition make the pursuit of repair difficult, if not fragile. Still, it is precisely because of this history that building infrastructures for accountability and mediated conflict becomes all the more urgent. Only then might we move toward a relational, aesthetic, and social global Blackness—both online and offline.

> *"When you believe in things that you don't understand, then you suffer."* —Stevie Wonder, "Superstition" (1972)

Wonder's lyric warns against blind faith in systems we neither shape nor understand—an apt caution in an era where digital infrastructures often masquerade as neutral, inevitable, or benevolent. Within the framework of technomediated justice, it becomes a rallying cry: we must not design for justice—or even futurism—without first understanding the historical, cultural, and relational dynamics that shape the particularities of Black (digital) life. When technologies are adopted without accountability, and platforms are treated as apolitical tools, we risk deepening the very inequities we claim to disrupt. Technomediated justice insists on critical understanding as a prerequisite for ethical design—a refusal to suffer in silence under systems that were never built for "us." It is also a blueprint for remembering, repairing, and reimagining the infrastructures through which Black life is mediated, so that our digital futures are no longer forged in superstition, but in solidarity.

APPENDIX A

Black Femme Data Appendix

Table A.1: Participant demographics (1 of 2)

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

Gender	Race	Age	Social Media Use	Unwanted Behavior
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 & 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	A couple of times a day	A couple of times a month

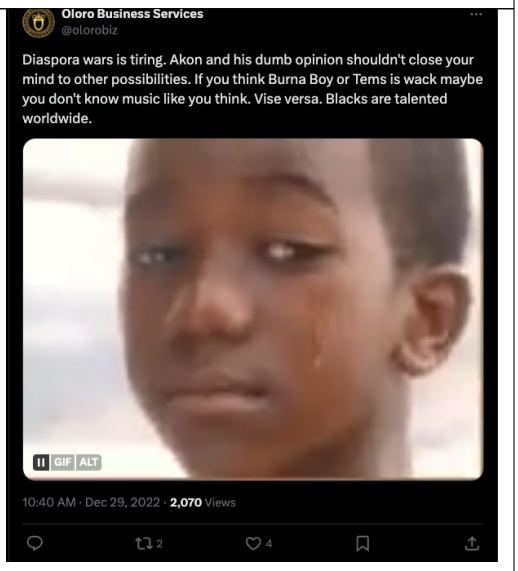
Gender	Race	Age	Social Media Use	Unwanted Behavior
Female	Black	51–70	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a week
Female	black	18–30	Multiple times a day	A couple of times a week
Female	African American	31–50	A couple of times a week	Rarely or never
Cis-woman	Black	18–30	Multiple times a day	A couple 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

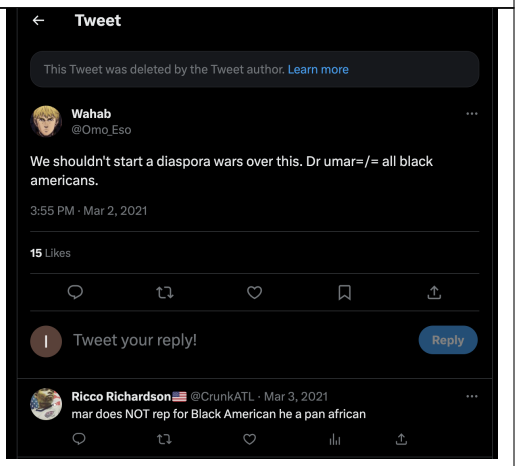
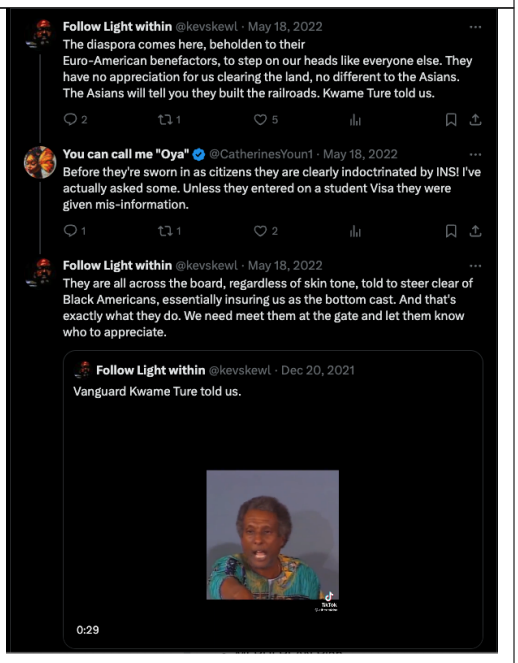
Gender	Race	Age	Social Media Use	Unwanted Behavior
Woman	African American	18–30	Most of the day	Multiple times a day
nonbinary	jamaican/filipino/hawaiian	18–30	Most of the day	A couple of times a week
Female	Multicultural/Black dominant	51–70	Most of the day	Most of the day
Female	Black	18–30	Multiple 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

