

The multidimensional nature of violence experienced by journalists working in South Africa

Research Report

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Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amanda Azania Nomakhwezi Mosaka', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Amanda Azania Nomakhwezi Mosaka

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Dedicated to my inspiration; Mama, Shamiso and Tatenda.

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Abstract

This research report explores the multifaceted nature of violence experienced by journalists while practicing journalism in South Africa. Despite global efforts to ensure the safety of journalists, the profession remains perilous, particularly in volatile environments like South Africa. This study delves into the various dimensions of violence encountered by journalists, including physical, psychological, digital, and structural violence, and examines how these experiences impact their professional practices and personal well-being.

The research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews with eight hard news journalists to garner in-depth insights into their experiences. The theoretical framework is grounded in the hierarchy of influences model and the concept of structural violence, providing a comprehensive lens to analyse the data. The study reveals that violence against journalists in South Africa stems from multiple sources, including political elites, the police, the public, and online platforms. These threats not only undermine journalists' safety but also impede their autonomy and effectiveness, ultimately compromising their role in society and ability to function in their jobs.

Key findings highlight the normalization of violence within the profession, the gendered nature of online harassment, and the intersectional impact of race and gender on journalists' experiences. The study also underscores the emotional impact of repeated exposure to traumatic events, which research shows makes journalists vulnerable to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Coping strategies and support mechanisms, such as social support, therapy, and organisational interventions, are examined to understand how journalists navigate these challenges.

The report concludes with recommendations for improving journalist safety, including the need for comprehensive institutional support, training on safety protocols, and fostering a culture of open discussions about mental health in newsrooms. By foregrounding the voices of journalists and their lived experiences, this research contributes to the broader discourse on journalism safety and underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to protect journalists in South Africa.

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1. Introduction

Despite global efforts to promote journalism safety and a free press, journalism remains a dangerous profession (UNESCO, 2021), facing significant challenges (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022). The nature of journalism, which involves probing and disseminating information, often challenges those in power (Dlamini, 2022), leading to increased threats and violations of press freedom (UNESCO, 2021). Journalist safety is multi-dimensional and with multiple sources of violence (Waisbord, 2022). Worldwide, and in South Africa, violence against journalists comes from multiple sources, including political parties, ideologies, both physical and digital spaces and from a cross section of people. This research looks at the violence journalists experience in the course of their work, by exploring the experiences of journalists covering everyday events. It is preoccupied with how journalists living and working in South Africa, engage with doing journalism in the context of a violent society. It examines the influence of violence on journalism practice through the hierarchy of influences model, considering the intersectional impacts of race and gender.

Threats to journalist safety undermine their ability to perform their duties, affecting their autonomy, effectiveness and function in society (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Any restrictions on a journalist's freedom, their news organisation, or the society they operate in, compromise journalistic safety and autonomy (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023; Hamada, 2022). Although South African journalists enjoy higher media freedom than many counterparts globally, they report from a country with high levels of everyday violence (Dlamini, 2022). They face attacks from the police, political elites, and the public; online threats include hate speech, harassment, and doxing; and surveillance by government agencies (SANEF, 2022). For these journalists, living and working in a violent environment, the front line is not a distant place they can escape, it is at their doorstep in the very society they live in. This study seeks to understand how exposure to everyday violent events affects journalists and their practice.

Inspired by literature on journalism safety in violent environments (Hughes & Márquez-Ramirez, 2017; Feinstein, 2013; Hughes et al., 2021, Brambila, 2018), this research uses the hierarchy of influences model to explore the experiences of journalists in unsafe settings. In South Africa, the media plays a crucial role in public life and often reflects broader societal debates about how the country is developing and defining itself. These debates occur in a politically tense environment

with high levels of violence and gender-based violence (Posetti et al., 2024), alongside issues of inequality, crime, and the legacies of colonialism and apartheid.

Using qualitative research through semi-structured interviews, this study examines how forces at micro, meso, and macro levels influence journalism practice and the well-being of journalists. This research locates and links journalism practice to structural violence, a structural system embedded in political and economic systems. This perspective is taken because the consideration of direct violence alone is in itself harmful as “structural violence may also be produced by systems, practices, policies, or norms implemented by institutions, structures, organisations, or groups” (O’Connor, 2020). In other words, the way these groups or institutions operate and make decisions can create conditions that harm individuals or communities, often without physical violence involved. This view of violence is not commonly taken in studies of violence and journalism practice.

Journalism safety has traditionally been associated with war zones (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022; Feinstein, 2006; Hughes & Márquez-Ramirez, 2017; Seely 2019; Smith, Drevo, & Newman, 2018; Charles, 2022), authoritarian states (Hamada, 2022; Araújo, 2024), and large-scale disasters (Dworznik-Hoak, 2020; Feinstein, 2006; Seddighi, Salmani, & Seddighi, 2020). However, threats to safety have extended to settings that may have been perceived as less threatening such as everyday local reporting (Seely, 2019) and non-conflict zones (UNESCO, 2024). But fewer studies explore the experiences of local journalists covering everyday news and the violence they face.

1.1 Motivation for this study

This study aims to explore the nature of violence experienced by journalists engaged in local reporting within South Africa. The South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) has documented numerous incidents of violence against journalists, including attacks by police, criminals, political parties, and the public; online abuse such as hate speech, harassment, and doxing; surveillance by government agencies; and restrictive laws targeting the press (SANEF, 2022; SANEF, 2023a; SANEF, 2020). SANEF, established in 2005, is a non-profit organisation representing editors, senior journalists, academics, and journalism trainers. It advocates for quality reporting, diversity, ethical media, and a free press where journalists can work without fear of retaliation (SANEF, nd).

Many of the violent incidents reported by SANEF are happening to journalists covering everyday news events. Journalists covering everyday news play a crucial role in exposing sensitive information about public interest issues, making them targets for those who wish to silence their stories. SANEF has acknowledged that local journalists are exposed to many traumatic stories which can negatively affect their mental health (SANEF, 2024a). Additionally, SANEF (2023a; 2023c) reported an increase in hostility, harassment, intimidation, and confiscation of equipment. This is supported by Amnesty International (2022) which reported that harassment of journalists was on the increase with 59 separate incidents of verbal and physical attacks and harassment by police, political parties and their supporters, communities and criminals in the 5 years leading up to 2022. These incidents suggest that routine journalistic tasks may be affected by violence. This study seeks to address the research gap concerning the experiences of South African journalists in local reporting by examining journalists' perceptions of the impact of violence on their work and news output.

Because not all journalists experience violence equally (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022; Waisbord, 2022) this research explores how local journalists in South Africa as a category within the newsroom hierarchy are impacted by threats and experiences of violence. In the decade leading up to 2018, most of the violent murders or attacks were not on war correspondents, but rather on journalists reporting on local news and investigative journalists reporting on sensitive topics in their own communities (Brambila, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to deepen the understanding of journalism safety and test the hypothesis that local journalists face significant violence which affects their practice.

Furthermore, local journalists may not anticipate trauma as part of their job, unlike war correspondents (Seely, 2019) and the trauma they experience is less overt but has an incremental impact (Seely 2019; Browne, Evangeli, & Greenberg, 2012; Charles, 2022). A further risk is that frequent hostilities towards journalists leads to fatigue, anxiety, and disconnection from the profession causing journalists to leave resulting in a loss of institutional knowledge and a less skilled workforce (Holton et al., 2023; Banjac, Lohner, & Neverla, 2016). This study explores how journalists perceive the impact of their work on their wellbeing, coping mechanisms, and support systems, aiming to inspire better safety training and support for journalists.

Journalists also face smear campaigns, harassment, and efforts to undermine their credibility through misinformation and disinformation (SANEF, 2023b) which has weakened public trust in the news (SANEF, 2022) dropping from 61% in 2022 to 57% in 2023 (Roper, 2024). Violence threatens journalists' autonomy and effectiveness compromising their social roles (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). These incidents violate human rights and principles of transparency and accountability diminishing public discourse essential for democracy (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022). Thus, journalist safety is crucial for media freedom, freedom of expression, democracy and society (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

Restrictions on press freedom ultimately impact broader society. Journalists working under threat may alter their approach adopting strategies to avoid harassment which can harm coverage quality and overlook important perspectives (Holton et al., 2023). Such self-censorship can limit reporting on controversial subjects, thereby undermining journalists' autonomy and editorial independence (Ozawa et al., 2024; Fadnes, Krøvel, & Larsen, 2020). A free media environment, free from pressure and violence, is crucial for protecting autonomy (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022; Hamada, 2022). When journalists operate in unsafe conditions, the legitimacy of democracy is at risk (Hamada, 2022).

Since UNESCO launched the Academic Research Agenda on Safety of Journalists through the United Nations Plan of Action on Safety and the Issue of Impunity, research on journalism safety has expanded (Miller, 2023; Fadnes, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2019). Numerous studies indicate widespread abuse and gendered violence against journalists, which can have a chilling effect (Chen et al., 2020; Stahel, 2023; Miller, 2023). Threats, derogatory remarks, and harassment of journalists have become commonplace even in countries with high media freedom (Hamada, 2022). This study contributes to research on the harassment of journalists in countries like South Africa, where the press is considered free. Therefore, this research aims to provide insights that can influence societal attitudes and decision-making regarding journalist safety in the profession, academia, and the state.

1.2 Aim

This research aims to deepen understanding of how journalists experience violence while working in violent, non-warzone contexts like South Africa. Safeguarding journalists from threats to their safety is challenging, and addressing the root causes of these threats is complex

(Waisbord, 2022). Although journalist safety may improve, structural factors contributing to anti-press violence can undermine preventative measures (Waisbord, 2022). Effective solutions for journalist safety must be localized and based on thorough understanding of the specific issues and circumstances. This research focuses on the violence experienced by journalists in South Africa to inspire context-specific solutions. Its aim is to foreground the experiences and voices of journalists, presenting their perspectives in their own words.

Frere asserts that “the context in which journalists... practise their professional activity and the possible impact of the risks they face on the content they produce are not often taken into account” (Frere, 2024, p. 1). Enhancing our understanding of these risks can improve our comprehension of what it means to be a journalist in sub-Saharan Africa and provide new insights into media content (Frere, 2024). This study examines how the violence journalists cover and the violent context in which they work serve as occupational risks and sources of stress.

1.3 Research Question

This research hypothesizes that journalists working in everyday news in South Africa experience multidimensional violence affecting their well-being and journalism practice.

The key research questions are:

- In what ways do journalists in South Africa experience violence while reporting on everyday events?
- How do these experiences of violence impact their well-being and work practices?
- What coping strategies and support mechanisms do they utilize in response to this violence?

This study aims to understand how exposure to violence influences journalists and journalistic practice, with potential implications for newsroom safety decisions. It seeks to explore the impact of violence on journalists’ autonomy and safety.

2. Background

The South African media landscape has transformed significantly under a democratic constitution that guarantees media freedom, including freedom of expression and the press

(Jones & Hadland, 2024). Despite three decades of democracy, the country remains in transition, grappling with the socio-economic legacies of colonialism and apartheid (Wasserman, 2020). According to democratisation theory, such transitions are often dramatic and conflict-ridden, impacting media, democracy, and conflict studies (Wasserman, 2020).

In transitional societies, shifting norms and structural constraints lead to fluid narratives and contested values (Jebril, Matthews, & Loveless, 2017). South Africa continues to experience conflicts related to democratization, with the media playing a crucial role in debates about rights and responsibilities, and advantages of the process (Wasserman, 2020). This backdrop of societal transition fuels distrust and resentment towards the media, as well as debates about its role. This section outlines the media landscape, political attitudes towards the news media, threats to media freedom and the criticism it faces, framing the context for media hostilities.

2.1 The media landscape

The South African media landscape is experiencing significant challenges, described by Roper (2024) as a "hollowing out" of resources, including retrenchments and closures of news titles. The journalism workforce halved from 10,000 in 2008 to 5,000 in 2018 (Daniels & Finlay, 2024). COVID-19 exacerbated this decline, leading to the loss of 3,000 jobs by July 2020 and the closure of several publications (Daniels & Finlay, 2024). Despite minor recoveries, overall, during the fifteen years leading up to 2024, South Africa's media workforce shrunk by 70% (Daily Maverick, 2024).

The print business model is struggling as consumers prefer digital news, leading to declining circulation and advertising revenue (Daniels & Finlay, 2024). The internet and digital publishing have accelerated this decline, with COVID-19 increasing digital news consumption (Motsai, 2024). Advertising revenue has shifted to digital platforms like Meta, X, and Alphabet, and the rise of AI tools may worsen the outlook (Motsai, 2024). Job recovery in the sector is slow, with gains offset by losses in many newsrooms (Daniels & Finlay, 2024). The Daily Maverick's shut down for a day to protest the "global state of emergency in journalism," warned of market failure because advertising revenue has shifted to foreign tech platforms, and the public and policymakers fail to recognize the urgency of the crisis (Daily Maverick, 2024).

These challenges have prompted calls for sustainable revenue-generation strategies to ensure financial resilience for newsrooms (Motsai, 2024). Globally, the financial stability of journalism is threatened by broken media markets, political affiliations, reduced advertising, and ineffective digital monetization strategies (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). The growing number of freelance journalists highlights the strain on resources and the instability of the profession (Chiumbu & Munoriyarwa, 2024). Despite the constitutional right to a free press, various forces at social institutions and social systems levels undermine the sustainability of news organisations.

2.2 Political Perceptions

Political actors are major sources of harassment and abuse against journalists, often aiming to delegitimize them (Miller, 2023). In South Africa, there is a perception that the media serves elite interests, neglects the poor, youth, and marginalised groups, which has eroded trust and raised doubts about the media's role in deepening democracy (Wasserman, 2020). Disagreements about the media's role—whether as a critical watchdog or a supporter of democracy—have been pronounced since the early years of South Africa's democracy when the media moved between being supportive, collaborative or developmental to maintaining a critical western-style watchdog posture (Wasserman, 2020). At the core of these tensions are fundamentally different beliefs about the media's role in a post-colonial, post-apartheid, new democracy and its relationship to the political elites (Daniels, 2012; Wasserman, 2020). The two major issues that demonstrate these tensions are the Protection of State Information Bill which limits journalists' access to classified information which is yet to be passed into law, and the ANC's proposal for a Media Appeals Tribunal to impose tougher sanctions on journalists (Jones & Hadland, 2024; Wasserman, 2020). In response, the Press Council restructured to include more public members and revised the Press Code (Wasserman, 2020).

Political leaders have often criticized South African media. Presidents Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma, and Cyril Ramaphosa have all expressed distrust and criticism towards the media, viewing it as disconnected from society and antagonistic to the ANC's leadership (Daniels 2012; Mpako & Ndoma, 2024). The rhetoric from leaders in high office shapes public attitudes, portraying the media as an enemy if it acts independently and critically. The ANC is not alone in this. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Black First Land First (BLF) have also openly

attacked journalists. EFF leader Julius Malema has doxed journalists and incited harassment (SANEF, 2019a; Reporters Without Borders, 2019), while BLF has staged protests and accused journalists of defending the concentration of economic power in the hands of a small predominantly white elite (SANEF, 2017; Citizen Reporter, 2018).

Hostility towards journalists is pervasive across the political spectrum. Attacks on the media have intensified and moved online. Populism is on the rise in democratic countries resulting in rises in misogyny and “populist leadership styles” on social media (Miller, 2023 p. 1239). South Africa is no exception; populism is on the rise spurred on by widespread discontent with the ANC’s governance and the success of new populist parties (Morieson, 2024). Populist political rhetoric results in continued harassment of journalists, demonization and delegitimization of the press (Miller, 2023). These attacks by the political elite targeted political journalists operating in an environment that guarantees freedom of the press. As part of the transition to democracy, the media has had to wrestle with its relationship with political power.

2.3 Threats to Media Freedom

While the media has significantly contributed to South Africa's democracy, some events outlined in this section raise concerns about declining media freedom, political interference, intolerance, threats, surveillance and economic pressures. In 2024, South Africa scored three out of four for media freedom in the World Press Freedom Index but dropped from 25th to 38th place globally (Govenden, 2024; Mpako & Ndoma, 2024). Despite greater autonomy compared to the apartheid era, the relationship between the media and the ruling elite remains tenuous, with growing political intolerance and interference (Wasserman, 2020).

