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Article

Trust Signals: An Intersectional Approach to Understanding Women of Color’s News Trust

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Abstract

Journalism scholars have increasingly become concerned with how our changing media environment has shifted traditional understandings of how news outlets create trust with audiences. While many scholars have focused on broad avenues of building trust with audiences through transparency, community engagement, and funding, arguably less attention has been paid to how audience members’ social positionality—determined by factors such as race, class, and socioeconomic status—can shape their varying understanding of what makes a news source trustworthy. Thus, in this study, I conducted focus groups with US women of color, a community marginalized minimally along race and gender, to understand how their positionality shapes how they conceptualize news trust. Through eight focus groups with $N = 45$ women of color, I found while participants used known antecedents of news trust, these were often more specifically rooted in their own experiences with racism, heterosexism, and classism. Further, participants had varying conceptualizations around antecedents of trust, such as accuracy and bias. Through these findings, I suggest how news organizations can better establish trust across marginalized communities.

Keywords

digital media; intersectionality; marginalized communities; news trust; women of color

Issue

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1. Introduction

Audience trust in news globally has steadily declined over the past few years in reaction to increasing political divisions, changing news business models, and the proliferation of mis- and disinformation in our digital news environment (Brenan, 2022; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). In response, journalism scholars have called on journalists to reconceptualize how they create trust, highlighting the need for journalists to develop stronger relationships with the communities they report on (Fenton, 2019; Lewis, 2019; Robinson, 2019). However, these audiences are often conceptualized broadly without accounting for how audience members’ positionality may shape how they conceptualize news trust.

Scholars have long recognized that mainstream news’ historical attachment to institutions of power and role as an institution of power itself that has historically

used editorial selection, the process of selecting what occurrences to cover, to erase the lived experiences of marginalized peoples, has led to a distrust of mainstream news by marginalized communities (Gans, 1979; Murphy, 2019; Wallace, 2019; Wenzel, 2020). Studies have found holding a marginalized racial or gender identity can differentially shape audience perceptions of news trust and credibility (Andsager & Mastin, 2003; Arguedas et al., 2023; Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Klaas & Boukes, 2022; Robinson & Culver, 2019; Spence et al., 2013). However, these studies’ overwhelming focus on a single axis of marginalization, such as race or gender, and reliance on quantitative methods that ambiguously define trust, may limit what they reveal about the relationship between marginalized audiences and news trust.

Thus, this study draws on intersectionality as a theoretical framework to conduct focus groups with 45 US

women of color (WOC) to examine how various axes of marginalization can interactively shape how audiences perceive news trust to better understand how news institutions can build trust with these communities.

2. Literature Review

Trust is the psychological state in which a person, the trustor, is willing to be vulnerable with and places trust in another person or entity, the trustee (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust in public institutions is often determined by past experiences that inform the trustor's future expectations of the trustee (Coleman, 2012; Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Thus, trust in media institutions is defined as "the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch et al., 2018, p. 5).

Trust allows audiences to learn from and internalize the information provided by news (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022). Thus, trust in news is foundational to our democratic citizenship because "citizens not only need to become informed themselves but to trust that others around them are similarly civically informed" (Coleman, 2012, p. 27). Therefore, at stake in news trust is the news' ability to fulfill its fundamental role in creating an informed citizenry.

Several factors can influence news trust, such as trust in the veracity, credibility, and unbiased nature of the information provided, trust that news will cover and contextualize events in a way that is relevant to the trustee, and trust in a journalist's professionalism and assessment of facts (Knudsen et al., 2022; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). However, our increasingly saturated digital news environment, brought about by the ease with which any individual can quickly create, post, and share information online, especially via social media platforms, makes it harder for audiences and journalists to know what information to trust (Fisher, 2016). Thus, developing antecedents of trustworthiness in online news is increasingly difficult (Grosser, 2016).