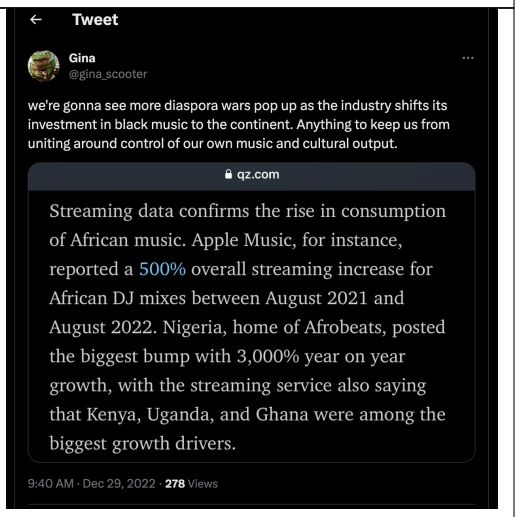
APPENDIX B

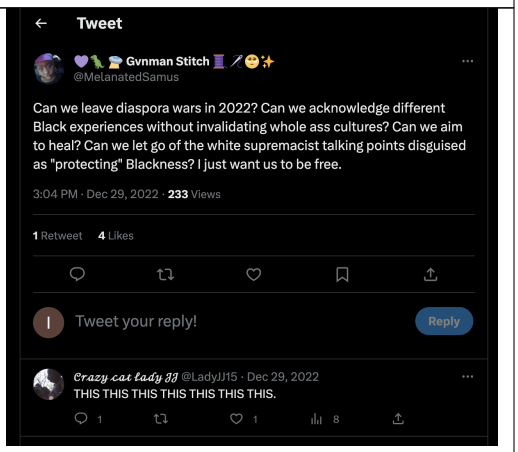
Diaspora Wars

Table B.1: Themes and Examples from Diaspora Wars Discourse

Themes	**Subjects**	**Examples**
Popular Culture	References to celebrities, entertainment, offline events, aesthetics	

Themes	Subjects	Examples
Cultural Betrayal, Misogynoir, Xenophobia	Callouts of stereotypes, humor, insults	
Social Issues	Oppression, protests, colorism, featurism	
Ancestry, History, Traditions	Reclaiming roots, colonialism, slavery	

Themes	Subjects	Examples
Expressions of Culture	Language, art, music, food	
Misinformation, Bots, Blackfishing	Troll accounts, blackfishing, disruption	

Themes	Subjects	Examples
Politics	Immigration, reparations, governance discourse	
Defining #diasporawars	Debates on tone, purpose, timeline	
Unity	Pan-Africanism, healing, peace-building	

Themes	Subjects	Examples
Stop the Wars	Calls to stop, disinterest in drama	

APPENDIX C

Events that Trigger Diasporawars

She's Gotta Have It

In May 2019, Spike Lee's 2017 remake of his 1986 classic, *She's Gotta Have It* (season 2), aired on Netflix, sparking a #diasporawars conversation about the complexities of Black identity in global media. One scene ignited particular controversy: protagonist Nola Darling, played by DeWanda Wise, critiques Olumide 'Olu' Owoye, a British Nigerian character played by Michael Luwoye, for taking acting roles that should, in her view, go to African Americans. This dialogue echoed Samuel L. Jackson's earlier critique of Get Out's casting of British Ugandan actor Daniel Kaluuya, igniting broader questions about who gets to represent Black American narratives. While framed by some as a concern over cultural authenticity and access, others saw the scene as reproducing insular, nationalist gatekeeping within the Black diaspora. Through the lens of global Blackness, the episode laid bare unresolved tensions around colonial legacies, economic opportunity, and cultural representation—highlighting the urgent need for solidarity that accounts for shared struggle and difference across diasporic lines. Rather than backing down, Lee doubled down on the debate, underscoring the complexities of telling Black stories in a transnational media economy.