The media has exposed corruption and societal wrongdoing in South Africa, but faces ongoing criticism and attacks, especially in print and online media (Govenden, 2024; Wasserman, 2020). Political interference is most evident at the public broadcaster, and misinformation campaigns have been used to distract from corruption allegations against political leaders (Jones & Hadland, 2024). Wasserman (2020) suggests that media freedom and democracy should be seen as cyclical rather than a linear progression.

Journalists also face threats including surveillance by the State Security Agency (SSA) (Hunter 2018), which has also targeted journalists and community organisations (Campaign for Free

Expression, 2024). Before the 2024 elections, the SSA's security vetting of the SABC Editor-in-Chief was seen as intimidatory, leading to heavy criticism of the SSA's attempt to expand its powers through the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill (Campaign for Free Expression, 2024).

Neoliberalism, which is a market-driven economic ideology that prioritises private enterprise and relegates government to a secondary role can be seen affecting the media in numerous ways (Govenden 2024). Private media ownership prioritises commercialism, content uniformity, class continuity and targeting advertisers and consumers (Radebe, 2021). The prevalence of young, inexperienced staff and reduced budgets for investigative journalism further weaken the media (Govenden, 2024). Economic forces influence journalists' freedom and autonomy, narrowing news stories to target elites and affecting trust in journalism.

2.4 Criticism of the Media

The South African media sector continues to transform, grappling with its role in society during and after the transition to democracy. Shifts in the political, economic, and regulatory environment have raised important questions about the media's role (Wasserman, 2020). While the constitution ensures freedom of expression and the right to dignity, there is tension between these rights (Wasserman, 2020). Critics argue that the media has defended freedom of expression but fallen short in promoting human dignity and societal healing (Wasserman, 2020).

The sector is yet to fully shed the racial colonial and apartheid legacies that influence media content where blackness is still linked to negative traits seen in coverage of for example service delivery protests, labour unrest; and how access to a wider media selection favours more affluent often white audiences (Govenden, 2024). Media ownership and board representation are skewed towards the white minority, limiting the media's ability to represent marginalized communities (Govenden, 2024; Radebe, 2021). This has fueled criticism that investigative journalism focuses on black elites while ignoring scandals involving white elites (Radebe, 2021). In a racially divided society, with a divided public sphere, the media may be perceived as taking sides in a polarized society, thereby contributing to tensions (Radebe, 2021).

Further concerns were raised by SANEF (2019b) because there were “a number of disturbing trends in our industry including the erosion of public trust, the decline of editorial independence

due to a number of issues including the encroachment of media owners and shrinking newsrooms linked to large scale retrenchments” and “trust in journalism has become eroded in the era of fake news and misinformation, as well as journalists sometimes backing certain political factions, which has muddied the waters by tainting the whole industry”. This led to an inquiry into media ethics led by a retired judge (SANEF, 2019b).

2.5 Conclusion

The South African media landscape has evolved significantly under a democratic constitution that ensures media freedom. Despite three decades of democracy, the country continues to struggle with the socio-economic legacies of colonialism and apartheid, resulting in a complex and often conflict-ridden transition. However, the media faces numerous challenges, including political interference, economic pressures, and threats to journalists’ safety. The decline in media freedom, as evidenced by South Africa's drop in the World Press Freedom Index, highlights the strained relationship between the media and the ruling elite. Additionally, the shift of advertising revenue to digital platforms has further weakened the financial stability of news organizations. Despite these challenges, the media remains vital to South Africa's democracy, exposing corruption and societal wrongdoing while navigating political and economic pressures. The media still reflects racial colonial and apartheid legacies, with skewed ownership which limits its ability to represent marginalized communities. Concerns about public trust, editorial independence, and media ethics continue to challenge the industry, highlighting the need for sustainable solutions to ensure its resilience and integrity.

3. Theoretical framework

Kivunja (2018) describes a theoretical framework as a structured set of concepts and ideas that help explain, analyze, and interpret phenomena in a field. It provides a foundation for research by guiding hypothesis formulation, defining key terms, and establishing relationships between variables (Kivunja, 2018). Swanson, cited by Kivunja, states that “the theoretical framework is the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study” (2018, p.46), while Varpio et al. describes it as "scaffolding a study" (2020, p.990). Essentially, it serves as a lens through which researchers can view and make sense of data and findings.

This theoretical framework examines structural violence and the hierarchy of influences model to address the complex problem of violence experienced by journalists. Using a sociology of media lens allows for studying the social context in which journalism is performed (Reese, 2007).

South Africa's legacy of apartheid and colonialism has left it burdened by structural and personal forms of violence (Friedman & Van Wyk, 2012). The hierarchy of influences model for example can help us understand how individual journalists' biases shape their reporting, the media organisation they choose and how news outlets operate within societal ideological constraints (Reese, 2007). It's also important to remember that models cannot capture all the intricate interconnections that shape the media but rather simplify, highlight, suggest, and organise these intricate interconnections (Reese, 2007).

3.1 Conceptualization of Violence in Journalism Studies

When conceptualising violence against journalists, the prevalent approach in journalism studies research has been to define violence in terms of the physical and psychological threats faced by journalists (Brambila & Hughes, 2019). Organisations like Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Freedom House (FH), and the International News Safety Institute (INSI) index physical attacks on media (Brambila & Hughes, 2019; Frère 2014). At the time of conducting this research, South Africa ranked 38th on the World Press Freedom Index, with a "satisfactory" rating (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). RSF defines press freedom as the ability of journalists to operate without threats to their physical and mental safety (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). However, behind the veneer of this ranking lies a violent context from which media content emanates (Friedman & Van Wyk, 2012).

Physical attacks are easier to measure, but this approach narrowly defines violence against journalists, ignoring other forms of violence that influence daily journalism practice. The different monitoring organisations use varying criteria to evaluate press freedom risks (Frère, 2014). RSF uses 43 indicators, including physical violence and state repression, while FH addresses extra-legal intimidation tactics (Frère, 2014). These reports, while valuable, document numerous incidents but often miss more intricate and subtler forms of violence that impede journalists' freedom of expression (Frère, 2014). They also overlook risks faced by journalists who deviate from their organisation's editorial stance or highlight wrongdoing by the media

organisations' strategic partners (Frère, 2014). Frère (2014) argues that oversimplifying media professionals' circumstances leads to failures in developing effective risk mitigation strategies.

Brambila and Hughes (2019) argue that focusing on physical attacks overlooks the structural, cultural, and symbolic forms of violence journalists experience. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power that results in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation (2017). Waisbord (2002) defines anti-press violence as attacks through verbal intimidation and physical harm. UNESCO (2016) includes violations like kidnappings, arbitrary detention, torture, intimidation, harassment, and destruction of material. Araújo (2024) defines it as unwanted and unsolicited behaviors that are abusive or aggressive, occurring online or offline, and may be verbal or physical. For this study, violence against journalists includes acts of aggression or harm due to their work, encompassing physical attacks, threats, intimidation, censorship, legal repression, online harassment, and psychological attacks.

3.2 Structural Violence in Journalism

Extensive research attributes South Africa's violence to the legacy of apartheid and colonialism, characterized by brutalization and a culture of violence (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2009). This legacy has normalized violence as a means of resolving conflicts (Friedman & Van Wyk, 2012). Friedman and Van Wyk say, "structural violence was a direct result of the violence of the system of apartheid" (2012, p. 140). Apartheid exemplifies structural violence, using social engineering to benefit one group while disadvantaging others (Harris & Vermaak, 2015; Friedman & Van Wyk, 2012). This structural violence was perpetuated through direct violence, conditioning generations to respond with violence (Harris & Vermaak, 2015).

Johan Galtung, a key theorist of structural violence, argued that focusing only on direct violence is "trite" and too narrow, as violence affects the body and "soul" through lies, brainwashing, indoctrination and threats (1969, p.169). Direct violence includes physical and psychological abuse, such as assaults, murder, harassment, and intimidation directed at journalists (Brambila & Hughes, 2019). Structural violence, on the other hand, is systemic and indirect, embedded in social, political, and economic systems, perpetuating inequalities without a clear perpetrator (Galtung, 1969; Galtung, 1990; Brambila & Hughes, 2019). Galtung (1969) describes structural violence as silent and static, embedded in societal structures. It is characterized by economic

inequality and vulnerability, manifesting as precarious work (Brambila & Hughes 2019), which is evident in the rise in freelance journalism in South Africa (Chiumbu & Munoriyarwa 2024).

Intersectionality helps explain how race, gender, class, and age contribute to different forms of discrimination (Vieira, 2023). The intersection of gender with newsroom cultures and journalism's norms has racialized dimensions (Banjac, 2024). Journalism relies on a white, patriarchal system that shapes its norms and standards, reflecting a narrow ideological perspective aimed at a white, male, middle-class audience (Banjac, 2024). This system socializes journalists based on the dominant group—white, male, and elite—while marginalizing others' experiences (Banjac, 2024). Consequently, black journalists often suppress their identities to conform to professional ideals rooted in whiteness and homogeneity, promoting a middle-class mentality over diverse realities (Banjac, 2024). Additionally, journalists face microaggressions, physical violence, and sexual harassment at the intersection of race, gender, class, and age (Banjac, 2024).

3.2.1 Cultural Violence

Cultural violence refers to aspects of culture that justify or legitimize direct and structural violence, making it appear normal or acceptable (Galtung, 1990; van der Merwe, 2013). Galtung (1990) explains that cultural violence changes the "moral color" of an act from wrong to acceptable through societal norms and values. This process can make acts of violence or oppression seem acceptable in certain contexts. Cultural elements such as symbols, language, art, religion, and ideology can perpetuate harm and discrimination by embedding values that support violence (Galtung, 1990). Cultural violence operates at a deeper level within societal norms, making it less visible but equally harmful (Galtung, 1990). It serves as the underlying justification for direct and structural violence (Galtung, 1990).

Brambila and Hughes (2019) argue that an expanded definition of violence against journalists should include structural violence and its reinforcing systems of patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and exploitative capitalism. In journalism, race, class, and gender are prevailing forms of exclusion and subordination (Banjac, 2024). Despite the rise of women in news work, newsroom culture often challenges work-life balance, especially for working mothers, and upholds a gender hierarchy where sexual harassment is used as control (North, 2009). Patriarchy, defined as the “systematic domination, oppression, and exploitation of

women”, manifests as normalized aggression (Brambila & Hughes, 2019, p.4). Women journalists face a patriarchal system that legitimizes and perpetuates violent conditions and behavior, resulting in financial and health burdens (Brambila & Hughes, 2019). This includes direct and indirect sexism, gendered routines, male-dominated public spheres, and cultural ideologies that normalize sexism (Blumell & Mulupi, 2024). Women often face career limitations and gender-segregated news beats (Brambila & Hughes, 2019; Topić & Bruegmann, 2021). Newsrooms continue to embody a masculine culture, even when women are in leadership positions, with politics and business beats dominated by men (Topić & Bruegmann, 2021).

In the United States and Canada, journalists from minority groups, often feel pressured to distance themselves from their racial identity and personal experiences, adapting to the professional norms of their organisation (Nishikawa et al., 2009). This creates a false sense of inclusion, as minority journalists are pressured to avoid advocacy journalism and stories that highlight minority complexities (Nishikawa et al., 2009). Brambila and Hughes (2019) argue that this is a form of white supremacy, causing similar harm to patriarchy. These harms include being undermined, paternalized, pigeonholed, accused of bias, needing to work harder for recognition, and feeling culturally isolated (Brambila & Hughes, 2019). Further research is needed on how structural violence affects ethnic minorities, other marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ journalists (Brambila & Hughes, 2019), and previously oppressed groups based on the context.

3.3 Conclusion

Structural violence, rooted in systemic inequalities in social, political, and economic systems, profoundly affects individuals by perpetuating poverty, marginalization, and oppression (Galtung, 1990). Journalism, as a microcosm of society, reflects dominant societal norms, values, and knowledge systems related to gender, race, and class (Banjac, 2024). Viewing violence solely as a threat to journalism as a collective body obscures how the institution of journalism and organisational level forces produce violence for journalists, especially those with intersectional identities created in social systems that discriminate against them (Banjac, 2024). Addressing violence requires tackling exclusion, harm, and marginalization based on gender, race, class, and other power structures (Banjac, 2024). By journalism, being an institution that socialises journalists within a journalistic framework focused on the ideologies of dominant

social groups ie. “elite, male, white”, and an advancement process that overlooks the perspectives and lived experiences of marginalised journalists, it turns into an unsafe environment for those with limited epistemic power to reshape it (Banjac, 2024, p. 358). Journalists have to navigate these forces at macro and institutional levels, while confronted by discrimination such as racism, sexism and classism and other forms of aggression at the individual and organisational levels (Banjac, 2024). These multiple layers of discrimination stem from broader institutional levels and daily environments and relationships. These multiple layers of discrimination come from broader institutional level forces, the environments and daily interactions.

3.4 Hierarchy of influences Model

Shoemaker and Reese (2016) introduced the hierarchy of influences model to organise and understand the forces shaping news content. The gatekeeping theory and the hierarchy of influences model identify five levels of influence: individual, routines, organisational, social institution, and social systems (Blumell & Mulupi, 2024). While both frameworks engage complexity and recognize multiple sources of influence, the hierarchy of influences model suggests that these levels have varying strengths and impacts (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Joyce, Chacón, & Alves, 2022).

The hierarchy of influences model extends beyond journalism into media sociology, reflecting how a "mediated symbolic environment" - media content and practice - is constructed by individuals within social, occupational, institutional, and cultural contexts, particularly in journalism (Reese, 2007, p. 31). This model helps organise an “array of eclectic research by considering the level or perspective at which explanation is primarily sought” (Reese, 2007, p. 38). Reese explains that analyzing a media phenomenon with multiple causes that exist within a web of interacting forces involves emphasizing different levels of influence.

Media sociology provides a framework for understanding the complex dynamics in journalism, emphasizing the importance of multiple levels of influence, including individual journalists, organisational practices, cultural norms, and broader societal forces (Reese, 2007). This research focuses on how forces at the organisational, social institution, and social systems levels interact and influence individuals and routines.

Structural violence, embedded in social, political, and economic systems, influences journalism across various levels of the hierarchy of influences model. Reese and Shoemaker (2016) describe these levels as micro, meso, and macro, encompassing individual characteristics, work routines, organisational concerns, institutional issues, and larger social systems. The model explores how influences at different levels interact, highlighting the difference between structure and agency (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Media work involves individual agency, which is both limited by and facilitated by the surrounding structures (Reese & Shoemaker 2016). This is structuration - a sociology concept that says structures can be both constraining and enabling (Reese, 2007). Attributing more agency to individuals, places emphasis on personal traits influencing decision making, while focusing on macrostructures downplays individual agency (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

This research examines how different levels of influence interact and affect journalists and journalism practice. It adds to current research on the impact of violence at individual and routine levels by exploring its effects from organisational, social institution, and social systems levels. For example, the rise of social media (social level) and the platformization of news (institutional and organisational levels) blur the lines between journalists and content creators, presenting threats like digital hate mobs and online abuse (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). This also introduces algorithm-mediated messages and audience interactions through comments, affecting journalists and their routines (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

3.4.1 Individual level

The individual level of analysis encompasses "biographical, psychological, and sociological characteristics" such as "age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and class status" (Zamith, 2022, p. 88). These attributes can influence the news a journalist produces, as past experiences associated with these personal attributes may influence how they interpret issues and reporting focus (Zamith, 2022). At the individual level, journalists have agency and autonomy in exercising news judgment (Joyce et al., 2022), but they operate within a network of constraints (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). This independence is hemmed in by a variety of interconnected factors that operate at higher levels of the model (Joyce et al., 2022). Despite these constraints, individual journalists contribute to news by suggesting topics based on their predilections (Tanikawa, 2017).