Empirical studies have examined how elements of online news impact perceptions of trustworthiness. Research has found that familiarity with a news brand offline translates to trust in the brand online (Toff et al., 2021). Further, using user-generated content in online news can lead to lower trust in a news item (Grosser et al., 2019). Studies have also shown that the inclusion of transparency cues online, like opinion labels and statistical information, can lead to increased news trust (Henke et al., 2020; Otis, 2022). However, Karlsson (2020) found that existing media trust is often a precursor to accepting transparency cues, highlighting the role of trust in accepting transparency measures meant to increase said trust.

Studies have also investigated how social media, specifically, impacts news trust. The dissemination of news through social media platforms can negatively affect readers' perception of the information's credibil-

ity and an increased use of social media to find news can lead to a decline in news trust generally (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Park et al., 2020). However, studies have shown that who shares a news item on social media plays a larger role in perceived trustworthiness than the source itself (Rosenstiel et al., 2017; Sterrett et al., 2019). Additionally, studies have found that younger, female, and heavy users of social media are more likely to trust news they encounter on social media, highlighting the cyclical relationship between social media news use and social media news trust (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018).

To understand how digital media can be more trustworthy, The Trust Project interviewed individuals across the US and Europe to understand how they assess news trust. Based on these interviews, the project put forth eight trust indicators, including if (a) news organizations disclose policies and standards for independent reporting, (b) a journalist has clear expertise, (c) a news organization clearly labels different types of news, (d) a journalist provides their sources and cites their claims, (e) a reporter discloses their methods, (f) a journalist is a part of the community they are reporting on, (g) a news item includes diverse voices and perspectives, and (h) a news organization incorporates audience feedback in their reporting (The Trust Project, 2018). However, news trust is hard to generalize as "trust is not a universal relationship but a socially differentiated" (Coleman, 2012, p. 37), meaning it is situational and contextual (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Thus, when considering how news trust is formed, we must consider the impact of social positionality.

Several studies have examined how race and gender identity shape perceptions of news trust. These studies frequently examine whether congruence between an individual's race or gender and the race or gender of the news reporter increases trustworthiness and credibility, often finding it does not, and, that African Americans and women often found White and men reporters, respectively, to be more credible, highlighting a potentially paradoxical relationship between identity and trust (Andsager & Mastin, 2003; Armstrong & McAdams, 2009; Klaas & Boukes, 2022; Miller & Kurpius, 2010; Spence et al., 2013). However, recent studies have found that marginalized people often feel mainstream news coverage of their communities is biased (Arguedas et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2021). Further, while White reporters see it as their responsibility in reporting on communities of color to remain objective, the communities of color they report on emphasize the need for news organizations to build trust with their communities and hire more Black journalists, highlighting an important disconnect between mainstream news and marginalized communities that could lead to mistrust (Newman et al., 2017; Robinson & Culver, 2019).

While these studies provide important insight, they often have two critical shortcomings. First, they often rely on quantitative surveys and experiments

that standardize the definition of trustworthiness, not accounting for how participants' identities and lived experiences may lead to differential notions and barometers for trust (Knudsen et al., 2022). Second, they mainly investigate how trustworthiness is shaped along one axis of marginalization, such as race or gender, and thus cannot account for how holding multiple marginalized identities may shape understandings of trustworthiness in nuanced ways. Thus, this study uses focus group methods using intersectionality, an analytic born out of Black feminist theory, to understand how experiencing multiple forms of marginalization shapes indicators of news trust.

Black feminism is a political orientation developed from the unique marginalized experiences and positionality of Black women that is "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," and aims to develop an "integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that major systems of oppression are interlocking" (Combahee River Collective, 1978, p. 210). Thus, Black feminist theory, as an intellectual tradition, lays the analytical foundation for the distinctive standpoint towards society, community, and self, born out of the similarly marginalized yet diverse and multifaceted lived experiences of Black women that aims to oppose oppression. Further, as Collins (2000) argues, a Black feminist intellectual tradition has historically aimed to foster Black women's activism. Thus, Black feminist theory highlights the connection between experiences, social consciousness, and orientations towards social justice and activism (Collins, 2000). Intersectionality is an analytic derived from Black feminist theory and critical legal studies that contends that any single axis of analysis, such as race or gender, cannot fully account for our lived experience, and argues for concurrent analytical consideration of how multiple axes of oppression can shape people's lives in dynamic and often unforeseen ways (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Thus, this study focuses on how US WOC, who minimally experience marginalized along the lines of race and gender, conceptualize news trust to better understand how experiencing multiple axes of marginalization may shape how they determine news trust.