Harriet, the movie

In 2019, *Harriet* was released, with British actress Cynthia Erivo cast as Harriet Tubman, a freedom fighter and icon of Black resistance [251]. While the film aimed to honor Tubman's legacy, it became a flashpoint in ongoing diasporic debates. In July 2019, Twitter (X) users surfaced past tweets in which Erivo appeared to mock Black American vernacular, reigniting conversations about cultural respect, proximity to slavery's legacy, and representational authenticity. Critics questioned whether someone raised outside the United States—regardless of Black identity—could fully embody the cultural weight of portraying an enslaved ancestor-turned-abolitionist. For many, Erivo's casting symbolized broader tensions within global Blackness: the uneven distribution of visibility, the lingering effects of colonial hierarchies,

and the unresolved wounds between African-descended peoples shaped by different histories of oppression. While some defended Erivo's performance as a win for diasporic talent, others viewed it as a missed opportunity to affirm the narratives of American descendants of slavery within their own national mythologies.

The Murder of George Floyd

n June 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, over an alleged counterfeit twenty-dollar bill [12]. His death catalyzed global outrage and reinvigorated Black Lives Matter (BLM) as both a domestic and transnational movement. Digital solidarity surged across platforms, with African users on Twitter (X) voicing profound support for Black Americans. Yet, the moment also surfaced long-standing tensions within global Black communities. Many African users expressed frustration with what they perceived as a one-way solidarity—where African American cultural influence is celebrated globally, but African struggles often go ignored. Tweets reflected this pain: "Black lives and Nigerian lives are two different things to them... we are too Black to matter," and "It's funny how when it comes to culture, hairstyle, the greatness attached to African Roots—they remember Africa. But when it comes to supporting Africans in crisis, they're suddenly African Americans. Shame." Another user wrote, "Black lives matter until it is Africans—then the world develops hearing difficulties." These digital exchanges underscored the fragility and potential of diasporic kinship, revealing how global Blackness is shaped not only by shared oppression but by uneven recognition and historical estrangement.

USATF Golden Games

In April 2021, Sha'Carri Richardson won the USATF Golden Games [245], sparking diasporic debates across Black Twitter (X). Users from both Jamaican and American communities began comparing how Black athletes are celebrated globally, noting the widespread reverence for Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt versus the polarized reception Richardson received. This discourse revealed underlying tensions in how respect, success, and cultural pride are distributed unevenly within the Black diaspora. As Richardson later traveled to Jamaica, her presence ignited further conversation when a xenophobic comment—"Jamaicans still talking shit when y'all walk barefoot to your coconut stand every day for a living"—surfaced online. Though condemned widely, the comment underscored how anti-Blackness can circulate even within diasporic spaces, revealing the fragility of global Black unity. These exchanges illustrate how diasporic belonging is continuously negotiated, shaped not just by national identity but by the complex interplay of colonial legacies, cultural pride, and contested recognition

within the global Black world.

Africa-CARICOM Summit

In September 2021, the first Africa-CARICOM Summit, hosted by Kenya, marked a historic step toward transoceanic solidarity between African and Caribbean nations [49]. In a landmark declaration, the African Union officially recognized the African Diaspora as the sixth region of Africa, symbolically extending continental belonging to descendants of the enslaved across the globe. Under the theme "Unity across continents and oceans: opportunities for deepening integration," the summit invited a vision of global Blackness rooted in political cooperation, cultural exchange, and mutual uplift. While the hashtag #diasporawars reemerged, its invocation shifted; this time, users expressed cautious optimism, noting the potential for diasporic repair and renewed commitment to collective identity beyond the scars of colonial fragmentation and historical estrangement.

Kidnapping in Kaduna State

In July 2021, 140 students were kidnapped in Nigeria [7]. Twitter (X) users urged Emmanuel Acho, a Nigerian American athlete and celebrity, to speak out. This sparked debate about how much responsibility Africans in the diaspora—particularly 1st to 3rd generation African immigrants—should bear in responding to events in their ancestral countries. One tweet questioned Acho's identification as African American given his American upbringing, and labeled criticism of his silence xenophobic.

BET Awards 2022

Nigerian artist, Wizkid, boycotted the BET Awards in June 2022, citing past disrespect and the lack of an on-stage award presentation. Twitter (X) users reignited #diasporawars, referencing Wizkid's interviews where he criticized how African artists are treated by Western award shows. Others pointed out that BET is not Black-owned and argued that all Black music is inherently Pan-African.

