The phenomenon of misogynistic online hate speech:
analysis and characteristics of a new form of gender-based violence

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Abstract
This paper examines the phenomenon of online misogynistic hate speech, emphasizing its key characteristics and conceptualizing it as a novel form of gender-based violence. The analysis adopts approaches that consider gender-based violence as a social construct, alongside Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, illustrating how such practices perpetuate gender differentiation and reinforce hierarchical structures destabilized by recent social and economic transformations. The discussion also addresses the heterogeneity of victims, the intersectional dimensions of the phenomenon, and the challenges posed by the use of the online medium. In conclusion, the paper explores potential solutions, both legal and non-legal, to mitigate these behaviors, with particular attention given to the strategy of counterspeech as a means of confronting and countering hate narratives.

Keywords: Misogynistic online hate speech; Cybermisogyny; Gender-based violence; Symbolic violence; Intersectionality

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Introduction

Over the past fifty years, the exponential growth of internet usage and the widespread adoption of social networks have brought about profound transformations in how individuals express themselves, access information, and communicate with others. In earlier times, communication was predominantly oral and typically confined to small audiences. Today, however, we benefit from a vast array of technological tools and platforms that allow for the instantaneous transmission of messages to large audiences, often transcending geographical boundaries. These innovations have created nearly limitless opportunities for self-expression and have positioned the internet as an unparalleled forum for the dissemination of ideas, contributing significantly to the democratization of the public sphere (Ash, 2016).

Nevertheless, these transformative dynamics have also introduced complex challenges. Among them are the increasing polarization of public discourse, the adoption of aggressive communication styles, and the silencing effects of online harassment. One of the darker aspects of this technological revolution (Tontodimamma et al., 2021) lies in the proliferation of offensive and derogatory language on social media platforms, a phenomenon that has fostered the emergence of hate speech. Both general online hate speech and gendered hate speech, in particular, have become pressing issues in public and academic debates (Döring & Mohseni, 2020), as reflected in the growing body of research dedicated to exploring these phenomena (Tontodimamma et al., 2020).

The magnitude of the problem is illustrated by a 2015 report from the Broadband Commission, which found that 73% of women and young girls worldwide had been subjected to some form of online violence (Broadband Commission, 2015). However, researchers argue that this figure likely underrepresents the actual prevalence of the phenomenon, as hateful comments and offensive content are often removed from online platforms by moderators or users themselves (Döring & Mohseni, 2020). Despite the lack of a universally accepted definition of online hate speech—stemming from the inherent difficulty of determining what constitutes offensive or hate-inducing content (Strossen, 2016; Herz & Molnar, 2012)—the phenomenon is generally understood as "any communication that disparages a person or a group on the basis of some characteristics such as race, color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion" (Tontodimamma et al., 2020, p. 157).

Within this context, misogynistic hate speech has been specifically defined as expressions targeting women on the basis of their gender, with the intent to demean, threaten, or silence them. Such expressions not only directly harm the individuals targeted but also indirectly create a hostile environment for other women who share the same social group, thereby fostering a pervasive atmosphere of fear and subjugation (Spallaccia, 2017). The manifestations of misogynistic hate speech are varied and often take the form of gendered harassment, which includes direct attacks through text or images containing explicit threats of rape, death, or other violent sexual acts. Other forms include virtual rape, characterized by simulated sexual violence or the portrayal of violent sexual fantasies; impersonation, where websites or social media accounts are created using the victim's name and identity with the intent to harm their reputation; and doxing, which involves the publication of private information to intimidate or harm the victim. Additionally, cyberbullying involves persistent online harassment, cyberstalking entails the monitoring of a victim's activities to gather personal information, and revenge porn or sextortion refers to the dissemination or threat of disseminating explicit content without consent to defame or extort the victim (Spallaccia, 2017; Jane, 2017).

These phenomena have led some scholars to argue that the internet and social media—frequently portrayed as egalitarian and democratic spaces—are, in reality, profoundly discriminatory. Rather than mitigating inequalities, these platforms often amplify sexism and hostility, particularly toward women and other marginalized groups. This dynamic has prompted concerns that online environments may exacerbate societal inequalities instead of diminishing them (Jane, 2017; Eckert, 2018; Massanari, 2017).