One recent study that gives insight into the value of this approach is a focus group study conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, with participants from "disadvantaged" communities in the UK, Brazil, India, and the US, to examine how participants' experiences and expectations of mainstream news may intersect with their sense of trust (Arguedas et al., 2023). The study divided groups by gender to analyze data along intersectional lines; however, the authors note that this perspective was not the central focus of their report. The study suggests that to build trust, news organizations attend to the distinct needs of and provide more positive and complete coverage of these disadvantaged communities, reduce bias towards privileged communities, and improve diversity in newsrooms. Extending the valu-

able insight this study provides, I asked participants *what makes news more or less trustworthy* to understand how their lived experiences shape their conceptualizations of news trust.

3. Methods

I conducted focus groups with WOC 18 and older, where "of color" was defined as identifying as racially non-White, including self-identifying as Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and non-White Latinx, as part of a larger study on WOC's news information seeking habits. Qualitative focus groups allowed me to directly ask participants how they assess news trust. Further, because WOC represent a range of racial, gender, sexual, age, and class experiences, focus groups allowed me to put multiple WOC in conversation to understand the scope of how their identities may influence news trust (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Questions about news trust asked participants what attributes made news trustworthy or untrustworthy.

To recruit participants, I posted flyers in public areas and universities around the Midwest city where I was located, online via social networking sites, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Redditt, and emailed them to organizations that serviced women and/or communities of color. Flyers instructed potential participants to fill out a screening questionnaire on the survey platform Qualtrics, which was used to assess eligibility for participation. Individuals were asked to confirm that they identified as a WOC, were 18 or older, and spoke English. The survey also asked participants to identify their race, age range, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and highest level of education, as other dimensions of identity that can shape news trust; however, individuals were not required to answer these questions to participate. I contacted all eligible individuals and invited them to participate in one focus group.

This resulted in eight focus groups of four to six participants each, for a total of $N = 45$ participants, attributed P1–P45 throughout the manuscript (see Table 1) conducted via Zoom from July to November 2020. While various demographic factors may shape news trust, such as socioeconomic class and education level, in this study focus groups were divided by age, based on previous research demonstrating the importance of age in dictating digital news consumption and social media news trust, which could shape how participants differentially conceptualize news trust in a digital news environment; and political and civic orientations, which could also influence perceptions of news trust (Cilluffo & Fry, 2019; Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022; Parker et al., 2019). Four groups had participants aged between 18 and 35 and four had participants aged 36 and older (36–60+). Age ranges were determined based on research on age variation in digital news usage (Shearer & Matsa, 2018). Focus groups lasted an average of 95 minutes and were recorded with participants' permission via a consent

Table 1. Participants.

Participant	Racial identity	Age range	Sexuality	Class	Highest education level
P1	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Undefined	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P2	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Upper middle class	College graduate
P3	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper class	Advance degree graduate
P4	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advance degree graduate
P5	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Upper class	Some advanced education
P6	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Working class	Some advanced education
P7	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Queer	Lower middle class	Advance degree graduate
P8	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Middle class	College graduate
P9	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	x	x	x
P10	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P11	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	x	x	x
P12	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	College graduate
P13	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P14	Indigenous	18–35	Pansexual	Middle class	Advance degree graduate
P15	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Middle class	College graduate
P16	Black	18–35	Heterosexual	Lower middle class	Some advanced education
P17	Black	18–35	x	x	x
P18	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	College graduate
P19	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P20	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper class	Some advanced education
P21	Black	35–60			
P22	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P23	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P24	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P25	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Middle class	College graduate
P26	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P27	Black	36–60	x	x	x
P28	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Some advanced education
P29	Indigenous	18–35	Pansexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P30	Black	18–35	Homosexual	Upper middle class	College graduate
P31	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P32	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Bisexual	Lower middle class	Some college education
P33	Asian/Pacific Islander	18–35	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P34	Indigenous	36–60	x	x	x
P35	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P36	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper class	College graduate
P37	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Working class	College graduate
P38	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P39	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P40	Black	Over 60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P41	Asian/Pacific Islander	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P42	Black	36–60	Heterosexual	Upper middle class	Some advanced education
P43	Non-White Latinx	36–60	x	x	x
P44	Non-White Latinx	36–60	Heterosexual	Middle class	Advanced degree graduate
P45	Indigenous	Over 60	x	x	x