Tariq Nasheed's Warning About Kanye

On November 4, 2022, Tariq Nasheed issued a viral tweet critiquing Kanye West's selective advocacy for the Black community, accusing him of engaging only when it serves his music career. Nasheed highlighted contradictions in Kanye's public behavior—such as denouncing white supremacy while continuing to participate in institutions like the BET Awards, which some see as complicit in commodifying Black culture. The critique sparked

broader conversations across the Black diaspora about the limits of celebrity-led solidarity, the commodification of Black struggle, and the spectacle of performative activism. Framed through the lens of global Blackness, the moment reflected deeper tensions about who speaks for Black communities, under what conditions, and to what end. It raised critical questions about authenticity, transnational accountability, and how cultural influence is leveraged, or squandered, on the global stage.

Akon and #diasporawars

On December 29, 2022, Akon publicly claimed, "Africans are more talented and better performers than Black Americans," reigniting long-standing tensions within the African diaspora. While some Twitter (X) users expressed frustration with Akon's remarks, the broader response reflected a deep sense of exhaustion across diasporic communities. Many rejected the binary framing and called for a recognition of the shared conditions shaped by colonialism, displacement, and racial capitalism. The incident laid bare how internal hierarchies and essentialisms are weaponized within Black transnational discourse, often to the detriment of collective power. One widely circulated post captured the sentiment with biting clarity: "It is way too easy to participate in Diaspora Wars." Seen through the lens of global Blackness, this moment underscored the urgent need for cultural dialogue that transcends nationalism and centers relational accountability, cultural nuance, and solidarity over spectacle.

Meek Mill in Ghana

On December 30, 2022, Meek Mill traveled to Ghana for AfroNation Ghana 2022 [221], an event that symbolized the growing cultural bridge between Africa and its diaspora. In a tweet, he stated he was showing "FBA love," referring to Foundational Black Americans, signaling a gesture of diasporic solidarity. However, after being pickpocketed during the visit, the incident quickly became a flashpoint for online controversy. Rather than engaging the moment as a complex exchange between diasporic communities navigating power, difference, and connection, social media personality Tariq Nasheed used the event to criticize Ghana's safety, a move many viewed as fueling xenophobic sentiment and reinforcing division. From a global Blackness perspective, the moment revealed both the fragility and potential of transnational Black unity—where celebratory reconnection can easily be overshadowed by distrust, and where digital platforms amplify longstanding wounds rather than cultivating deeper understanding.

APPENDIX D

Examples of Diaspora Wars



Figure D.1: Example of content suggesting that #diasporawars are initiated by provocateurs.



Figure D.2: Examples of content suggesting that #diasporawars doesn't have any relevancy offline.



Figure D.3: Examples of content suggesting #diasporawars connection to other social media conflicts such as gender wars.