The micro level includes journalists' training, attitudes, interests, socialization, and personal experiences (Tanikawa, 2017; Joyce, Chacón, & Alves, 2022; Reese, 2007). These factors shape how journalists perceive their roles and make decisions about news coverage (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). The individual level also highlights the diversity within the profession, even within the same national culture (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Rapid changes in the professional environment necessitate understanding how professional roles connect to larger structures, providing opportunities for journalists to adapt (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Personal experiences, such as cultural background, trauma exposure, education, personal interests, political beliefs, and identity, profoundly impact reporting (Engesser, 2017). This suggests that individual experiences, identity and backgrounds can shape the narratives journalists construct, influencing how stories are told and what aspects are highlighted. Individual characteristics may be more pronounced in certain types of news content such as features and opinion sections (Tanikawa, 2017).

3.4.2 Routine level

Reese and Shoemaker (2016) emphasize that journalistic routines are crucial in shaping how news is gathered, reported, and presented. Journalists often adhere to specific practices, norms, and expectations within their newsroom. These routines, which may not always involve conscious decision-making, are habitual and systematic practices within the production process (Joyce, Chacón, & Alves 2022). The routine level focuses on the behavioral patterns that define news work, including implicit rules and ritualized activities (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Power within organisations is exercised not just through instructions from leaders but by creating consistent practices that fulfill organisational needs, adjust to information sources, manage workflow, and provide structure (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

News routines serve both journalists and organisations but have been disrupted by digital trends and performance metrics, which are increasingly incorporated into media practice (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016; Bossio et al., 2024). The encroachment of the inescapable digital world means that now routines reflect the preferences, interests, and participation of audiences which can be monitored in real time (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Technology has transformed the ecosystem, intertwining values like transparency “drawing journalism out from its closed professional boundaries into greater transparency” (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016, p. 399). Journalistic routines

are influenced by organisational and institutional demands for increased connectivity and online engagement (Bossio et al., 2024). However, in response to violence against journalists, these routines must adapt to prioritize safety, resilience, and effective reporting. This adaptation includes training to handle attacks, involving professionals such as lawyers, psychologists, and security experts for additional support, and collaborating with other journalists or news organisations (Bossio et al., 2024). The way newsrooms operate can inform integrating safety protocols into journalist routines, normalizing safety measures and having reporting mechanisms.

3.4.3 Organisational level

The organisational level encompasses influences from within the organisation, including managers, colleagues, media company owners, and both formal and informal policies (Joyce, Chacón & Alves, 2022; Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023). This level also considers the increasingly complex and unsettled environment, policies, and structures in which journalists work (Joyce, Chacón, & Alves, 2022). The boundaries of news organisations have become more fluid due to consolidation, cross-ownership, investment, and globalisation (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Despite these changes, different parts of the news organisation continue to function through social control (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Journalists learn organisational expectations through socialization, even without explicit efforts to shape their understanding (Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023).

News remains a socially constructed product of the organisation (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). However, the changing shape and fluid boundaries of news organisations have diffused news production, with journalists often operating remotely within smaller organisations connected to a larger parent company or spread across various platforms (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Furthermore, organisational hierarchies are often structured around age, race, gender, ethnicity, physical ability, sexuality, and religious affiliation, which are used to control workers (North, 2009). The organisational level can influence violence against journalists through policies on safety, support systems, resource allocation for things like training and culture and values on how seriously it takes threats.

3.4.4 Social Institutions

The social institution level examines external forces influencing media organisations, including government, advertisers, public relations, regulators, sources, audiences, and technology (Joyce, Chacón & Alves, 2022). This meso-level exists between society and organisations, where media institutions interact with economic, political, and cultural forces (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). It addresses concerns beyond individual organisations, focusing on the collective media institution (Zamith, 2022). Reese and Shoemaker (2016) note that while media institutions aim for coherence, they are not homogeneous and are often fragmented and polarized. As a larger institution, news media share common objectives like legitimacy, information access, and profit generation (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

Media institutions are influenced by their co-dependency with significant systemic actors such as government, private sector (Zamith, 2022), judiciary, political parties and public institutions. In the media-state power dynamic, power is exchanged in both directions, as they adapt to each other in a reciprocal process (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Mediatization, the process through which media shapes various societal aspects, including politics, culture and everyday life is evident at this level (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). The interdependence between media systems and other societal spheres demonstrates how media not only reflects but also actively contributes to changes in social structures and power dynamics (Joyce, Chacón, & Alves, 2022). Power dynamics are also reflected in the violence journalists experience from institutional actors, which has been normalized within the institution of journalism. The social institution level influences the political environment where political parties and government may use violence, intimidation and harassment to limit press freedom. Legal frameworks can provide strong protection for journalists affected by violence while social institutions can advocate for journalist safety. Societal attitudes towards journalists can influence the prevalence of violence against them.

3.4.5 The social system

The social system level is considered hegemonic because it impacts other levels and functions as an instrument of social control, enabling societal elites to sustain their power (Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023). Key questions at this level revolve around how media's symbolic content promotes the interests and power of specific groups through representations related to class, gender, or race (Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023). This level can be further divided into

cultural, ideological, economic, and political subcategories (Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023).

The cultural subcategory involves how people perceive themselves and develop their values and norms (Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023). The ideological subcategory, arguably the most significant, is linked to prevailing values and includes systems that enable those in power to maintain control (Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023). Ideology explains how the social system remains cohesive, as the classic contention suggests that media conveys ideas supporting those in power (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). When ideology is seen as the sum of the forces shaping society, reality can seem inevitable and ideology is indistinct, however, recognizing that social reality is manipulated makes it appear less harmless (Collins, Kinnally, & Sandoval, 2023). The economic subcategory acknowledges that media is intertwined with the fundamental economic system and relies on commercial support as part of the political economy of media (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016).

The social system level also includes global forces affecting media through globalization (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). A social systems factor influencing violence against journalists is the global shift towards populism, where news is mischaracterized as fake, and as part of populist rhetoric, misogyny is weaponized against women journalists (Miller, 2023). This shift impacts attitudes and perceptions of news, journalists, and their organisations at the social system level. Crucial to journalism safety in South Africa is that in societies where the political system fails to uphold the rule of law, crime, corruption, violence and human rights violations often pose significant threats (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

3.4.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the hierarchy of influences model is the preferred framework for this research because it situates journalists within broader social, economic, political, and technological systems (Zamith, 2022). These “systems and structures in turn influence how journalistic actors think and how they go about their work” (Zamith, 2022, p. 87). The model does not establish causal relationships but helps us understand that journalism is influenced by more than just journalists and their organisations (Zamith, 2022). It acknowledges multiple factors impacting journalists' experiences and responses, recognizing influences from personal beliefs to broader contexts.

By considering various levels of influence, the model enhances understanding of how violence affects journalists, including their reporting practices, mental health, and job performance. Miller (2023) argues that harassment of journalists should be studied at both micro and macro levels, as intersectional identities at micro level and macro-level forces like press freedom and political influence interact with journalists' safety and autonomy (Miller, 2023; Hamada, 2021). Miller suggests that “hostility towards the press is rooted in significantly deeper societal systems and contexts that cannot be ignored (2023, p. 1239). Violence affects journalists in unique ways based on their intersecting identities (Banjac, 2024) and is intertwined with larger structures and systems (Miller, 2023).

In the absence of a specific theoretical framework for studying the nature, effects, and analysis of violence against journalists, as scholars have called for (Miller, 2023), the hierarchy of influences model serves as a placeholder. It facilitates the exploration of the interplay between individual agency and external pressures on news production (Zamith, 2022), offering a richer analysis of the challenges journalists face in violent environments.

4. Literature Review

This section reviews literature pertinent to this research, providing context and a comprehensive yet critical examination of prior studies (Hofstee, 2013). A literature review establishes the theoretical foundation for the research being performed, its significance, and its place within the broader academic field (Hofstee, 2013) of journalism safety. This section addresses the concept of journalism safety, violence against journalists, and its impact on their autonomy and media freedom. The context in which journalism is practiced also heightens their vulnerability. The literature review must also contextualize the South African media landscape and the environment in which journalists operate. This literature review considers the physical, psychological, digital, and financial threats faced by journalists as institutional actors. These threats to journalists' safety and autonomy arise from forces at various levels of the hierarchy of influences model. Given the significant role journalists play in modern societies, their professional autonomy has historically been fundamental to both press freedom and democracy (Hamada, 2022).

4.1 Journalism safety

Journalism safety is defined as “the extent to which journalists can perform their work-related tasks without facing threats to their physical, psychological, digital, and financial integrity and well-being” (Slatcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1214). This definition encompasses both material and perceptual threats to journalists' occupational safety. Threats are “actions and conditions that increase the risk of physical, psychological, digital, and financial harm to journalists as human beings and as institutional actors” (Slatcheva-Petkova et al., 2023, p. 1215). Galtung asserts that “threats of violence are also violence” (1990, p. 292). Although different types of threats exist, there is significant overlap and interplay between physical, digital, and financial threats, all contributing to psychological safety (Slatcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). This indicates that violence towards journalists comes from multiple directions.

This research supports Brambila and Hughes' (2019) view that the lens for considering safety and violence against journalists should include structural, cultural, and symbolic violence. While this study explores direct physical and verbal violence and structural violence, it includes a focus on gender and race, and not pay inequalities in the newsroom, which can be a potential area for future research.

The impact of violence varies significantly among journalists based on region, area of practice, and identity (Waisbord, 2022; Chen et al., 2020; Hiltunen, Suuronen & Pöyhtäri, 2024). Similar to social violence affecting certain citizen groups disproportionately, not all journalists face the same level of vulnerability (Waisbord, 2022). Investigative journalists exposing misconduct, corruption, and collusion are particularly vulnerable, as are journalists targeted based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality (Waisbord, 2022; Posetti et al., 2024). Those fitting multiple vulnerable characteristics face increased risk (Posetti et al., 2024; Waisbord, 2022). Journalists critical of those in power or covering conflict, corruption, and crime are especially at risk (Media Defense, 2023). This research suggests that journalists covering everyday events are also vulnerable, as reporting on wrongdoing is part of everyday news in South Africa, not just investigative journalism.

4.2 Freedom of expression, autonomy and safety

Violence against journalists can impact their autonomy, which those wishing to silence them aim to limit. This violence can lead to a chilling effect, where journalists self-censor out of fear or a catalyzing effect, where they persist despite threats (Ozawa et al., 2024). A chilling effect erodes

journalistic accountability and reduces audience trust (Miller, 2023; Posetti et al., 2021). Despite declining editorial rigor in some publications, trust in South African media remains relatively steady (Roper, 2024). Violence against journalists harms democratic deliberation, press freedom, and public access to information (Miller, 2023). In a democracy, journalists' autonomy and safety are crucial for providing truthful and unbiased information (Hamada, 2022).

Hamada (2022) categorizes countries along a continuum: one end with strong support for a free press and minimal interference, the other with state-controlled journalism, and the middle with journalists in conflict with those in power. Both overbearing and weak states pose challenges to critical journalism (Hamada, 2022). Most South Africans believe their media is "somewhat or completely free," (Mpako & Ndoma, 2024, p.2) but this autonomy is threatened by forces in the environment across the hierarchy of influences model.

The state is a primary perpetrator of violence against journalists, creating hostile environments that hinder effective reporting (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023; Hamada, 2022). This includes limiting journalistic freedoms, promoting ideologies that denigrate journalism, and targeting journalists through imprisonment or violence (Waisbord, 2022; Hamada, 2022). Journalists investigating government actions are also targeted by private interests and criminal elements (Waisbord, 2022). Increasing violence forces journalists to struggle for autonomy, a key element of professionalism (Nygren, 2012). Hamada's study shows that high autonomy can coexist with significant threats, suggesting South African journalists can experience high autonomy despite daily violence.

Hamada's (2022) research shows that journalists' autonomy is complex and context-dependent, influenced by various forms of violence and inequality. Journalism norms and standards vary by country, especially in roles and news values based on national traditions and culture (Nygren, 2012). Role conceptualization can be active and participatory, neutral and informative, or interpretative (Nygren, 2012). Active journalists seek greater autonomy and service to society (Nygren, 2012).

In post-apartheid South Africa, the media landscape promotes independence from government control, highlighting a shift towards media freedom and autonomy (Radebe, 2021). However, this has led to differing views on the media's role in democracy (Radebe, 2021). The media plays a watchdog role, exposing corruption and abuse of power, with public support for holding the

government accountable (Mpako & Ndoma, 2024). Despite this, societal pressure to protect journalists may be lacking, as seen in public harassment of journalists perceived as acting against group interests (Posetti et al., 2024).

Threats to safety stem from power dynamics between journalists and political elites or social groups asserting power and in how journalists respond when faced with unsafe conditions (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Journalists are targeted for their potential to reveal abuses of power and their perceived power to sway public opinion, with women and minority journalists facing additional challenges because they represent cultural challenges to oppressive systems that favour specific groups or identities (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Journalistic autonomy is influenced by political dynamics, cultures of impunity, and democracy deficits (Hamada, 2022). Professional autonomy in journalism is complex and context-dependent, reflecting the relationship between journalism and power (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

Hamada's study did not identify universal determinants of autonomy and safety due to varying perceptions and practices. However, it found interrelated factors working together: press freedom, democracy, journalists' perceptions of political influences, their autonomy, and their safety (Hamada, 2022). Changes in one correlate with changes in the others (Hamada, 2022). While Hamada's research does not support a generalized trend, it shows that journalists have less autonomy where they experience high levels of violence and feel unsafe (Miller, 2023). This suggests that declining safety compromises journalists' autonomy, negatively impacting their perceived influence on the political process, press freedom, and democracy. Persistent violence against journalists in South Africa could harm its democracy.

In the hierarchy of influences model, forces at different levels impact the individual, who also influences other levels. Press freedom and democracy are at the macro-level (societal level), while perceived political influence is at the micro-level, shaping journalists' autonomy and safety (Hamada, 2022). Journalists experience autonomy in relation to external power and internally within their news organisation (Nygren, 2012). Internal autonomy is influenced by financial pressures, relations with editors and owners, and ethical standards (Nygren, 2012). In the hierarchy of influences model, external power is at the social institution and social systems levels, while internal autonomy is shaped by organisational level forces.

4.3 Violence during reporting

South Africa faces numerous social ills, including high rates of violent crime, rape, gender-based violence, child abuse, drug and human trafficking, mob justice, and police brutality, which negatively impact individuals and society (Radu, Morwe & Bird, 2012). Witnessing scenes of devastation, interviewing victims and first responders in the midst of tragedy, and recounting the despairing loss of life can profoundly impact journalists' wellbeing (SANE, 2024a).

Studies on journalism-related trauma have focused on war and disasters. Feinstein's study compared the psychological distress of war reporters and local journalists in Mexico, finding that local journalists showed more severe symptoms due to constant exposure to violence (Feinstein, 2013). Another study that looks at the impact of frequent trauma exposure on journalists is a Simpson and Boggs (1999) study on newspaper reporters which found a high prevalence of trauma exposure and PTSD symptoms among journalists covering violent events. These experiences of repeated exposure to traumatic events may leave what McMahon describes as "hidden scars, unseen lesions on the psyche that have imprinted themselves irreparably" (2010, 40).

Journalism-related trauma is often studied through examining symptoms of PTSD, compassion fatigue, burnout, and secondary traumatization (Hill, Luther & Slocum, 2020). Charles (2020) introduced continuous traumatic stress (CTS) to study local journalists in Colombia, acknowledging that trauma exposure is both a present reality and an expectation for the future rather than something that is in the past. It takes into account the political and social realities, where trauma is generated in the environment repeatedly and progressively (Charles, 2020). Journalists with CTS experience chronic and severe trauma, requiring post-trauma recovery (Charles, 2020). This is useful when considering frequent trauma exposure of journalists doing everyday reporting in a violent society.

What is clear is that repeated exposure to trauma can also lead to life-changing consequences such as mental breakdowns, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, avoidance, anxiety, depression, hyperarousal, and difficulties functioning at work and socially (Simpson & Boggs, 1999; Dworznik & Garvey, 2019; Buchanan & Keats, 2011). It can also impact how individuals perceive themselves, others, and the world (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019).