Note: X = participant chose not to disclose.

form approved by the Institutional Review Board at a mid-sized Midwestern university. After a focus group, I sent each participant a \$20 e-visa gift card as remuneration for their time spent participating in the study.

Groups included a range of racial, economic, and educational diversity. While focus groups were racially diverse, in the 18–35 range, the majority of participants self-identified as Asian/Pacific Islander and, in the 36+ range, the majority of participants identified as Black, which potentially reflects the larger number of Black and Asian/Pacific Islander populations in the US compared to other minoritized racial groups (US Census Bureau, 2020). Further, no women in the 18–35 range identified as non-White Latinx, however since Latinx is an ethnicity, not a race, Latinx participants in these groups could have used a different racial identification, such as Black or Indigenous. Of the participants who disclosed their education, all identified as having at least some college education. Of participants who disclosed their socioeconomic class, 55% identified as middle or upper middle class. All participants identified as cisgender and 53% identified as heterosexual. While I did attempt to sample for demographic variation, reaching diverse participants was made harder by the ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic, the implications of which will be discussed.

I transcribed focus group recordings using the secure transcription platform Rev. I coded transcripts using qualitative thematic coding, in which I grouped participants' answers into initial thematic codes based on the central themes expressed in each statement and then combined codes into larger themes, and subsequently grouped pervasive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Initial codes were derived deductively from the literature on news trust, including transparency cues, past experience with an outlet, veracity, and attributes of the journalist or news sharer. Additionally, the coding scheme was also left open to allow new codes to arise that may specifically pertain to WOC's assessments of trustworthiness. In analyzing data, I also used intersectionality as a form of critical social theory to "explain...not simply describe" (Collins, 2019, p. 51) WOC's conceptions of news trust by situating participants' conceptions of trustworthiness within their self-identified or self-described racial, gender, and classed experiences.

4. Statement of Positionality

As a study centering on Black feminism, it is important to acknowledge how my own positionality and lived experiences shaped the below analysis (Evans-Winters, 2019). I am a Black, heterosexual, middle-class cisgender woman with an advanced degree and past experiences working at a national mainstream news broadcast. My experiences as someone who has considered news trust as a researcher, media professional, and woman of color news consumer shaped how I thought about the potential intersectional dimensions of news trust. Specifically, during focus groups, I was aware of how

news trust could be shaped by individual positionality in relation to systems and institutions of power and past experiences with news as an institution of power. To this end, during focus group sessions, I used both my insider position as a woman of color and my outsider position as a researcher and former news producer, to advance conversations and comments that could more deeply explain not only how but why participants defined news trust in the manner they did and what sites of power were shaping these beliefs. At the same time, I was keenly aware of how my potential assumptions as an insider could influence my findings, and thus often asked participants to elaborate on comments in ways that directly revealed the reasons behind their perceptions (Young, 2004).

5. Findings

Participants were active news consumers, with 35 participants regularly seeking out news. Many participants grounded their understanding of their high news consumption in their marginalized positionality. Echoing a sentiment many participants expressed, P36 commented: "I want to know more than someone who doesn't look like me, what's happening to people who look like me." In this way, as WOC, participants saw high information seeking as an important way to combat the various forms of social, political, and economic marginalization they face.

However, as research has shown, information seeking from a source does not necessarily precipitate news trust (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). Thus, several factors contributed to whether participants found a news outlet or item trustworthy.