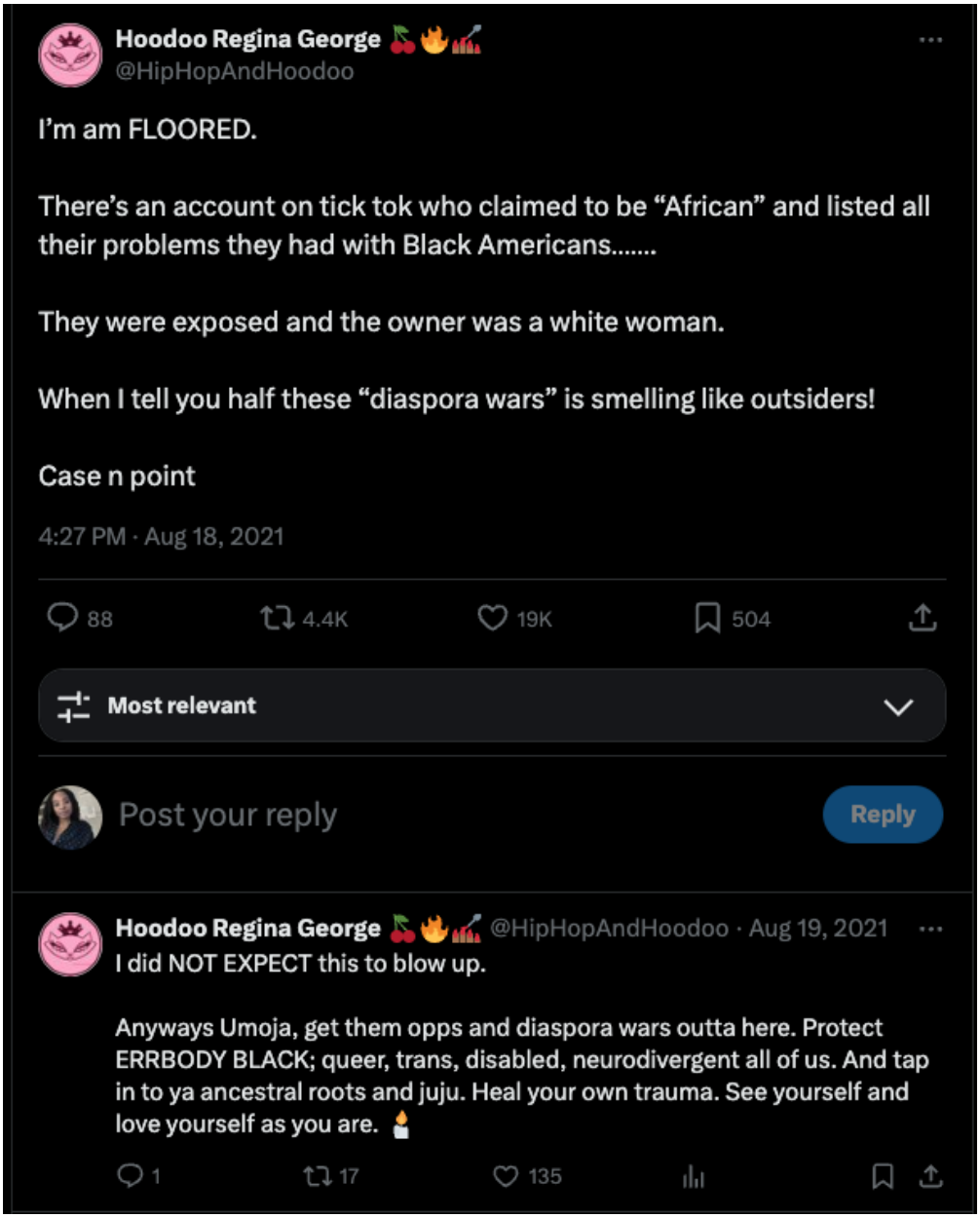


Figure D.4: Example of content suggesting that #diasporawars is a cross-platform dialogue in this example on TikTok.