Journalists in South Africa work in what the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation describe as a violent society with high crime levels (2009). They face violence and are exposed to traumatic stories, affecting their physical and mental health (SANEF, 2024a). They also experience growing criminal attacks, becoming victims of assault, robbery, and victimization (SANEF, 2023a). Frequent exposure to violence harms journalists psychologically (Feinstein, Audet, & Waknine, 2014). Despite this, extensive research on the impact of violence on South African journalists is lacking. This study provides qualitative insights into how local journalists are affected.

4.4 Online violence

Digital technologies have greatly benefited journalism, but they also expose journalists to online violence (Waisbord, 2022; Chen et al., 2020; Hiltunen, Suuronen & Pöyhtäri, 2024). Harassment thrives online due to easy access to journalists (Miller, 2023) and the online disinhibition effect, where anonymity emboldens harassers (Chen et al., 2020; Simões, Alcantara, & Carona, 2021). Journalists face hate speech, threats, and gendered attacks, with female journalists disproportionately targeted (SANEF, 2022; Posetti et al., 2024). Women journalists, like women in society, face harassment, assaults, and abuse in their daily lives (Simões, Alcantara, & Carona, 2021; Araújo, 2024; Miller, 2023). While male journalists also encounter abuse, the harmful content aimed at women is often gendered (Simões, Alcantara, & Carona, 2021). Women face the same dangers as all journalists but are additionally targeted for being women in public roles (Miller, 2023; Chen et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020; Simões, Alcantara, & Carona, 2021).

Online violence against women journalists fosters a culture of impunity (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022) with violence used to silence, shame, and undermine their credibility, stifles public interest journalism, ends careers and robs society of valuable voices and insights (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). A global survey found that 73% of women journalists experienced online violence, with marginalized groups facing the highest rates (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Black, Jewish, Arab, Asian, Indigenous and lesbian women journalists experienced the highest rates and most intense effects of online violence (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). This type of online violence is where “racism, religious bigotry, antisemitism, sectarianism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia intersect with misogyny and sexism” (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022, p. 11).

Platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram are common places for these attacks, with Facebook deemed less safe (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Perpetrators often go unpunished (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022) and social media companies often fail to remove harmful content, prioritizing market share and hide behind claims of promoting free speech while violating human rights of victims (Daniels & Posetti, 2022). Political actors add to the mix by frequently instigating online harassment and fomenting an environment where anonymous faceless figures, conspiracy theorists, and digital mobs attack journalists (Daniels & Posetti, 2022).

Online violence against women journalists often translates to offline harassment and assaults (Posetti et al., 2020). Another global survey shows that the troubling misogyny and violence against women journalists on digital platforms, which often comes with threats of physical harm, is acted upon in physical life (offline) (Posetti, Harrison, & Waisbord, 2020). Twenty percent of women journalists surveyed reported experiencing offline harassment and assaults that they believed to be linked to digital violence that they received (Posetti, Harrison, & Waisbord, 2020). Furthermore, surveys indicate that journalists feel less safe due to social media (Chen et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020). Many women journalists are leaving the profession or avoiding frontline reporting due to online violence, and journalism students feel discouraged from entering the field (Posetti et al., 2020). This crisis also reduces online engagement from women sources and audiences (Posetti et al., 2020).

4.5 Conclusion

The safety of journalists is not a simple problem because journalists face multiple threats to their safety through various forms of violence including physical, psychological, symbolic and structural. This research explores the multidirectional forms of violence experienced by journalists to consolidate how they engage with it and how it affects the way they do their work.

5. Methodology and research design

This section outlines the methodology used to explore how journalists engage with violence in their work. It describes the research design, techniques, and methods guiding the study. The section explains the use of semi-structured interviews as the qualitative method to gather data on

journalists' experiences with violence, their coping strategies, and support mechanisms. It also details the research design procedures and sampling techniques for participant selection.

5.1 Qualitative Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to examine whether the persistent presence of violence influences how journalists in South Africa practice journalism, their coping mechanisms, and the support systems they use. Qualitative research focuses on individuals, groups, contexts, or cultures to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena (Wright et al., 2016). It encompasses various methods to explore real-world phenomena to produce in-depth knowledge (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Qualitative approaches were chosen for this study because they provide a deeper understanding of specific phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing them (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). Common qualitative methods include focus groups, observations, and semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Qualitative research is iterative, using feedback and results from previous cycles to enhance subsequent ones (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This flexibility is particularly useful for the exploratory nature of this study.

5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study because they encourage participants to share their perspectives and experiences while allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions (Dworznik-Hoak, 2020). This method keeps interviews focused while giving researchers the freedom to explore relevant ideas that arise (Adams, 2010). Semi-structured interviews offer both comparability and the discovery of unexpected knowledge (Banjac & Hanusch, 2022). They provide personal narratives on how journalists engage with different forms of violence (Seely, 2019).

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore journalists' experiences and actions related to the violence they encounter. Semi-structured interviews are useful as a data collection method for gaining insights into individual participants' perspectives rather than seeking a broad understanding of phenomena (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Unlike unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews require a guide of questions that address the research question (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The guide provides structure and direction while allowing the conversation to flow naturally (Adams, 2010). It includes open-ended questions with the option to probe further (Adams, 2010). The researcher developed a set of open-ended questions to ensure the interviews were conducted similarly and to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The study's purpose was described at the start of the interviews, which began with biographical questions such as professional background, age, and gender.

5.3 Research Design

The research design is the overall strategy or blueprint outlining how the study will be conducted to answer the research question (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This study used semi-structured interviews to gather participants' experiences, feelings, and knowledge about the phenomena under investigation, generating new knowledge and ideas for further exploration. The research objective forms the basis for defining the study population (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), which in this case, aims to understand the impact of various forms of violence on everyday journalism practice and journalists themselves.

5.4 Sampling

Sampling needs to balance individuals with deep knowledge and those offering fresh perspectives to the topic (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Sampling is also a product of resources such as time and funding available (Varpio et al., 2020). The researcher used non-probability sampling, where selection is based on the researcher's judgment rather than random selection (Tongco, 2007) and where not all members of the population have an opportunity to be selected (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik 2021). Purposive sampling was used to select participants with specific criteria (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, such as everyday news reporting experience in South Africa for a minimum of three years. While purposive sampling can be biased, it can also yield reliable data if managed carefully (Tongco, 2007). One participant was included through snowball sampling, where an informant recommended another (Tongco, 2007). This method expands the network of informants, unlike purposive sampling, which selects based on specific criteria (Tongco, 2007).

Ten local journalists with at least three years of experience were invited via email, and eight participated in hour-long virtual interviews. Typically, news stories are prioritised differently within the journalism hierarchy (Stahel, 2023). Journalists who report on political matters – often referred to as hard news, which includes coverage of political leaders, significant societal scandals - are usually ranked at the top of the newsroom hierarchy (Stahel, 2023). By exemplifying the democratic principles of holding those in power accountable, political journalists have greater potential for influencing social democracy and affecting change (Stahel, 2023). As a result, they tend to be more heard and acknowledged (Stahel, 2023). Consequently, some of the most famous “celebrity journalists” are political journalists (Stahel, 2023).

Political reporting was common to all the participants, however, due to shrinking newsrooms and the loss of beat reporting in newsrooms, more journalists are doing general reporting (Daniels, 2018). Among the participants, two are the exceptions. Although they have extensive experience as general reporters, one is currently an investigative journalist while the other is focused on court and legal reporting. The eight journalists who participated in the research have an average of 14 years of experience working in journalism. The group is made up of journalists who have worked for different leading media organisations across different media types. They are all still practicing as journalists and are regarded as senior in their respective newsrooms.

The sample consists of five journalists who identify as women and three who identify as men. As the literature review shows, female journalists are targeted with highly sexualized threats and a focus on their physical attributes more than men particularly online. Without opposing the notion that gender differences exist for men and women as journalists in general, and without undermining the concerning experiences of women, men often do not receive recognition for their vulnerability and need for protection (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022). There is limited systematic research specifically addressing threats and violence against male journalists (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022) However, research examining both male and female experiences for example with sexual harassment is emerging (Westlund, Krøvel & Orgeret, 2022). This study’s sample therefore includes men and women journalists to gain the nuanced perspective of both because all attacks on journalists threaten journalism practice.

Virtual one-on-one interviews were conducted to ensure confidentiality, trust and discretion (Brinkmann, 2020). While face-to-face interviews were traditionally preferred, virtual interviews

offer flexibility and broader geographical access, despite challenges such as quicker fatigue which can be mitigated through limiting and sticking to set times (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez & Joffe, 2022). All these factors were considered as part of the conceptual framework which operationalised the research design (Kivunja, 2018).

5.5 Data Analysis

The data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, chosen for its flexibility and accessibility, especially for early-career researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas themes are abstract and defined as “coherent integration of the disparate pieces of data that constitute the findings” (2013, p. 402). Thematic analysis identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within qualitative data (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest six phases of analysis when using the thematic analysis approach: 1) extensive reading and review of the data while noting initial idea, 2) coding aspects that stand out and collecting all the data related to each potential theme, 3) searching for themes 4) reviewing themes 5) naming and defining each theme and evaluating the overall story the analysis is telling and 6) producing the report which includes choosing compelling extracts, conducting a final analysis and relating the analysis back to the research question and literature. Thematic analysis can be used within different theoretical frameworks and is not tied to any pre-existing framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis of the data was guided by the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews, which were designed to answer questions within the overarching research question. Themes emerged from searching across the data set to identify patterns of meaning.

The analysis process began with the semi-structured interviews, followed by transcribing the recordings, which provided another opportunity to develop familiarity with the data. Identifiable traits, including media organisations, were removed from the data analysis except for gender and length of service. Biographical questions about participants' journalism experience, motivations, and reasons for continuing in the profession were asked to establish rapport and understand their resilience in facing threats.

The coding process involved manually grouping the data into meaningful groups by working through the entire data set to identify repeated aspects. Different color highlighters indicated potential patterns, which were collated based on their color along with vivid extracts from individual transcripts. The different codes were then organised into potential themes along with the extracts. These were organised into overarching themes and sub-themes. The potential themes were reviewed to evaluate which were candidate themes, which needed to be collapsed into one, broken down further, or were sub-themes. The themes were also evaluated for relevance and accuracy in representing the data set. The selected themes were then refined and named. The process concluded with a final analysis and write-up of the report, telling the complex experiences journalists have with violence, including in their own words.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

This research followed the ethical guidelines of the University of the Witwatersrand, with ethics approval obtained from the relevant committee. Research was conducted based on respect, beneficence, and justice to protect participants from harm (Belmont Report, 1978).

Participants willingly joined the study and signed consent forms developed by the researcher. Informed consent ensured participants understood the study and potential risks (Xu et al., 2020; Belmont Report, 1978). Consent was also obtained to meet legal and ethical obligations under South African regulations (National Department of Health, 2024). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, in recognition of their autonomy. Although the study was low risk, a distress protocol was developed due to the references to violence.

An information sheet provided an overview of the project and explained how personal information would be handled. However, absolute anonymity is not guaranteed because due to certain information provided in the interview, the participants identity may be evident, which they have been informed about in the consent form. Recorded interviews, transcripts, and consent forms are stored in a password-protected folder on a secure computer. Maintaining confidentiality and protecting research data is crucial to safeguarding participants' privacy and rights (Kaiser, 2009; Adams et al., 2021).

5.7 Research Questions

The research question is the problem a researcher plans to investigate (Kivunja, 2018). It, along with the hypothesis, needs to be addressed by the theoretical framework. To explore how journalists engage with violence, their coping strategies, and support systems, participants were interviewed around three key areas.

Hypothesis: Journalists working in everyday news face multiple threats of violence from multiple sources which impacts them and their routines.

Research Questions:

- In what ways do journalists in South Africa experience violence while reporting on everyday events?
- How do these experiences of violence impact their wellbeing and work practices?
- What coping strategies and support mechanisms do they utilize in response to this violence?

These questions aim to understand how violence impacts journalists and journalism practice. Recognizing these threats helps develop better safety protocols and support systems for journalists. Violence against journalists can suppress free speech and limit public access to information, making it vital to advocate for press freedom. Understanding this dynamic also highlights how high levels of indirect violence can lead to less critical coverage of important issues, weakening reporting and harming society. Insights from these questions can inform policies to protect journalists and promote a media landscape that supports their wellbeing. Analyzing how violence affects journalism can also provide insights into broader societal issues such as conflict, power dynamics, and human rights.

5.8 Conclusion

To answer the research question on how exposure to violent events affects journalists and their practice of journalism, this research used semi-structured interviews to explore and analyse how violence affects journalists and journalism practice. Through recalling their experiences, participants outline the nature of the violence, its impact as observed by them, how it affects their journalism practice, their coping strategies and the support resources they have access to and utilize. The data that has been collected has been analysed and reflects distinct themes. The themes that have emerged which are discussed in the following section can be outlined as

follows: journalists' motivations for continuing to work in the field in spite of violence; the different forms of violence journalists working in everyday news experience; the emotional and physical impact of the violence on them and those related to them; how violence intersects with race, gender and misogyny; journalists' coping strategies; how violence impacts journalism practice and the role of the organisation.

6. Discussion and Analysis

This analysis highlights that journalism, often seen as the cornerstone of democracy, is a profession filled with significant risks and challenges. Interviews with participants provided detailed and personal accounts of the various forms of violence and challenges journalists, especially women, face. This discussion weaves together interview responses with analyses of each response area.

The responses reveal that violence against journalists comes from multiple directions, highlighting the multifaceted nature of violence in everyday reporting in South Africa. Both direct and indirect forms of violence are considered. This discussion includes personal accounts from participants and focuses on how the hierarchy of influences model and the concept of structural violence help us understand the challenges journalists face.

This section also presents participants' experiences with direct intimidation and physical attacks, recollections of situations where their safety was threatened or when they were assaulted. Offline violence occurred outside newsrooms during events like service delivery protests, political unrest, criminal activity reporting, lawsuits, and political rallies. Participants experienced physical and verbal assaults and multiple dangerous situations. Online hostility, insults, and abuse occurred during occupational tasks like posting on social media, providing news updates and from comments on individual journalists' and news organisations' posts. Four participants trended online, attracting thousands of posts including abuse.

The discussion also covers violence in the newsroom, with several participants reporting psychological violence from managers, often linked to commercial pressures. This research explores how journalists cope with harassment and the resources available from their news organisations. The qualitative content analysis includes these aspects to provide a comprehensive understanding of the sprawling nature of violence faced by journalists.

6.1 Motivation for Choosing Journalism

What follows is an exploration of why journalists pursue their profession despite its inherent risks. Understanding these motivations helps contextualize the threats they face, as their commitment to ethical reporting and social justice can make them targets for those seeking to suppress their stories or manipulate narratives. Journalism often attracts individuals driven by a deep sense of purpose and a desire to make a difference.

Self-determination theory differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Pjesivac, 2017). Intrinsic motivation is driven by the inherent rewards of the activity, while extrinsic motivation seeks external rewards or avoids negative consequences (Amabile et al., 1994). Motivation is at the individual level of the hierarchy of influences model and can influence topics, reporting, and storytelling.

Participants' intrinsic motivations include a passion for storytelling, commitment to social justice, personal experiences, fascination with news, and inspiration from role models. One participant said, “I knew from the age of 12 this is what I was going to do... and Noeleen Maholwana-Sangqu was a newsreader I greatly admired”. Another stated, “I love storytelling and believe that words have the power to help people, especially in South Africa where we are their last resort.”

A strong commitment to social justice is another significant motivator. One participant, initially interested in psychology, turned to journalism to champion social justice, motivated by a desire to expose corruption and fight for a better society. Another, influenced by a political family background, said, “I was largely motivated by political events but also socio-economic events within the community that I am from.”

Some participants were driven by an interest in current affairs and a commitment to holding those in power accountable. One said, “I have always been taken with the narrative of what was happening in the country, particularly because of our country’s history.” Others joined journalism through internships or as a second choice but grew to deeply enjoy it.