5.1. Familiarity

Participants often used the preexisting reputation of and familiarity with a news outlet as a heuristic for establishing trust in their on- and offline news usage:

If it just generally has a track record of being well-known or prestigious or acclaimed in some way....So sometimes it might just be the number of followers it has. The big news sites...like *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, probably some others, have won Pulitzer Prizes and have broken really major news stories over the years. So that gives me a sense of trust in them. (P29)

Similarly, P13 said: "A news outlet that has been established for a long time, or that other people know and trust as well, that makes me want to trust it." Thus, for participants, a large part of being able to trust a news outlet resided in its previous track record based on their own experiences with the outlet, awards, and large audience followings. As a result, participants regularly sought out news from large, mainstream media outlets, particularly *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, CNN, and NPR.

5.2. Journalists' Positionality

However, in using these news sites, participants often placed trust in specific journalists. For instance, P26 said: "Whether I read *The New York Times*, whether I read *The Daily News*, I also look at the journalist or the person who's actually writing the story. Certain ones I trust more than others." For many participants, trust in individual journalists was tied to a perceived sense of shared cultural background and experience:

Within media outlets from *The New York Times*, there's some people who I'm like, "Why would you choose that headline? Why would you do that? Or that picture..." But then let's be real, part of it too is, does this author's interpretation match my own politics? This is why Nick Estes is so far up my list. He's an Indigenous scholar, he's a socialist, he cares about the same stuff as I do, and his interpretation of events is on point with my own politics. (P14)

Thus, while P14 acknowledged that she evaluated individual journalists' trustworthiness in terms of how they frame and present a story, this assessment was also tied to her racial and class politics as an Indigenous woman and whether she felt a journalist, like Estes, would reflect those experiences. Likewise, other participants noted placing more trust in journalists with multiple marginalized identities such as Angela Rye and Yamiche Alcindor, Black women, and Don Lemon, a gay Black man, arguably because they could accurately reflect their raced, gendered, sexual, and class experiences in reporting and framing news stories.

5.3. Business Practices and Motivations

Participants' conceptions of trust were also shaped by the financial incentives of news organizations. P30 said distrust stemmed from "reading an article and there's so many ads all over the page." For many participants, these commercial motives seemed to not only signal reporting interest outside of informing the public but potential culpability in supporting institutions interested in "maintain[ing] a system" (P15). For instance, P7 noted of local news coverage of anti-racist protests at the time:

The police brutality toward the protesters was fucking gnarly; and so, to me, that is more about protecting capitalist interests. NBC News is proudly sponsored by local businesses....There's a lot more money involved in that. So, I get really skeptical with the bigger news sources because I wonder what are they serving? What is it that their newsroom is protecting?

Similarly, P33 commented: "I've just been confronted with how news sources are funded by people that want to maintain a system, like Jeff Bezos funds *The Washington Post*." Thus, how participants perceived

financial incentives to influence reporting, especially if it means a news outlet would be influenced to uphold institutions of power, became an indicator of trust. Broadly, participants saw reporting that potentially privileges classed, capitalist, and commercial interests as a reason not to trust a news outlet or reporter. In turn, some participants noted an increased trust in non-profit and publicly funded news outlets such as NPR or BBC, which they felt had a greater "responsibility to the public" (P29).

5.4. Accuracy and Bias

Finally, participants across focus groups said that accuracy and unbiased reporting were indicators of news trust. However, participants often conceptualized and defined these terms differently, particularly as they related to age.

5.4.1. Factual Accuracy and Bias

For many older participants (ages 36–60+), accuracy was defined as a news outlet's ability to fulfill traditional journalistic norms of providing verified information. For instance, in conceptualizing accuracy, many of these participants talked about their knowledge of whether a news organization had fact-checkers and other systems in place to verify the information. P44 said: "For me, [trust is] fact-checking, just having hired a fact-checker." Likewise, P39 noted: "It's important to feel as someone is going through with their telling of the story, they are saying this is where the information came from."

Further, many older participants used news outlets' use of retractions to signal veracity, like P37, who stated: "When they retract the story...they said we misreported or something...I think that gives them credibility. Right?" Explaining how she used retractions as a heuristic for assessing which news outlets were and were not trustworthy, P44 said:

PBS will start it with, "Yesterday we made a mistake. We said this when it was this." So, for me that accountability and willingness to say, "I made a mistake we were wrong." To me that carries so much weight. I don't often hear Fox News saying we did something wrong, we got it wrong. So, fact-checking and then being accountable to themselves, for me are the biggest things.