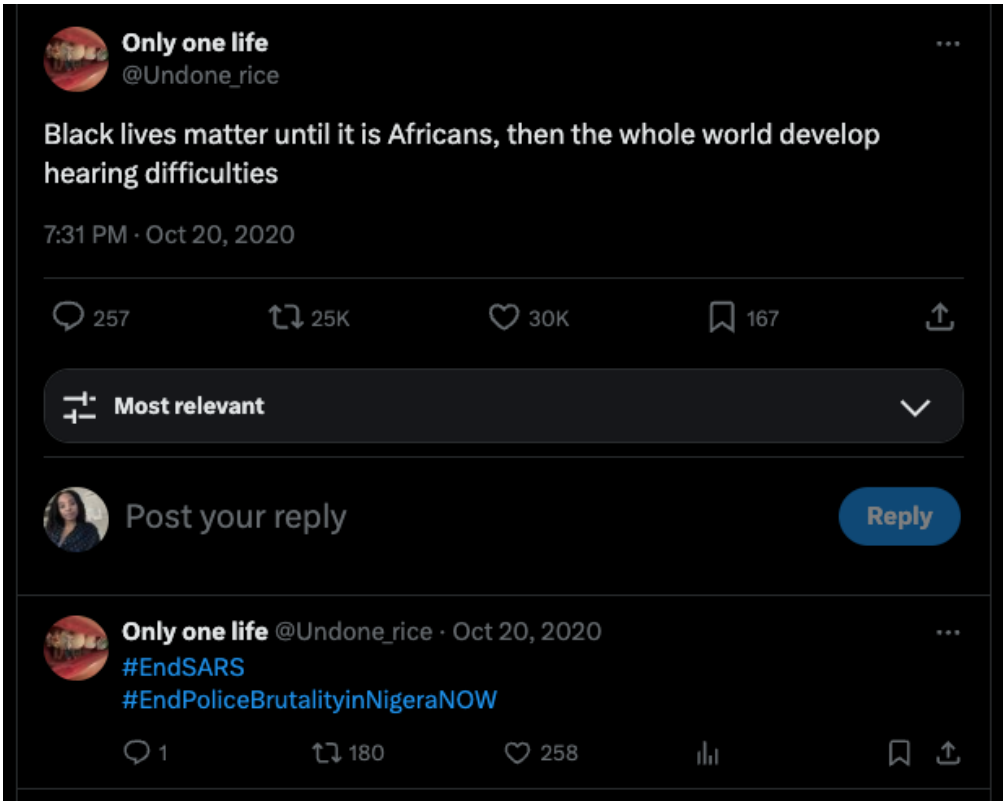


Figure D.5: Example of content suggesting how #ENDSARS has made it to the #diasporawars discourse.



Figure D.6: Examples of content illustrating how #diasporawars dialogue addresses the shared ancestry of global diasporas.

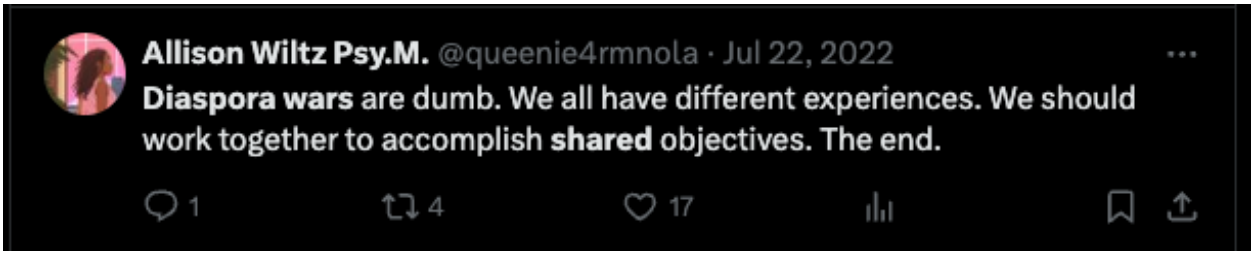


Figure D.7: Examples of content illustrating the fatigue associated with #diasporawars.

APPENDIX E

Technomediated Justice Participant Appendix

Table E.1: Participant location and experience.

Focus Group #: Participant #	Location	Role
F1: P1	West, USA	Restorative justice facilitator in the workplace, volunteer in the prison system
F1: P2	North East, USA	Restorative coach
F1: P3	Midwest, USA	Restorative Justice Facilitator for 18 years, conflict resolution coordinator at a higher education institution, focus on Title IX cases
F1: P4	North East, USA	Restorative justice practitioner and workplace circle keeper
F1: P5	North East, USA	Trainer, consultant, and coach of restorative practice and restorative justice conference facilitator
F2: P6	Midwest, USA	Program officer at a community organization, trainer in community conflict network, committee member of area restorative justice network
F2: P7	Midwest, USA	Restorative Justice practitioner and coordinator
F2: P8	North East, USA	Restorative Justice facilitator and trainer

Continued on next page

Table E.1 – continued from previous page

Focus Group #: Participant #	Location	Role
F3: P9	North East, USA	Ph.D. student, Restorative leader, trainer, facilitator, and circle keeper
F3: P10	South East, USA	Restorative Justice Facilitator for serious and violent harm cases
F4: P11	West, USA	Conflict mediation with leaders and organizations across the nation
F4: P12	Southwest, USA	Facilitate restorative circles at non-profit and NYC schools
F4: P13	North East, USA	Facilitate restorative justice circles for incarcerated population, formerly incarcerated
F4: P14	North East, USA	Restorative Justice practitioner and doula
F5: P15	North East, USA	Restorative Justice practitioner
F5: P16	Midwest, USA	Restorative Justice facilitator
F5: P17	North East, USA	Former Restorative Justice practitioner
F5: P18	Midwest, USA	Circle Keeper, Restorative Justice practitioner and trainer
F6: P19	North East, USA	Tribal mediation within Indigenous communities, survivor advocate and coach, abuse prevention consultant
F6: P20	West, USA	Restorative Justice coordinator within a local school district
F6: P21	South East, USA	Restorative Justice trainer, facilitator, and circle keeper
F6: P22	South East, USA	Participant of restorative justice processes, restorative justice facilitator and director of a non-profit organization, formerly incarcerated

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