These responses suggest intrinsic motivations, as participants are driven by passion and interest in their work. There are also extrinsic motivations, such as goal achievement and job popularity (Amabile et al., 1994; Pjesivac, 2017). One participant noted, “People join journalism because

they actually want to change the world... but as time goes on, you realize what you are fighting is a losing battle.” In transitional societies, real-world experiences can moderate intrinsic motivations and the desire to work in journalism (Pjesivac, 2017).

Pjesivac’s (2017) study on what motivates students to study journalism in Serbia – a transitional country - shows that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are necessary for working in journalism within Serbia. The study revealed that strong extrinsic motivations include building the country, holding the government accountable, fighting injustice, and realizing democratic ideals, reflecting the press’s normative role as a watchdog. Studying the motivations of these participants suggest for South African journalists, the history of the country, the politics and socio-economic conditions as forces at the social system level have shaped the attitudes and motivations of participants and how they conceptualize their role.

The desire to contribute to society and effect change is a powerful motivator. Whether driven by storytelling, social justice, personal experiences, role models, or a desire to make a difference, these motivations provide the resilience and determination needed to continue telling important stories and giving a voice to those who need it most, even at the risk of harm.

6.2 Physical Violence and Threats

Physical violence against journalists can range from assaults and abductions to killings (UNESCO, 2024). Offline abuse, including verbal and physical forms, which typically occurs during coverage of events like protests, political campaigns, court proceedings, or sports (Araújo, 2024). Participants noted the potential for physical threats, contrasting their situation with colleagues in countries like Mexico, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, where journalists face lethal dangers. One participant remarked, “In South Africa, we are quite lucky we are not like places where journalists get killed and die in the line of duty.”

Despite South Africa not experiencing journalist murders or imprisonments for doing their jobs in the democratic era, there are growing threats to media freedom due to increasing intimidation (Daniels, 2023). A participant recalled, “Three journalists from our newsroom were arrested during the Fees Must Fall protest while doing their job” and released after the news organisation intervened. The 2023 murder of photojournalist Bongani Mbatha outside his home in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), shook the industry (Daniels, 2023). While the motive for the murder is unknown

(Daniels, 2023), the concerns of the participants are also reflected in the number of journalists killed worldwide. UNESCO (2024) recorded 162 journalist killings between 2022 and 2023, a 38% increase from 2020-2021. This rise was due to killings in both conflict and non-conflict countries, with the highest number of women journalists killed since 2017 (UNESCO, 2024). There has been an increase in the deadly assault on journalists reporting on issues such as corruption, human rights abuses, environmental crimes, trafficking and political misconduct in countries that are not experiencing armed conflict (Ewen, 2023). Journalists are not only being physically harmed as a result of being caught in the crossfire but also from reporting critically. Here are further accounts of physical violence and intimidation reported by participants:

“I did a series of stories about corruption at a government department. A man came to the newsroom and told my editor and I that the minister wanted to get rid of me, even if it meant killing me. The organisation had to get security for me and my family for about two months.”

“During the Fees Must Fall protests, I was slapped by a taxi driver. It’s so normalised, you even forget that you went through that.”

These examples underscore the immediate physical dangers journalists face, often normalized, especially when reporting on powerful figures or contentious issues. This normalisation of violence is echoed in other studies (Araújo, 2024; Chen et al., 2020). Violent behaviors towards journalists have become routine and are often accepted as part of the job, even by journalists themselves (Araújo, 2024). This normalisation can lead to individuals not recognising they are experiencing abuse (Araújo, 2024). Another participant described being shoved and pushed to the ground by a municipal politician when she attempted to ask questions. Several participants reported assaults by the protectors of former President Zuma. One recalled being told by Zuma’s protectors:

“Fuck off, sibebe (bitch), its normal language, that’s normal. I laugh about it because this kind of life is so normalised within this culture and this profession. It’s such a shame; we don’t have platforms to talk about it.”

Another participant described being physically assaulted by a political figure's supporter on live television while covering the story of the politician’s imminent arrest.

“That was one of the most difficult phases of my career. It almost resulted in me leaving the media space altogether...my employer had to come in, take me through counselling, try to calm me down and put in some security measures to make sure I was mentally and physically fine.”

This assault was followed by threats on his life, leading to a decision by the newsroom and the participant for him to stop reporting on that political figure. Participants highlighted the dangerous relationship between political figures and their supporters, where threats to journalists are not addressed, leading supporters to act unlawfully. Hiltunen, Suuronen and Pöyhtäri (2024) suggest that harassment is driven by ideological motivations to influence perceptions about a journalist as illegitimate, immoral or harmful in some way (2024).

A female participant recounted being threatened by a mob of EFF supporters after a security officer accused her of being a spy for the opposition while she was filming. She had to run for safety and seek refuge among police officers, which constrained her ability to work effectively. Two participants who covered the Mkhonto weSizwe Party rally recalled witnessing a female colleague being pushed and verbally assaulted by the party's supporters. One participant noted that after the rally, colleagues expressed a desire to avoid covering the party's rallies due to the treatment of journalists.

Hostility and violence towards journalists can lead them to avoid specific topics, limiting diversity of voices and curtailing investigative efforts (Miller, 2023). Media freedom advocacy bodies, including SANEF, have called on political parties to avoid intimidating or harming media workers and to denounce abusive acts against journalists (SANEF, 2024b). Failure to prevent aggression against journalists can result in events of public interest going unreported, which denies the public the right to information, and it shrinks the space that journalists have to do their work. Reflecting on politicians as sources of violence, a participant noted,

“Politicians are very nice to you when you are seemingly serving their agenda. If you are probing their political enemies, they see you as an ally and they don't see you as a person who's independent and who's doing their job. They will try and manipulate you and have you push their propaganda. In South Africa, political leaders have become very irresponsible and have no regard and no sense of respect for the journalism profession.”

Participants also shared experiences of reporting from protests and the risks to their physical safety. The South African Human Rights Commission (2018) estimates over 13,500 protests annually, with violence related to protests on the increase. One participant said:

“I have been caught in the crossfire between the police and communities during service delivery protests many times, inhaled tear gas, and been shot with rubber bullets and stun grenades. It’s been 21 years of this.”

This is a common experience among the participants who all have frequently been exposed to protest action which often turns violent. Physical violence and threats are a stark reality for many participants, with seven of the eight experiencing direct intimidation or physical attacks. This violence threatens news production, media freedom, and the dissemination of public interest information (Hughes & Márquez-Ramirez, 2017; Radu, Morwe & Bird, 2012). All seven participants are black, while the single exception is white, which further supports the understanding that not all journalists are affected by violence in the same way or to the same extent. This distinction matters in a country with a racial divided past striving for a non-racial society. The structural violence of the apartheid and coloniality systems which organised society, distributed resources and enacted violence on a racial basis, still impacts how society is organised today, and which identities cover events such as violent protests.

Consistent with other research, political figures and their supporters are a leading source of violence against journalists. The State of the Newsroom report for 2023 raised concerns about increasing threats from local government officials and political parties and groups (2024). Threats from the police, public, business sector, and institutions have also worsened according to the report. Participants experienced physical and verbal attacks from various sources, including government, political organisations, police, businesses, and public figures. Journalists have also been restricted arbitrarily in various ways by magistrates and judges from freely covering court proceedings, which violates the guidelines for magistrates according to the report. The different levels of government, political organisations and their supporters and members (formally organised or not), the police service and other security structures, individual businesses and the private sector, criminal enterprises, institutions in society, the judiciary and public figures operate at the social institutions level. They possess power outside the media sector which they wield against the press. The violence enacted on journalists exerts a force and influence on the

journalists, their routines and media organisations which restricts journalist freedom of movement, expression and autonomy.

6.3 Psychological and Emotional Impact

This section explores the emotionally challenging reporting and frequent exposure to violence described by participants, followed by the impact on their mental wellbeing and that of their loved ones. Journalists reporting on traumatic events face the risk of emotional injury (Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Witnessing and documenting human suffering, violence, and injustice inevitably takes a toll on their mental health (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019; Seely, 2019; Smith, Drevo, & Newman, 2018; Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Journalists, like other first responders, play a crucial role in reporting events, helping the public understand what is happening, and supporting readiness, recovery, resilience, and meaning-making during crises (Rupar, 2020). They must move quickly, overcome challenges, communicate information responsibly, stay safe, interview victims, and continue working as events unfold (Rupar, 2020).

The professional values of objectivity, detachment, and impartiality mean journalists experience emotional labor, are forced to compartmentalize and suppress their emotions regardless of the tragedies they report on (Simpson & Boggs, 1999; Seely, 2019; Ikhida, Timur, & Ogunmokun, 2023). Displays of emotion are viewed as unprofessional (Dworznik-Hoak, 2022; Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Unlike other first responders, journalists do not intervene, which can conflict with their moral values, leading to moral injury (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg, 2012). Frequent trauma exposure is positively correlated with feelings of guilt (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg, 2012), making journalists vulnerable to guilt and moral injury. One participant described the harrowing experience of walking over multiple dead bodies during the July unrest in 2021:

“We were doing morning live coverage and I was literally walking over dead bodies. I saw 18 people that had been shot all at once. Afterwards you go home, you sleep, you wake up, and continue the next day.”

Another participant highlighted the lack of time to process the violence witnessed:

“You are expected to churn out stories...before you can process what happened today, where you saw a child pass away, a mother grieving and the community angry at the suspect who killed the

child and they want to kill him and you will probably see them kill him, you have to go to another story... That's what you see and hear on a daily basis."

The emotional toll of journalism is profound. Trauma occurs when people are exposed to overwhelming negative events, including violence (Hamber & Lewis, 1997). Research indicates that journalists are deeply impacted by the events they witness (Dworznik-Hoak, 2020; Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Exposure to violence, death, and human misery may result in PTSD (Smith, Drevo, & Newman, 2018). Key to journalism is that the criteria for traumatic events can be experienced by an individual whether it is directly experienced, witnessed, occurred to someone close, or through repeated exposure to catastrophic events (Smith, Drevo, & Newman, 2018). A participant who is survivor of sexual assault recalled struggling emotionally while covering a story involving gang violence and rape: "It felt like horror after horror... I remember saying to my boss I could not do this anymore."

Another participant who could still vividly recall images of child pornography, a chainsaw murder, and child rape cases, lamenting the lack of awareness on safeguarding journalists' mental wellbeing. This suggests a need to reconsider journalism routines that may place journalists in avoidable harm. In this case it is useful to ask whether it is necessary for journalists to see such images to be able to report on the story. Perhaps where there are other ways of substituting routine practices that might harm or expose journalists to violence, these alternative practices should be exercised such as writing the story based on the investigators' report.

Participants also spoke of the emotional challenges of dealing with people's trauma, such as speaking to parents who've lost their children or victims of gender-based violence. They described overwhelming feelings of helplessness and intrusive thoughts "(wishing) I could go back and intervene and save this child."

The culture within the profession and organisations often promotes suffering in silence and stigmatizes distress (Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Simpson & Boggs, 1999; Seely, 2019; Nicolaides, 2014; Keats & Buchanan, 2009). This culture has kept mental wellbeing low on the newsroom agenda (Seely, 2019). However, it is important to balance perspectives that the professional comportment of objectivity and impartiality only harms journalists, because research shows that the professional values of objectivity and impartiality also inspire a heightened sense of professionalism and build journalists' abilities to respond to future crises (Rupar, 2020).

Journalists must remain composed, think rationally, and make quick ethical decisions while covering breaking news events (Rupar, 2020). Their experience, socialization, and organisational routines support credible journalism and can be protective (Rupar, 2020). While journalism-related trauma is concerning, the professional values that underpin the profession are essential.

6.3.1 Relational impact

The violence journalists experience affects not only them but also their families, news organisations, and sources (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022). One participant, who was assaulted on live television, spoke of the pain his mother felt upon learning about the incident:

“It’s no longer just about you. My mother was told by her colleagues what happened to her child. I didn’t tell her because I didn’t want her to worry because she has a heart condition. She spent days googling the story and it affected her badly.”

Participants also mentioned the need to protect their loved ones, especially children, from the spillover violence of their work, which can occur in public places and online. Another participant discussed the demanding nature of the job and its impact on personal time. She broke down while talking about the negative effects on her time with her child:

“My biggest problem is that I have a six-year-old child who obviously demands my time. My job requires that I know what is going on all the time and be available to meet people. Her life is reliant on me prospering in my job. Right now, she is being raised by the nanny and that really hurts me. It’s sad when your child is crying saying, ‘Mommy, please don’t go to work,’ and when you are home, you still need to be working. That is one of the most difficult things when I think of coping. I am not alone in this because for many of us, our personal lives take a backseat.”

For this single mother, the job's time demands hamper her connection with her child. The notion that men are better suited for journalism because they are freer of family responsibilities and have more suitable traits is well documented (North, 2009; Topić & Brueggemann, 2021).

6.3.2 Cost to Mental and Physical Wellbeing

All participants strongly believed in the positive correlation between journalism and mental wellbeing. When asked if there is a direct relationship between mental health and journalism, all participants said yes. One participant noted:

“There is definitely a relationship between the job and our mental wellbeing. A colleague resigned because of the environment, pressure, and constant demand. Those who left for communications realized afterwards their anxiety and stress were job-related. After leaving, they found stability and better mental wellbeing.”

Abuse of journalists affects them emotionally and cognitively (Miller, 2023). Two participants referred directly to mental health conditions. One said, “I’ve got anxiety and sometimes take medication for it,” though it was unclear if it was diagnosed. Another said, “I’ve got depression,” which has been diagnosed and required hospitalization before. “I can’t say my depression is caused by the job, but the job exacerbates it to the point where I need professional intervention.”

This does not imply journalism caused these conditions but shows participants believe their jobs affect their mental wellbeing. Research shows repeated trauma exposure can lead to mental breakdowns, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, avoidance, anxiety, depression, hyperarousal, and difficulties functioning at work and socially (Simpson & Boggs, 1999; Dworznik & Garvey, 2019; Buchanan & Keats, 2011).

The participants also noted physical health impacts with most commenting that they feel run down and that “this job is exhausting” were repeatedly mentioned. Participants said, “A lot of us suffer from fatigue. You’re just always tired. You just want to do the story, go home and call it a day.” Most of the participants spoke more generally about how they believe their mental wellbeing is affected by their reporting. One mentioned being ill-tempered towards loved ones:

“You find yourself snapping at your family for no reason. And you develop anger issues which you need help with but sometimes you are not okay.”

Court reporters spoke of the emotional burden of covering court cases involving severe human suffering, such as child abuse, rape, robbery, and murder, leading to significant emotional distress. Speaking about the effects of the job on mental health, a participant observed:

“This job breaks you to a certain degree. You look back and remember everything you’ve seen and how you’ve had to sleep, wake up, and continue the next day.”

Another described the effects of constant exposure to violence as “stripping away your humanity,” noting, “where stories were once treated like a baby you wanted to nurture, now it’s

all about getting the job done and getting home.” This suggests frequent exposure to violence impacts professional values, ethics, and standards. One participant questioned whether the cost of violent exposure was worth it:

“This job has a huge negative effect on me. You get beaten up at a story, attacked on social media, attacked everywhere. You start questioning yourself, especially when you are physically assaulted. You ask yourself, is it really worth it?”

Two participants reflected on the impact on their physical health: “After almost every (ANC) conference, I have been hospitalized. I am exhausted and have gotten physically ill from the pressure of the job.” Another participant with a chronic health condition had to be regularly hospitalized during a high-stress period when a politician took her to court for her reporting, “I suffered life-threatening comas, causing trauma to my family, and I have a lot of guilt over that.”

Frequent exposure to violent reporting has also impacted participants’ outlooks. The participant who now works as an investigative journalist said, “I don’t have optimism about humanity, about our country, about anywhere in the world.” Frequent trauma exposure can impact how a person perceives themselves, others, and the world (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019). These impacts on journalists are consequential to the profession, its ability to attract new people, and its service to society (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

Reflecting on journalism as a career, Dane Clausen argues that journalists must be fearless because it is “not for the faint at heart” (2006, p.1). Clausen believes journalists should have “guts” and be able “to roll with the punches” (2006, p.2). However, journalists should not be expected to withstand excessive levels of violence just because it comes with the job. As a participant put it describing an incident of severe online abuse, “I can withstand pretty much anything, but that day I sat there and just cried.”