Thus, for many participants over 35, accuracy, as an indicator of trust, was closely tied to transparency cues around information, such as retractions, citing their sources, and disclosing reporting methods which signaled trustworthiness.

Older participants' understandings of accuracy were also tied to perceptions of "unbiased" news. In describing untrustworthy "biased" news, P23 noted: "The ones that have nothing but opinion and lack all facts." Similarly, P24 stated that a news source was trustworthy if it was

“impartial and unbiased,” explaining: “You’re going to get facts, and even if you get some opinion, you still get all of the facts versus just one side, just facts related to inform.” For P24, “unbiased” news did not mean news had no opinions or biases, but rather more often than not it tried to be as unbiased as possible, signaled by a news outlet reporting on more than one perspective of an event and focusing on facts over opinion. In turn, P24 explained she often sought out news from multiple mainstream news outlets such as *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* that would consistently give her “75% of the story” to piece together the most “unbiased,” and thus trustworthy, version of the event. These signals of more “unbiased” news reflect traditional journalistic practices of signaling objectivity, such as balance, often defined as presenting multiple sides or perspectives on a story in reporting or giving “just facts,” reporting without underlying opinion (Mindich, 1998).

In turn, a news organization perceived to have multiple reporting inaccuracies, became an antecedent of mistrust, as exhibited in this exchange between P25 and P27:

P25: I’m becoming increasingly disappointed with the news that I used to trust....I would trust *The New York Times* more than I would trust a lot of other news sources...I am for the first time in, I don’t know how many years, thinking of not paying to get *The New York Times* because I don’t find them to be any more accurate or trustworthy than anybody else.

P27: Can you explain why that is? I know I’m a *New York Times*-er myself....But I think for me it’s like NPR and *The New York Times* are my...okay, these are the sources that I can trust.

P25: They [*The New York Times*] are not as balanced as they say they want to be....The second thing is that they’re not accurate. I mean, a lot of the things I read in *The New York Times* have been refuted elsewhere, and I’ve been getting a lot of the Apple newsfeed. And I was starting to think about that because it’s a variety of news sources.

Since *The New York Times* was no longer fulfilling P25’s barometer for the minimal signals of trustworthiness, defined as not properly “balanced” or verified information, in part based on conflicting reports from other sources in her Apple newsfeed, she began losing trust in them, and instead began turning to other outlets they felt more “comfortable” with due to perceived higher levels of balance and veracity, such as NPR. In this way, reduced bias in reporting through balance and indicators of veracity played a large role in how older participants conceptualized trustworthiness.

In turn, many older participants were distrustful of the news they encountered on social media, which they felt lacked transparency around sourcing and fact-checking (e.g., P30, P18, P21, P34, P36) and did not

present the same “balanced” reporting, especially due to the perception that news on social media was filtered through “algorithms [that] tend to highlight what is extreme because they’re trying to get as many clicks as they can” (P36).

5.4.2. Socio-Political Accuracy and Bias

Contrastingly, for many younger participants (18–35), while news trust was tied to their perception of a source’s accuracy, accuracy was often defined in terms of how their reporting reflected the realities of systemic racial, gender, and sexual oppression in shaping news events. For example, P7 stated:

I try to look at the framing and see who they’re attributing the power and “victimhood” to. If they’re attributing it to, “Oh, poor CPD officers, this thing happened to them.” I go, “okay, well, I can see CPD officers are killing people. So actually, that’s not how the power source works, or the power dynamic works here.” I try to keep an eye out for that as a way to know whether this is a trustworthy site because, for me, trustworthiness has to do with acknowledging what the systems of oppression are within our country in order to be able to dismantle them.