This nuance is crucial when discussing work-related trauma in journalism, as there are limits to both what can be done to eliminate it and what journalists can endure. Recognizing that most journalists will encounter traumatic events during their careers, and that some may experience long-term PTSD symptoms, underscores the importance of trauma awareness, training, and organisational support (Browne, Evangeli & Greenberg, 2012). Additionally, journalism culture

needs rethinking. Newsroom support mechanisms and environments must also be considered for changes at both routine and organisational levels within the hierarchy of influences model.

6.4 Digital Harassment and Cyberbullying

Journalism relies heavily on financial and digital infrastructure (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Digital advancements have created a paradox: while publishers enhance their online presence and journalists promote their personal brands, these same tools facilitate harassment and threats against journalists (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022). The shift to social media has meant that news audiences and organisations expect journalists to be interactive, participatory and reciprocal as part of connecting with audiences on social media (Holton et al., 2023). Journalists with strong social media presences often draw more attention, becoming micro-celebrities through frequent posting, interaction, and platform algorithms (Stahel, 2023).

Although violence against journalists is not new, adopting social media has introduced new dimensions of violence: digital harassment and cyberbullying (Waisbord, 2020). Thereby threatening the mental wellbeing of journalists (Jukes 2015). This section discusses the nature of online violence against journalists, its gendered aspects, and its spillover into the offline world.

Participants in this study have all faced online abuse and threats. One participant working across radio and online news noted, “I trend every other week,” reflecting the frequency and severity of the abuse. Being a journalist who is a public figure, especially with a large following, poses significant risks when covering sensitive topics (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022; Stahel, 2023). One participant recounted being targeted after writing a corruption story, suspecting the subject of the story sponsored an online mob to harass him on X, leading to significant stress and anxiety.

“It affected me very badly. I didn’t think that if something like that happened, I would be affected, but I took a lot of stress. Luckily my kids were young, but I worried how they would be affected had they been on social media.”

He described this as an example of how social media has been “weaponised against journalists,” particularly by those with resources to mobilize online attacks and those who want to suppress certain information. This is supported by research that online attacks against journalists and media organisations by criminal groups, authorities, activists, and citizens are often deliberative,

organised and orchestrated (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022; Waisbord, 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Ressa, 2022).

Participants also spoke of the rise of online abuse and misinformation used to fuel violence against journalists. One participant recalled:

“I was woken up by WhatsApp messages in the early hours with friends asking if I am okay. They told me that people on social media were talking about me and saying revolting things. I just sat there and started crying. I was overwhelmed by the hatred and people wishing I would get COVID and die. I remember calling my editor and telling her I am not okay, I am broken today.”

With the support of the editor, the participant now believes, “the idea is to break you, to get under your skin, so you self-censor and second guess yourself. That was the most liberating message about what I am navigating because when I see it now, I see it for what it is.”

6.4.1 Online Gendered Abuse

Chen et al. describe gendered harassment as a “specific type of harassment that includes sexist or misogynist comments that criticize, attack, marginalize, stereotype, or threaten a person based on attributes of gender or sexuality” (2020, p. 879). In this study, both women and men participants have received “forms of incivility, defined as aversive speech that goes beyond mere impoliteness, and is marked by profanity, insults, and name-calling” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 879). All participants have been labeled as “tools” of oppositional forces, accused of reporting “fake news,” being biased, and have experienced coordinated trolling campaigns. However, the nature of the insults and threats varies and is gendered. While harm and loss of life in conflict zones disproportionately affects men, online abuse disproportionately affects women (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022). Both men and women participants believed that women are targeted for being women and insulted based on their appearance, body, or perceived role, receiving sexist comments and sexualized threats. One participant located the gendered attacks on women journalists within broader societal behaviors and attitudes towards women.

“It’s a kind of silencing culture around women. Me being targeted is just part of a long line of women who have been the target of the silencing campaigns. I have been called the same names that Fezeka, Thuli Madonsela, Janet Love, and Justice Sisi Khampepe have been called because

it's powerful women who have a voice and are there to do a job, and there is this underlying misogyny to silence you.”

This silencing is a backlash against women participating in public life in a visible and substantive way and is not limited to journalists but to high-profile women in public roles (Simões, Alcantara, & Carona, 2021). This harmful gender norm speaks to a culture and ideology at the macro level that exists in the broader environment in which journalists operate. It suggests that online abuse is not an individual issue but a complex societal issue impacting the public sphere and media freedom (Waisbord, 2020; Simões, Alcantara & Carona, 2021).

The reaction to online abuse is also gendered, as research suggests that women have stronger emotional reactions to abuse and are more likely than men to report incidents (Waisbord, 2020; Holton et al., 2023; Simões, Alcantara, & Carona, 2021). Gender socialization can explain why women are more likely than men to use avoidant strategies to deal with the stress of abuse (Miller, 2023). Women journalists also have to do more emotional labor to suppress their emotions and change their outward emotional appearance when dealing with abuse (Miller, 2023). In this research, all five women participants specifically mentioned employing avoidance strategies to minimize exposure to online abuse.

With the growth of social media platforms and financial pressures on the media funding model, the internet and digital media have become part of journalism practice and routine (Holton et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2020). As journalism has evolved with new technologies, routines are adjusted, and new tasks become practice. Reading and responding to comments is one such task (Chen et al., 2020). An example of this emotional labor is that journalists now engage with audiences and participate in “reciprocal journalism,” which centers on building an audience community and promoting multiple ways of interaction between audiences and journalists (Chen et al., 2020, p. 879).

Engaging with online comments is part of reciprocal journalism and has become part of journalism routines (Chen et al., 2020; Simões, Alcantara, and Carona, 2021; Holton et al., 2023). However, it is seen as a risk factor by participants. Speaking on limiting interaction with audiences, choosing only to post the news, and limiting responses to comments because comments are “toxic” and “really dark” has been the approach participants have taken. Describing their interaction with audiences on social media, participants said:

“What I do is just be like Beyonce, drop the tweet, walk away and don’t read the comments”.

“People make of you what they want. They’re going to hate you. So be it. But at the end of the day, the questions you need to ask yourself are: is it accurate, is it fair, is it necessary? And if you can answer yes to those three questions, put your story out, walk away.”

This reflects a resignation that the abuse is par for the course. Another woman participant used to get in the proverbial “mud and respond to the trolls,” but it took a toll on her.

“Depending on my mood and the day, I respond to the trolls, and sometimes I’ll just block. Friends said you need to learn to block people because you are not open air space for everyone to take a shot.”

The verbal abuse, marginalization, criticism, and threats experienced by participants based on their gender and sexual identity affect journalists' routines and personal well-being (Holton et al., 2023; Miller, 2023). Some participants believed that this allows those who want to silence them to achieve their objective. Online abuse disrupts reciprocal journalism as a routine practice because women journalists cannot participate if they are being attacked and undermined online (Chen et al., 2020). Moreover, this gendered harassment of women journalists undermines their ability to adhere to journalistic routines (Hiltunen, Suuronen & Pöyhtäri, 2024).

Violent misogynistic attacks underscore how race and gender intersect in online harassment, similar to how they do offline (Simões, Alcantara, and Carona, 2021; Chen et al., 2020). Participants observed that women experienced harmful misogynistic attitudes online similar to what they do offline. All the women participants had experienced online attacks and derogatory comments like “isifebe” (slut), “bitch,” “spy,” “satan,” with one participant saying, “It’s so vile, I have been called a hippo” as an attack on her weight. This participant described how she was body-shamed and insulted on platforms like X, Facebook, and TikTok regularly, which had a significant impact on her mental well-being. Other participants said:

“You get labeled all sorts of things. I’ve been labeled a white monopoly tea girl, a thuma mina minion, whatever fits the order of the day, I will get that particular label and any other pejorative depending on the political party.”

“It is body shaming. It is insults about my work...you have to dig deep and find enough mental wherewithal to withstand attempts to tear you down via narratives that are created about your credibility, your looks, and capability.”

This gendered difference results in women journalists contemplating or exiting the profession, self-censoring, modifying their engagement with the audience, being more likely to adopt avoidance strategies, and struggling with the professional value of impartiality (Holton et al., 2023; Simões, Alcantara & Carona, 2021). This cuts to the heart of everyday journalism routines (Chen et al., 2020).

Men journalists also face abuse that challenges their credibility, but as one male participant observes, his experience differs from that of his female colleagues:

“As a male, your physical looks are sometimes used as a weapon, your mannerisms, your lifestyle, where you stay, and where your kids go to school. It’s about your livelihood, and your intelligence gets insulted. But it’s worse for women. They get called all sorts of names and are accused of sleeping with so and so. It’s worse than what males go through and it’s dehumanizing”.

This study does not assess the proportion of attacks on women compared to male journalists. However, exploring gendered experiences provides a nuanced look at the differences and similarities. Individual accounts suggest women participants, as reflected by research elsewhere (Chen et al., 2020; Holton et al., 2023; Araújo, 2024), are more frequently targeted than their male counterparts. Gendered harassment places women journalists in a difficult situation: if they perform well, they are accused of receiving preferential treatment or exploiting their gender and sexuality to advance their careers (Chen et al., 2020). If they falter, their performance is seen as a reflection of women in general (Chen et al., 2020). These societal attitudes judge women as interlopers in newsrooms and public opinion.

The gendered nature of online harassment shows that studying violence towards journalists without exploring how identities intersect with the role of being a journalist renders a limited perspective. Intersectionality, as a lens to understand where power collides and intersects, involves multiple identities and various systems of oppression (Miller, 2023).

6.4.2 From Online to Offline and Vice Versa

Research by Posetti, Harrison, and Waisbord (2020) shows that online violence increasingly spills over into offline incidents, a trend supported by participants' experiences. A female participant endured harassment that began with taunting videos on X and escalated to the harasser attending press briefings she attended.

“There was a guy doing videos about me, calling me 'white monopoly tea girl' in 10-minute videos on X. Luckily, my organisation was willing to pursue the legal route because people need to be shown they can be challenged, that it is not a free-for-all. However, in the end, we didn't follow up, but I appreciated that the company was willing to put its legal might into dealing with this.”

Research suggests journalists often have to find “preventative and palliative coping mechanisms” on their own, with organisations failing to address harassment as a systemic issue (Holton et al., 2023, p. 859). Although both the individual journalist and the media organisation are responsible for journalists' safety, journalists bear the brunt of the abuse, with organisations providing inadequate support (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022).

Participants pointed to politicians and political parties as primary sources of online abuse, followed by private sector actors. They believe online bullying is intended to intimidate and silence reporting, with attacks by political actors legitimizing these behaviors. Technological advancements have integrated platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram into journalism routines, increasing risks (Araújo, 2024). A participant said:

“I was in the WhatsApp group of political party members and supporters of the former president discussing how a particular journalist must have their neck throttled, he is disrespectful, he must be castrated. It was chilling. I sent that journalist a text asking him to be careful. The threat was at 2 pm, but by 6 pm in the evening, he had been throttled by some guy. That is how volatile the environment is for us.”

This is another example of violence moving offline due to reporting. Participants noted that when these online attacks happen, few colleagues come to their defense publicly or check on them privately. Online abuse targets not only the individual but also those connected to them (Posetti, Harrison, & Waisbord, 2020), possibly deterring others from showing support out of fear of attracting abuse. This tactic amplifies the chilling effect on journalism.

6.5 Violence in Newsrooms

Participants also experienced violence in newsrooms, which were described as hostile, high-pressure environments. A participant who does political reporting noted, “I don’t think we speak enough about the violence of newsrooms themselves. We think it’s a badge of honour to be in hostile environments. The job is quite hostile and demanding, but some people think it has to be hostile because of past experiences, and it’s not.”

Four participants described newsrooms as places where journalists couldn’t talk about “exhaustion and when they are falling apart” because “this job is exhausting” and “is a high-pressure environment.” Toxic cultures were seen as a combination of legacies of past newsroom cultures, with editorial teams not managing pressure well and news organisations placing unrealistic targets on managers and editors. Describing the interactions with previous editors a participant said, “Some editors don’t have emotional intelligence, and they spread trauma. It becomes a transfer of their pressure, and how they deal with people is poor.”

Chen et al. (2020) found that journalists reported intimidation and bullying by bosses, a form of psychological violence. Participants acknowledged that newsrooms are under-resourced, working with smaller teams and budgets. “We work for the private sector, and they are prioritizing targets above us, and that pressure trickles down”, said a participant who works for a privately owned media organisation.

Many organisations struggle with gender-based power dynamics, where decision-making often favors men or certain gender norms, leading to a focus on profits rather than employee well-being (Holton et al., 2023). This can create an atmosphere where employee needs, especially those of marginalized genders, are not adequately addressed (Holton et al., 2023).

The imbalance in newsroom leadership may result from the abuse experienced by journalists with intersecting identities. Miller argues that “certain identities may lead to privileged experiences in the newsroom – particularly when it comes to abuse” (2023 p. 1245). For example, some American journalists believe that the imbalance in race and gender at newsroom management levels is partly due to the abuse experienced by journalists of colour (Miller, 2023). In South Africa, while it is a majority black country, white men still disproportionately dominate top corporate positions (Saba, 2019). This suggests that if white men experience less abuse, they

will stay in newsrooms and ascend to leadership positions, while journalists of colour and women might leave due to the abuse they face. Women are leaving journalism at higher rates than their male counterparts (Miller, 2023). This highlights the importance of examining why journalists leave and who leaves, as understanding the hostility they experience might explain some contributing factors to newsroom leadership.

6.6 Race, Gender-Based Violence, and Misogyny

Participants highlighted how violence intersects with race and gender in other ways too, reflecting the unique challenges they face due to their identities in a racially divided society. This section expands understanding of sub-research question 1 on the nature of violence journalists experience. It explores these themes, focusing on misogynoir, race, and socio-economic factors, and maps the forms of violence shaped by structural violence.

6.6.1 The Intersection of Misogyny and Race

The majority of hostility is targeted at groups that have been historically socially and economically disadvantaged including women and ethnic minorities (Stahel, 2023). Hostility increases with the visibility of journalists from marginalized groups, because they challenge traditional social hierarchies (Stahel, 2023). Participants suggested that being female and black incurs a different penalty. Black journalists, particularly women, face additional challenges due to systemic racism, often experiencing harsher scrutiny and violence compared to their male and white counterparts. Participants reflected on the intersection of race and gender inherited from colonialism and apartheid, with black women forced to navigate misogynoir in their work. One participant observed:

“It is almost always black female journalists most likely getting assaulted, pushed around, and targeted with the most vicious kind of language in the spaces and contexts we work in. As a white middle-class female, I have a repertoire of backups that aren't available to black women in this space.”

Even though she experiences online abuse, she noted, “my privilege protects me in a lot of respects,” highlighting the unequal experience of violence based on skin color and that black women are often the most targeted in hostile environments. This suggests the unequal experience of violence even among the same gender doing the same role based on skin colour.

Participants also discussed the dehumanization and sexualization of women journalists, who have also been sexually harassed by politicians. A participant spoke of how women journalists are disrespected by politician who proposition them for sex in exchange for stories. She recalled, “a politician pushed up against me and tried to grab my breast. He said if I want the story, I should come over at night to his hotel for a rendezvous.”

To demonstrate that this incident is not isolated, another participant referenced a conversation in a women journalist community WhatsApp group during a sexual scandal involving a former high-ranking government minister. Several women journalists disclosed that they had also fallen victim to the minister saying, “This should have been our #MeToo moment”. These experiences underline the additional challenges faced by women journalists, who often have to navigate a landscape of sexism, race and sexual harassment while doing their jobs, making this a double burden.

Women participants also spoke of working in an environment where sexual innuendoes were commonplace. The gendered nature of abuse includes undermining women journalists' professional credibility, questioning their credentials, and subjecting them to sustained attacks (Holton et al., 2023). Black female participants also described being victims of patriarchal attitudes, feeling they are “not taken as seriously” as their male and white counterparts. When interviewing politicians, they feel they are viewed as inferior and have to constantly “prove myself”. One participant said, “South Africa is very patriarchal, and the men engage differently. It’s an indictment that we still haven’t made enough progress to the point where women are not taken seriously or put in positions of authority. As women, we are not taken as seriously as our male counterparts. Politicians don’t perceive us to have authority like they do with men.” This gendered violence not only undermines professional credibility but also poses significant personal risks. Women face escalating harassment in environments where they are encouraged to build their personal and organisational brands (Holton et al., 2023). They experience verbal assaults, marginalization, and threats because of their gender and perceived sexuality, affecting their autonomy and routines.

Another way in which gender intersects with violence and structural violence was described by a participant who is a senior journalist in the newsroom. She described the pressure she feels as a black woman working at a private, predominantly white media house:

“The pressure of who I am in this space is never lost to me. I sometimes experience that in conversations with white politicians, because there’s an expectation of how I should behave as a black woman that will make me palatable. So, our interactions with each other are informed by the history of this country.”

She added, “I cannot be subpar because if I am, I am not good enough,” highlighting the constant exhaustion and self-inflicted pressure to exceed expectations. “So, I think in a way you almost inflict violence on yourself because you know the perceptions you’re working against.”

Another participant said, “As a black female journalist, I’ve had to work ten times harder than my male and white female counterparts. I’ve had to go the extra mile and do double the work in the stories I do.” On the other hand, black female participants found their race gave them greater access when covering service delivery and social justice issues but restricted them when covering politics.

Historical and systemic inequalities shape the way different social groups experience hostility and violence, including in digital spaces (Stahel 2023). This can be explained as existing social inequality where the uneven experiences of individuals based on their gender or ethnicity are influenced by long-standing societal structures that favour certain groups over others leading to discrimination and hostility (Stahel 2023). These inequalities are not new and have a historical context where they have been established over time through social, legal and economic systems (Stahel 2023). Furthermore, society often legitimises these inequalities through cultural beliefs and narratives, for example traditional gender roles which devalue women’s contribution, while stereotyping ethnic minorities resulting in marginalisation (Stahel 2023). Through socialisation, people come to embrace these cultural stereotypes and biases.

6.6.2 Journalism While Being Black

Both black male and female participants spoke of expectations from black politicians that as black journalists, they should not criticize a black government, while black business people accuse them of “trying to destroy black excellence.”

“A lot of the violence, particularly online, stems from what politicians say. They almost set their supporters on you. They push the developmental agenda argument around journalism in South

Africa, saying we should give the black democratic government a chance by reporting through a lens that makes our government look a certain way. It's patriotism, they say."

While white politicians, on the other hand, punished them for perceived bias. One participant described the stonewalling:

"I've become persona non grata to the party leader who refuses to do interviews with me. The party supporters also take to social media to attack you, accusing you of all sorts of things."

Politicians project their conception of the media and their politics onto these journalists, casting them as enemies of their political projects. Journalists, with their access to information and the public's attention, wield a form of power that can influence the political agenda and shape public opinion (Slatvcheva-Petkova, 2024). Those being reported on may feel disrespected or humiliated, perceiving journalists' reports as challenges to their integrity (Slatvcheva-Petkova, 2023). Consequently, journalists may be targeted not only for what they report but also for their influence over public opinion (Slatvcheva-Petkova, 2023).

6.6.3 Perceptions of Differences in Safety Based on Race

Black journalists felt unsafe from members of the public they encounter where they live and socialize. They are often confronted by members of the public with accusations of treating certain politicians or businesspeople unfairly. A participant, anxious about being in public, said:

"You can't just go to a nightclub and have fun or sit outside at a chisa nyama with friends because you don't know who is following you, who knows your number plates, and they could abduct you. I have faced threatening circumstances in my daily life, walking in a mall or in a township. People have stopped me and accused me of being an agent of white monopoly capital and that journalists are pushing a certain narrative against a certain leader or business. I worry I will get slapped or pushed around."

This participant believes that white journalists who report on government and political corruption are safer, while black journalists face greater threats due to where they live and socialize.

"As a African black child who comes from townships and rural areas, we face these issues because we live in the same spaces due to our socio-economic backgrounds. In contrast, white journalists who investigate wrongdoing are relatively safer because of their life construct and

where they stay and socialize. Their lives are not as much at risk as someone from a previously disadvantaged background, who lives within a community where the iNkabi (hit men) are usually recruited from to eliminate people.”

These incidents and ongoing concerns affect their sense of safety in everyday life. A participant working for an online news organisation said, “I am lucky that at least my byline is what you see on a story, but it’s worse for colleagues who have to put their faces and voices out there.”

According to Stahel (2024), journalists with greater celebrity capital are targeted more frequently than those with less. Journalists with strong social media presence, who work for media organisations with greater reach, television, and cover politics have greater celebrity capital (Stahel, 2024). With the exception of one participant, the rest work on platforms where their identity is known, and they have a public profile. From the interviews, journalists’ safety is contingent not only on their work environment but also on where they live and socialize. Their socio-economic status and background influence the violence they are exposed to.

6.7 Coping Strategies and Resources

The themes that arise in this section help to answer sub-research question 3 which is focused on how journalists cope with work-related violence. Understanding participants' coping strategies is crucial because workers experience occupational stress when they cannot mitigate job-related dangers (Hughes et al., 2021). Without coping strategies, this stress can harm well-being and work performance (Hughes et al., 2021).

Despite challenges, participants use various coping mechanisms to manage occupational stress. They reported learning to cope over time through experiencing different challenges. “I have learned to cope” was a common response. William-Wynn and McDonald define coping as “a regulatory process that can stabilise and reduce negative feelings associated with stressful situations” (2021, p. 102). Coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2021). Adaptive strategies increase resilience and positivity, while maladaptive ones lead to dysfunction and avoidance (Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2021). When asked if they thought they cope with the ways in which their work affects them, participants responded:

“That question is going to make me cry. I think I have learned to cope. It has been hard, but you adjust.”

“My coping is to cry. My coping is to acknowledge the pain and to feel the pain. My coping is to stay away from social media. My coping is to be outside and see my friends and just have love and gratitude for the life I have.”

“I am not the same person. Coping isn’t remaining consistent in who you are in the face of traumatic experiences. Coping is realizing that it has affected you and finding ways to care for yourself.”

A participant who underwent extensive online abuse noted that her experiences attracted whistleblowers and enhanced her interpersonal interactions with them:

“I think I cope. And I think weirdly enough because I’ve been through a humiliation ritual and gone through something very unfair and unjust, people who might not talk to a journalist are willing to talk to me.”

Reframing the situation is part of problem-solving as a coping strategy (Slatvcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Reactions to traumatic events vary, with individual differences in responses (William-Wynn & MacDonald, 2021). Participants mentioned coping behaviors like alcohol abuse, leaning on their faith, physical activity, and remembering their job's purpose. Research identifies common coping strategies among journalists as social support, disconnecting, remembering job purpose, and substance use (Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Seely, 2019; William-Wynn & MacDonald, 2021). Participants' strategies align with these categories.

6.7.1 Alcohol as a crutch

Research on trauma responses in journalists often focuses on post-traumatic stress and depression, but substance abuse is another reaction (William-Wynn & MacDonald, 2021). Coping behaviors like alcohol consumption, social withdrawal, and emotional disassociation - often referred to as compartmentalisation – can worsen psychological symptoms (Seely, 2019). On the maladaptive side participants discussed alcohol dependency:

“When Friday hits, I want a drink. There is no Friday where I can say I did not drink. The only way I de-stress is to have my Castle-Lite and Jägermeister and drink myself to sleep. And it’s normal, alcohol is part and parcel of the job.”

“At some point, I did not cope and I picked up elements of alcohol abuse. That was my escape. To bring myself out of it, I realised that if I don’t seek help, I am going to lose everything I’d worked so hard for over 21 years.”

One participant noted that alcohol abuse among journalists in South Africa needs proper study, believing it to be an unspoken and widely accepted problem. These concerns are not misplaced because research shows journalists are often stereotyped as regular drinkers because they frequently conduct their jobs in social settings where alcohol is present (William-Wynn & MacDonald, 2021). Drinking is ingrained and accepted in journalism culture (William-Wynn & MacDonald, 2021). According to literature, journalists often turn to substances as a coping mechanism (Buchanan & Keats, 2011; William-Wynn & MacDonald, 2021). It is worth noting that excessive drinking does not always lead to a diagnosis of alcohol abuse or dependence or render people dysfunctional in their work (Feinstein, Owen, & Blair, 2002).

6.7.2 Social support

Greenberg et al. (2009) found that journalists prefer seeking support from family and friends over managers or therapists, even when they don't stigmatize mental health. This shifts the burden of support to informal networks. Participants in this study also turned to a mix of family, friends, managers, and psychologists. A participant said:

“I choose to debrief at home with my spouse. It’s where I evaluate and assess the events of the day, where my mistakes were and where I could have done better. And also where I am vulnerable to attacks to my safety.”

Another noted:

“My family and my partner are the ones I talk to because I’m not good at talking about my feelings. It’s only once I start talking to my family who will say ‘we saw you dodging rubber bullets, are you okay?’ where I will realise that I am not fine. I am actually upset, that I am scared.”

When asked about seeking support from managers or colleagues, one participant said:

“No, no, no. Definitely no. You just keep on moving. After a politician shoved me, very few colleagues called to ask if I am okay. And my manager saw this as an opportunity for an advert for the station. I have learned that at work you are kind of on your own.”

Half of the participants (three women, one man) expressed ambivalence about workplace-provided psychological support. A participant who has sought therapy at times of distress said:

“I don’t know if therapists are well equipped to deal with some of the challenges journalists face because journalists will go cover a tornado, see dozens of dead bodies and then come back and carry on. Those are not normal experiences.”

Another expressed discomfort with employee wellness services, preferring outside facilities. This participant was concerned about protecting how they are perceived and felt that seeing a psychologist might undermined their public image. “I am viewed as tough, as the iron lady, as the person who goes where nobody else wants to go. That is not how I am away from the camera. That makes me uncomfortable,” she said. The stigma of being seen as “emotionally sensitive or professionally toxic” may prevent journalists, especially women, from seeking help (Holton et al., 2023, p.861). Keats and Buchanan (2009) suggest that journalists suppress distress to avoid being viewed as weak. Participants also doubted the confidentiality of employer-provided services. The other half of the participants (two women and two men) received mental health, legal and security support albeit in extreme times of distress as a response to physical assault, intense cyberbullying and legal prosecution. A participant said after an extreme case of cyberbullying, “My editor was my saving grace, and with her help I sought therapy”. Another, facing a court case, said, “I phoned my editor in tears that I am not coping, and he found a psychologist for me and assured me that my legal bills would be paid by the organization”.

The participant who has depression works for an employer who provides social work and psychologist support felt he was not stigmatised in the newsroom or suffer any discrimination professionally for his condition even after a month-long hospitalisation. However, for these three participants who felt supported by their organisation, they admitted that this level of support is provided selectively even within the same organisation and likely unique to certain newsrooms. These findings show mixed experiences with employer-provided services. A systemic approach

to support, training, resources, policy, and transparency could strengthen prevention and palliative support (Holton et al., 2023). Seely (2019) suggests that support systems should involve editors, supervisors, colleagues, and journalism educators to promote open discussions about mental health, free from stigma, to cultivate a healthier workforce. Supporting journalists with coping with distress from the violence they encounter, requires routines, newsrooms and organisations to promote help-seeking behaviors, implement robust support systems, resource allocation and taking action against abuse.

6.7.3 Disconnecting

Participants often engage in social isolation and avoidance, characterized by denial, suppressing feelings, and withdrawing socially (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023) during periods when they struggle to cope. One participant shared:

“The traumatic nature of my job forces me to separate myself from my work, so I can’t take my work home with me. I’ve learned over the years to do the story and then to go home and not think too much about it.”

Another participant described a phenomenon among journalists called a “blanket day”. They explained, “It’s not an official work thing, but sometimes you would ask for a blanket day when you are drained and exhausted so that you can just sleep”. This suggests that managers are aware when journalists are struggling to cope. Another participant mentioned their approach when feeling impacted by work:

“On many occasions over the years I’ve gone to my doctor and said I’m not sick, I’m just tired, and he already knows what I mean. He books me off just so I can sleep and switch off. But he is concerned that if I come back continuously with this, I will need to get psychological help.”

Even with these strategies, participants recognized that these are not adequate long-term strategies to address the underlying issues.

6.7.4 Remembering Purpose

Journalists are grappling with declining public trust, increasing job demands, employment instability, high turnover, job dissatisfaction (Gran, 2024), and increasing hostility and incivility (Stahel, 2023). Despite this, Perreault (2024) emphasizes the need to understand what brings

journalists joy and keeps them in the profession. Participants stay for reasons like passion for storytelling, commitment to truth, societal impact, diverse experiences, continuous learning, and community engagement. They spoke of the rewarding aspects of the job and explained their reasons for staying in the profession even when faced with violence from different directions as follows:

“For some strange reason, it still fulfils me. And the story of South Africa remains very interesting.”

“I stay because of the yearning to be a guiding light, to be a voice that helps connect the dots for the audience. It is something I deeply care about.”

“This job allows you to go into different sections of society and connect with people from Gogo Dlamini to the President. There is beauty in that. And it has a level of addiction.”

“I think what I do is a calling, I am called to do this.”

Another participant reflected on the profession's impact:

“I think back to my journalism lecturer who said coming into the job, know that you’re not coming into money, you are coming into activism, citizenry, and doing good. It’s amazing to be around fellow journalists who’ve changed the course of history and helped steer the country out of the darkest and most difficult times.”

Participants recognized their work's societal impact, feeling their reporting brings change and holds power accountable. Demonstrating that media work leads to change, one said, “The arch of history is long but it bends towards justice”. Another noted, “There is a reward in being able to speak to people and help them. I had to cover the story of the kids who died from poison at a tavern. The entire country was talking about it because of the media’s coverage and the president acted as a result. And that is the reward; knowing you are part of something bigger than yourself”. Research shows journalists find joy in the service-oriented aspects, camaraderie, and learning opportunities of the job (Perreault 2024). One participant simply commented, “I like the job. I like that we are flexible. I like that you get to talk to people and get to travel. It just suits my lifestyle”.

However, there are limits to these joyous reasons because the violence they face makes staying challenging. The threats temper the joy as noted by a participant, “No story is more important than your life” and another said, “I would love to continue but in the interest of my health and well-being, I am re-evaluating. You react differently to things especially when you’ve covered violence for so long. I need to get away from this environment”. Another acknowledged, “It’s from one traumatic event to another and I think nobody really cares. Things have gotten really hard”. Some participants expressed a desire to leave the profession, citing a lack of advancement opportunities, especially for women.

Successful coping is essential for journalists to remain in the profession. It is tied to power dynamics, including the authority of journalism as an institution, the influence of media organisations and editors, and the autonomy of individual journalists (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Coping strategies are not solely based on individual psychological traits; they also have a significant social aspect. Individuals acquire coping strategies from social support networks, including friends, family, and colleagues (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Societal culture, norms, and organisational culture influence these strategies. Macro forces, such as the rule of law supported by police and courts, can help journalists feel safe and support adaptive coping strategies (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Journalists' autonomy and performance are significantly influenced by threats to their safety, the resulting stress, and their resilience (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

6.8 Effects on Routines and Practices

The abuse journalists face affects both their work and routines (Miller, 2023). Due to safety threats, participants are extremely vigilant about the accuracy and details of their stories, which may improve journalism quality. On whether this may have had a chilling effect, one participant said, “not one bit, it’s not going to change how we do our work. Politicians need to understand that I am not meant to be their friend. It’s not my job and I won’t reward rubbish behaviour by pandering to them because that tells them, that behaviour is okay”. Speaking about their commitment to not allowing violent experiences and the anti-press sentiment change how they work a participant said, “I think in the age we're in, where the notion of truth is being so fundamentally disrupted, we can't let go of being truth tellers to enable people to see the reality of the situation and to make informed decisions”.