In this way, P7 defined accuracy in terms of whether a news outlet recognized the power dynamics between institutions of power and racially marginalized people. Likewise, P32 commented: “I think a pretty green flag for me is just someone who is totally anti-fascism, anti-Proud Boys, anti...all of these stupid neo-Nazi people, just being anti that is already a flag for my trust.” These comments underscore just how, for many younger participants, accurate reporting was not only about verifiable facts or reporting both sides, but specifically acknowledging how multiple forms of power and systemic oppression, such as racism, antisemitism, and class all shape the facts being reported based on their own experiences with these systems of oppression. In turn, this expression of accuracy reflects a different definition of “unbiased” news, as news not biased towards institutions of power.

In turn, many younger participants said mistrust could stem from news outlets sensationalizing their reporting around marginalized communities. As P30 commented:

Usually, when you’re reading an article online, there’s some kind of imagery to catch your attention...depending on the choice of visual, it can feel very off-putting....I see that a lot with a lot of articles about the trans community. Sometimes there’s irrelevant imagery, like a woman putting on lipstick or someone putting on high heels, and then the story is about something within the trans community that’s in no way related to makeup or hair or clothes. And I’m like, “Well, what was the purpose of this?”

In this way, P30, who is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, was mistrustful of news organizations that sensationalized and othered marginalized communities she was a part of using what she perceived to be stereotypical or incendiary imagery.

For this reason, some younger participants supplemented their mainstream news use with news from alternative news outlets such as ProPublica and Truthout and social media platforms, particularly ones that allowed them to curate the news they were exposed to, such as Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and where they could follow unfiltered reporting by social justice activists and citizen journalists. As, P3 noted: “I think a lot of these big newspapers, even though we may describe them as left-leaning or right-leaning, always strike hard right down the middle in ways that can feel very dismissive of particular experiences,” such as the experiences of people of color, women, and queer folks. Additionally, participants noted social media and alternative news outlets often engaged in “on-the-ground” reporting in a way participants felt was better able to reflect the needs and concerns of marginalized peoples. For instance, P6 said: “I need humans to tell me what’s happening that are on the ground that’s seeing what’s happening. People who are part of the protest, journalists that are doing the work and not mainstream media sources.” For this reason, she stated:

I cannot trust any sources that I would otherwise consider reliable like *New York Times*, like BBC....For things like that, I put my trust “on the ground” journalists like people who are actually there in Palestine, or actually covering what’s happening in Palestine and seeing what they have to say because news sources are so heavily funded and have an agenda. (P6)

Thus, unlike participants over 35 who often questioned the trustworthiness of news on social media, participants 18–35 believed “the immediacy definitely lends some credibility to [social media]” (P8) by allowing them to see unfiltered news from entities they trust who they perceive to not share the hegemonic biases of mainstream media.

6. Conclusion

I conducted focus groups with 45 self-identified US WOC about what they perceive makes news trustworthy or untrustworthy to understand how experiencing multiple axes of marginalization shapes news trust. Findings suggest that participants trusted mainstream news outlets on and offline based on their reputation and familiarity with the brand, echoing previous literature that trust in public institutions is, in part, defined by past experiences with those institutions (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

However, participants’ news trust also was connected to their perception that reporting in these outlets reflected their lived experiences. In this way, a key indica-

tor of trust was a journalist’s expertise and assessment of facts (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; The Trust Project, 2018). For these participants specifically, this expertise was cultural: Could a journalist acknowledge the role of multiple forms of systemic oppression in shaping news events, based on a similar lived experience? This finding reflects and expands recent literature on the importance of journalists of color for building trust with communities of color, by highlighting not only the importance of race, but also class, gender, sexuality, and class of journalists in building trust with WOC.

Additionally, in line with previous literature noting the role of editorial independence as a signal of trust, participants said the perceived financial incentives of a news organization also shaped perceptions of trustworthiness (Knudsen et al., 2022; The Trust Project, 2018). However, for WOC participants this concern for editorial independence was specifically rooted in concern for how news organizations’ capitalist interest was upholding sites of systemic class, racial, and gender oppression.

Thus, this study reveals how intersectional analysis illuminates the specific ways communities that face multiple forms of systemic marginalization conceptualize antecedents of news trust. Specifically, findings suggest that how WOC participants conceptualize news trust, while seemingly similar to more general antecedents of news trust, is often connected to signals that implicate a news outlet in upholding hegemonic systems of oppression across multiple dimensions of marginalization, as opposed to privileging specific signifiers of oppression such as racism or sexism.