Despite this commitment, safety threats interfere with journalists' freedom of movement and work with sources, impacting their autonomy. KZN is a province participants considered as unsafe for journalists. Both men and women participants reported "thinking twice, maybe thrice before boarding a flight to an ANC or MK event in KZN". When they do travel there, it is under a veil of secrecy to avoid drawing attention from hostile actors. From 2011 to 2018, there were 321 investigations into political killings in KZN, making it a violence hotbed politically and for news reporting (Nxumalo, 2023). One participant restricts travel to KZN, even to see family, fearing for their safety.

A participant who reported on former President Zuma's arrest recalled a time when journalists "could go right up to the faces of the people (supporters) who were firing gunshots in the air illegally. Now, I evaluate the situation. If I am not safe, I would rather continue with my job with the same vigour from a distance". This suggests a loss of freedom and access to report on political events and interview sources up close, affecting job performance and news quality. This affects how journalists do their jobs, limits details, stunts perspectives and flattens the news stories.

In a society frequently experiencing violence, another participant said, "I don't prioritize the story over the human being when I can see that this person is broken, I just let it go. And when I talk to people about traumatic experiences, I always let them see the story and if there is something they need me to change or take out, even if it's something they said, I take it out. I don't want to reinforce human trauma". In this case, news content is influenced by the violence and trauma experienced by members of society. The news value of objectivity, defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a person's judgement not being influenced by personal feelings or opinion in considering and representing facts, is impacted as journalists exercise a subjective assessment of contents of the news content.

Overall, participants spoke of how the culture of hostility towards journalists has become normalised, affecting them personally and professionally. Instead of dampening their motivation, they adapt their routines to maintain journalistic integrity.

6.9 Safety for South African Journalists

This section explores how participants consider safety relative to the violence they experience. Constant threats and the need for vigilance have altered their daily routines, leading to a heightened sense of insecurity. One participant said, “I have had to learn to do basic surveillance and counter-surveillance. When I am driving, literally every few seconds, I look in the mirrors to see if anything looks suspicious. It’s a basic life skill everyone should have in South Africa, but for journalists reporting on corruption, you can’t afford not to know how to do it”.

Some participants have become more safety-conscious, disrupting their patterns to avoid being tracked, with a participant saying:

“I use different roads every day so that people don’t know my patterns and approach the driveway to my house from different directions. I change my car regularly, use the darkest tint allowed, and I moved my family to a gated community. These measures have cost me financially, but you don’t know who will feel offended by your work and what lengths they will go to.”

For these participants, safety means increasing vigilance when working on stories about “notorious people who could decide to take you out”. This includes knowing that “the most dangerous place for you is next to off and on ramps which can give someone just enough time to shoot you and take off and disappear”. A female participant who was sexually harassed by a politician who tried to touch her breast said safety is “keeping a distance between me and my source to protect myself. I avoid being in intimate environments with sources, even if they are well-known. I make sure to go either with a photographer or with someone else”. This suggests feeling unsafe to cover stories alone which affects routines surrounding sources.

For another participant who often covers protests, safety means wearing protective gear like bulletproof vests, helmets, and gas masks. Safety also involves “contacting community leaders to make them aware you plan to cover the story and to find out if the community wants you there. It is contacting the police commander on the ground or the spokesperson and alerting them that you will be there”. Safety for these participants is wearing bibs marked “PRESS” and driving in fleet cars covered in the news media organisation’s branding. Despite these measures, one participant noted, “our cars have been damaged and we’ve often driven back to the office while sitting on glass”.

Safety for all participants and their loved ones includes limiting personal posts on social media. Where they once shared their personal lives online, a participant said, “I don't post personal things on social media anymore. I guess [the threats] have changed my life.” Another simply stated, “safety is getting home every day.”

Without effective solutions, participants are forced to be pragmatic and take safety into their own hands. The Dart Centre encourages journalists to adopt these safety principles (2015):

- Journalists should complete a first aid course and carry a kit to be able to care for themselves and their colleagues if injured.
- Protective clothing along with training on covering hostile environments should be mandatory for journalists covering hostile events.
- Together with the news organisation, journalists should conduct a thorough risk assessment before starting the assignment to evaluate the risk to benefit of covering the story.
- Safety measures include developing a detailed plan of routes, transport and communication strategies with editors and colleagues.
- Journalists should understand the risks of any specific assignment they undertake and take into account the safety information shared by colleagues and other authorities while also feeding back their safety information to others.

These principles relate to physical safety, and journalists should receive training on digital, physical, and psychological safety, with pre- and post-assignment support (Committee to Protect Journalists, n.d.). According to participants, debriefing in newsrooms is uncommon, except in extreme cases of trauma exposure, which may increase vulnerability to harm. SANEF promotes awareness and access to safety and trauma resources through partnerships with organisations like the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), CPJ, Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, and Frontline Defenders (SANEF, 2024a). They encourage help-seeking behavior, personal care, and proactive measures to mitigate trauma risks.

Safety is crucial for journalism practice, journalists' families, and sources (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret 2022). It goes beyond physical safety, as journalists respond to threats from multiple sources, impacting individuals, news organisations, civil society, the private sector, and democracy (Westlund, Krøvel, & Orgeret, 2022).

6.10 Findings

The experiences shared by the participants map the various types of violence including physical, psychological, digital, and structural violence that journalists endure in South Africa. Their accounts suggest that hard news journalists work in an environment of continuous risk. Journalists seem to be preyed on and treated as soft targets by various groups with freedom of press and the rights of individuals violated repeatedly.

Journalists in South Africa face physical threats and assaults, particularly during protests, political rallies, and while reporting on corruption. These threats and assaults include sexual assault, being shoved, slapped, and even threatened with death. A culture of violence towards journalists has become acceptable and normalised as part of their everyday work by various actors in society. The sources of violence are varied, with political figures and their supporters implicated as major perpetrators. Politicians and their supporters as actors belonging to the social institution level use intimidation and harassment to silence journalists both online and offline, while the police and the public also pose threats, especially during protests and while reporting on sensitive issues.

Online platforms facilitate harassment, with perpetrators going unpunished. This creates a hostile environment for journalists, both online and offline. Online harassment and cyberbullying are prevalent, with journalists facing hate speech, threats, and gendered attacks which have also spilled over into their offline life. The study reveals that while both men and women experience frequent and intense online harassment, women journalists are disproportionately targeted with sexist and misogynistic comments which have also become normalised. The online abuse experienced by participants can be characterised as being flooded by a mob intent on belittling, terrorizing and violating journalists. This online violence is found, as Maria Ressa characterises it, as “radiating” thereby spreading and affecting their journalists’ families (Ressa, 2021, p. 11). The violence experienced by journalists affects their families and personal lives, leading to strained relationships and guilt due to the demands of the job. Forces at organisational, social institution and social systems level exact a heavy personal cost on journalists.

Witnessing and reporting traumatic events, such as rape, murders and child abuse, has left vivid recollections and mental imprints which cause emotional discomfort and feelings of guilt for the participants. This is consistent with research that journalists struggle with emotional labour and

moral injury, as they witness and report on human suffering and violence (khide, Timur, & Ogunmokun, 2023). The impact of this violence on journalists is profound as participants report constant mental and physical exhaustion, costs to their mental wellbeing and negative health outcomes. These experiences raise questions about the need to disrupt or re-evaluate journalistic routines for their protectiveness or harmfulness while promoting news values. This exposure to traumatic events is a product of the direct and structural violence in South African society.

Structural violence, rooted in macro systems of apartheid and colonialism, continues to affect participants, with racial and gender-based discrimination impacting their professional experiences. Black journalists, particularly women, experience a wider range of the forms of violence because of intersectional identities at micro level which interact with macro level factors such as press freedom, rule of law, democracy and perceived political influence of journalists.

To cope with these challenges, journalists employ various strategies. Social support from family, friends, and colleagues is crucial, although there is ambivalence about seeking help from workplace-provided services. Although news organisations have extended legal, psychological and security support for journalists, the perception is that it is not equally provided across the newsroom and industry. This perceived favouritism can only harm trust in organisational support and journalism safety. Disconnecting from social media and taking "blanket days" to rest are also common strategies. "Blanket days" should alert managers of possible overwhelm, need for rotating assignments and giving journalists more time away from news coverage. Despite the challenges, journalists find fulfillment in their work and stay motivated by their commitment to truth and societal impact. They remember the purpose of their work, which helps them navigate the difficulties they face. Signs of erosion of this commitment are there as the impact of violence weighs on the participants.

The study reveals that to stay safe, journalists use diverse tactics including increased vigilance, changing routines to evade possible threats, using protective gear, and limiting personal posts on social media as some of the strategies journalists adopt to protect themselves. Safety measures are essential for journalists in South Africa. As journalists grow increasingly concerned about hostility and abuse, they often start self-censoring (Fadnes, Krøvel & Larsen, 2019). This is instances where they avoid covering certain topics, angles or viewpoints that may be of public

interest (Fadnes, Krøvel & Larsen, 2019). In this study, this includes not covering stories about particular political figures, political party events and avoiding parts of the country deemed to be hostile due to perceived and material threats which affects journalist autonomy and freedom.

Addressing the multifaceted nature of violence requires a systemic approach, involving societal recognition of the risks, comprehensive institutional support, and effective coping mechanisms to ensure journalists' well-being and safety. The findings emphasise the importance of safeguarding journalists to maintain a free and independent press, which is vital for democracy and informed public discourse. The findings also outline the complex and multidimensional forms violence faced by journalists.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to knowledge about the impact of violence on journalists and journalism practice in South Africa and to knowledge about the general condition of journalists working in unsafe contexts. It argues that when studying journalism safety, violence against journalists should be studied by exploring not only direct forms of violence but also structural violence. This is because journalists with marginalised identities experience not only direct violence, but also structural violence. Safety research often overlooks the underlying causes and symptoms of risks, such as state versus non-state actors, and tends not to address issues related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and intersectionality (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). This study provided an intersectional perspective on how various forms of violence affect journalists in South Africa. It offers nuanced perspectives of female and male journalists and black journalists, revealing their experiences in everyday news reporting. It also demonstrates that while it is important to look at the individual aspects of intersectional identities – race, gender, sexuality etc.- account of the broader influences that affect these identities must be taken (Miller, 2023). Factors such as press freedom, democratic values, political pressures and rule of law play a significant role in shaping the independence and safety of journalists (Miller, 2023). Understanding a journalist's identity is not enough without considering the larger societal and political contexts that impact their work and well-being.

While the sample did not permit outright comparisons, or explore the violence experienced by other marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+, people with disabilities and religious minorities, the

findings suggest opportunities for future study in these areas. Understanding these intersectional experiences is critical for designing equitable and just responses to journalism safety.

The hierarchy of influences model and the concept of structural violence have been used as valuable frameworks to understand violence against journalists in South Africa. The hierarchy of influences model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the forces shaping news content. This research shows that violence from various sources at different levels of this model creates a complex web impacting hard news journalists and journalism practice.

Understanding these dynamics can help foster equitable media practices addressing both immediate and systemic violence and in devising interventions related actors at different levels of the model.

The broader cultural and ideological context, including prevailing values and norms, shapes how violence against journalists is perceived and justified. Thereby making the lens of direct and structural violence a useful one in encompassing violence from systems within which journalists operate. Structural violence also affects journalists through patriarchy and gender-based violence. While men also face dangerous levels of violence, women journalists experience systemic discrimination and violence, particularly in the field. Patriarchal norms perpetuate stereotypes that women are less competent, further exacerbating their vulnerability. Addressing such a complex system such as patriarchy which is at macro level is complex and would require an all-of-society response. As Waisbord (2022) noted, without addressing the complex systems that undergird threats to journalism safety, efforts to keep journalists safe, risk being undermined. In the interim, journalists are responding with pragmatism.

The rise of social media has introduced new forms of structural violence, with journalists facing online harassment and cyberbullying. Posetti, Harrison, and Waisbord (2020) found that digital violence is often gendered and racialized, targeting journalists based on their identity and content. The findings of this research support this proposition as seen in the experiences of women and black journalists. Despite these threats, journalists stand up against online violence by continuing their work, refusing to be silenced even if it makes them bigger targets. When journalists are threatened, attacked, or killed, their ability to report freely and independently is compromised, leading to a media environment dominated by narrow interests and serving a few. This limits diverse voices in public discourse and affects the quality and diversity of information

available to the public, weakening democratic engagement and accountability. The suppression of a free press through violence can contribute to democratic backslide, as citizens are deprived of crucial information needed for informed participation in governance. Continuous violence against journalists can also erode public trust in the media, leading to skepticism about the reliability and safety of news sources (Waisbord, 2022). This further complicates the relationship between the media and the public. Overall, violence against journalists has profound implications for the health of democratic societies, press freedom, and informed public discourse.

Journalists in South Africa struggle to maintain their autonomy and personal freedom amid violence. They resort to "strategic silence" to manage risks to their physical safety and mental well-being by reducing chances of attack when safety is tenuous (Waisbord, 2022). This is seen in the stories they choose to cover, the sources they consult, and their minimized social media activity. This research explored whether violence has a chilling or catalyzing effect on journalism practice. Participants' responses suggest a catalyzing effect despite safety risks, for now. However, the scale and incremental nature of the violence sustained against journalists risks deterring them from playing their full role in society. Especially as resources in news organisations dwindle, eroding the infrastructure and resources available to support journalists.

The literature review indicates that not all journalists experience the same level of violence and consequences. In this study, all participants reported extensive experience with various forms of violence in South Africa. The findings support the hypothesis that hard news journalists reporting on everyday news in South Africa experience multidimensional violence affecting their well-being and journalism practice. The findings also demonstrate that journalists do not respond in the same way. Violence against journalists, and the consequent trauma is not restricted to conflict or disasters, it is rife in everyday reporting at concerning levels. Research suggests that violence against journalists occurs in stable democracies and non-conflict countries, and not just in authoritarian states (Araújo, 2024; Waisbord, 2020; UNESCO, 2024). This research supports those findings and provides insights into violence experienced by journalists in a transitional society, offering a comparative perspective on the normative and structural constraints of journalism. Violence against journalists is also at concerning levels in a country - South Africa - with constitutional protections for press freedom and scoring satisfactorily in lists monitoring

press freedom. Although not a focus of this study, this suggests a need to explore how journalism safety is measured and monitored.

Although these findings cannot be broadly applied due to the study's exploratory nature and sample size, they should encourage dialogue on journalism safety in South Africa, involving academia, the media sector, and society, considering the media's pivotal role in shaping the public agenda and democracy. The findings also suggest there is room for further study exploring the multidimensional nature of violence experiences of sport, lifestyle, and financial reporters and other contributors to news content such as columnists and pundits. Studies on strengthening organisational support mechanisms are also critical for further study as violence against journalists becomes increasingly entrenched because violence against journalists is not an individual problem, but an organisational one too.

Given South Africa's history of structural violence, organisations should consider an intersectional approach to support mechanisms, addressing journalists' diverse identities, organisational justice, and equitable practices to address journalists' experiences with violence. Failures in institutional support exacerbate journalists' challenges. Journalists need systems to report safety violations both within and outside their organisations. Media organisations should establish safe channels for journalists to communicate and record incidents, ensuring privacy and pursuing prosecution of perpetrators. Governments should support efforts to keep journalists safe, contributing to their autonomy and press freedom.

The nature of violence faced by journalists is complex, encompassing physical threats, psychological trauma, digital harassment, and gender-based violence. Participants' experiences illustrate the pervasive and varied forms of violence in the profession. For most participants, the risk of violence is a continual concern due to factors such as public visibility, social identity, and the political environment (Waisbord, 2022). This research shows that journalists working on everyday news in South Africa face a sprawl of threats to their safety - physical, psychological and digital. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive institutional support, evaluating the role of routines in safety and newsroom culture, societal recognition of the risks involved, and promoting effective coping mechanisms to ensure journalists' well-being and safety. As journalism evolves, so must the strategies to protect those dedicated to uncovering the truth.

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