Further, by putting a range of WOC in conversation, findings reveal that participants’ conceptions of news trust are not monolithic. While participants relied on accuracy and bias as indicators of trustworthiness, they presented two distinct ways of conceptualizing these signals. While older participants (36–60+) often defined accuracy, through signals of fact-checking, disclosure transparency and unbiased reporting through, as much as possible, giving just the facts or presenting both sides of a story, younger participants (18–35) often grounded their understanding accuracy in how a news outlet or journalist covered stories about marginalized communities, including people of color, women, and the LGBTQIA+ community, and thus was not bias towards privilege (Arguedas et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2017). These assessments of trustworthy news were based on a new outlet’s acknowledgment of how systems of oppression, broadly, shape events. To be clear, this does not mean older participants were unconcerned with how mainstream media covered marginalized communities, but rather these concerns were less salient indicators of news trust than factual accuracy and perceptions of balanced and less opinionated reporting. This finding highlights how news trust is linked to different audiences’ attitudes toward traditional journalistic norms and values (Robinson & Culver, 2019; Rosenstiel et al., 2021). Additionally, extending the trust signal of “including

diverse voices,” this understanding of accuracy reflects not only a desire for individual diverse voices in reporting but also an acknowledgement of how multiple forms of systemic oppression can shape the event being reported on (The Trust Project, 2018).

These different conceptualizations of accuracy may be due to several factors. Due to the fact that younger participants were Millennials, who, as a generation, are more likely to say people racialized as Black are discriminated against and be critical of gender norms, they could have a more critical analysis of the institutions that uphold forms of systemic discrimination (Parker et al., 2019). Also, since focus groups were conducted in the summer of 2020, as anti-racist protests were taking place across major cities in the US, these events could have more readily shaped younger participants’ view of the accuracy of news reporting, as more active participants in these protests (Barroso & Minkin, 2020).

Additionally, younger participants were more willing to trust news on social media, echoing findings on the importance of alternative news sources for marginalized people (Arguedas et al., 2023). This finding may reflect how younger individuals, generally, and as heavier users of social media users, are more willing to trust news on social media (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Forman-Katz & Matsa, 2022; Warner-Søderholm et al., 2018). Further, for younger participants, the lack of fact-checking on social media may be secondary to their trust in the people they get news from on social media, such as activists and people “on the ground” (Rosenstiel et al., 2017; Sterrett et al., 2019).

Building on the suggestion from Arguedas et al. (2023) that to grow trust with marginalized communities, news institutions should focus on accuracy and fairness, I argue that this requires attention not only to the veracity of facts but also attentiveness to how the presentation of these facts acknowledges the struggles and lived experiences of marginalized communities. When considering how to create news trust with marginalized communities, news organizations must think along multiple dimensions of marginalization and lived experience to consider varied and sometimes competing strategies for conceptualizing and building trust.

However, interestingly, across racial identifications, participants did not present distinct conceptions of trustworthiness. This is arguably because, despite their specific racialized experiences, participants were still centrally concerned with how news represented or failed to represent those experiences outside of a White, hetero-patriarchal.

While this study provides important insights, its findings are based on a limited sample of WOC in the US. This socially and culturally specific understanding of news and systemic oppression may have influenced participants’ orientation towards news trust. Further, due to limitations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, class, educational, and gender diversity within the sample was limited. Most participants were well-educated, which can

be a predictor of news literacy, or the “knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes” (Tully et al., 2022, p. 1593), which gives consumers’ ability to critically analyze and evaluate media messages and information (Tully & Vraga, 2018). Thus, the higher level of education amongst this group of participants could have resulted in a more critical analysis of news media and traditional indicators of news trust. This level of media literacy could have also been increased because participants were generally high news consumers. I also cannot account for response bias, or how participants’ answers may have been influenced by wanting to appeal to others in the group. Future studies should expand on these findings through more representative open-ended surveys with comparative groups of marginalized communities utilizing an intersectional analytical lens.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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