Main characteristics of mysogynistic hate speech

The literature identifies several defining characteristics of misogynistic hate speech, framing it as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Foremost among these is its nature as a form of group-based violence, which impacts not only the immediate targets but also indirectly affects other members of the same social group (Leets, 2002; Wilhelm & Joeckel, 2018). These groups are often composed of individuals who are marginalized, underrepresented, or subject to systemic discrimination. Victims, whether directly or indirectly targeted, are singled out due to their group membership—a dynamic described as "tracker stigmas." This concept highlights the persistent nature of

stigma, which follows and afflicts all members of a group across varying contexts and circumstances (Richardson-Self, 2021).

Another critical feature of misogynistic hate speech is its disproportionate focus on visible women, particularly those who express their opinions in public spaces. Empirical studies reveal that women who assert themselves in online or offline environments are more likely to become targets of such attacks (Musi et al., 2022; Carlson, 2017; Spallaccia, 2017). In this context, Laurie Penny (2013) developed the metaphor of the "short skirt of the internet," arguing that the act of expressing one's thoughts in cyberspace makes women visible and therefore especially vulnerable to misogynistic attacks, much like wearing a miniskirt in physical spaces exposes women to potential harassment. A further characteristic of these attacks is their tendency to escalate rapidly. Jane (2014) observes that responding to an initial attack often increases a victim's visibility, which in turn heightens the risk of additional attacks. This escalation frequently manifests as a sustained barrage of insults and offensive comments, typically orchestrated by "cyber mobs"—groups of users who organize through forums and message boards with the explicit intent of discrediting, harassing, and ultimately silencing their targets (Citron, 2011).

Misogynistic hate speech is also distinguished by its reliance on sexually explicit and violent rhetoric. Research consistently shows that while hate speech targeting men often focuses on their actions or statements, attacks against women are frequently rooted in their identity as women (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021). These insults commonly involve objectification, hypersexualization, and aesthetic evaluations, aiming to undermine the individual's credibility by reducing their worth to their perceived sexual desirability rather than their intellectual or professional contributions (Richardson-Self, 2021; Kaipainen, 2021; Nussbaum, 2010).

The Ambivalent Sexist Theory, introduced by Glick and Fiske (1997), provides further insight into this dynamic, demonstrating how sexist attitudes can be expressed in both hostile and seemingly benevolent forms. Hostile sexism openly denigrates women, while benevolent sexism praises them in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles, often emphasizing their physical appearance over their achievements. Richardson-Self (2021) further categorizes misogyny into two forms: interdivisional and intradivisional. Interdivisional misogyny involves generalized hostility toward all women, while intradivisional misogyny distinguishes between "good women," who conform to traditional expectations, and "bad women," who are criticized for defying these norms, particularly in relation to sexual behavior. Although "good women" are often positioned above "bad women" in this hierarchy, both remain subordinate to men. This process of categorization reduces women to their perceived sexual value or lack thereof, thus perpetuating a framework in which sexuality defines women's societal roles (Jane, 2017).

Finally, these dynamics underscore the disproportion-ately severe effects that online harassment has on female victims compared to their male counterparts. Research highlights how such attacks reinforce existing inequalities and contribute to the marginalization of women in digital spaces (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021).

Cybermisogyny as a new form of gender-based violence

The considerations outlined above suggest that cyber misogyny can be conceptualized as a form of gender-based violence (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021; Elias & Gurbanova, 2018; Spallaccia, 2017). This perspective aligns with scholarship identifying the primary objective of misogynistic online discourse as silencing not only the direct victim but also, by extension, the broader group to which the victim belongs—namely, women. This silencing serves to reinforce existing gender asymmetries and to protect the hierarchical social order that is perceived as being destabilized by economic and social changes (Kim, 2018). Scholars have described this phenomenon as a form of "hierarchical insecurity," which emerges from the erosion of traditional male hegemony and the accompanying anxieties about evolving gender dynamics (Welzer-Lang, 2023; Kim, 2018).

The economic crisis and shifting social landscapes have further exacerbated these tensions by challenging long-standing cultural narratives, such as the archetype of the male breadwinner and the dependent woman (Ging, 2019; Kim, 2015). Men increasingly perceive a sense of inadequacy in meeting the demands of hegemonic masculinity, which has traditionally been tied to their ability to achieve economic success, secure high-status occupational roles, and fulfill societal expectations regarding provision and authority. This perceived inadequacy is often externalized, with women being scapegoated for these crises. Women are portrayed as morally culpable for disrupting the established order, while male privilege remains unexamined and unchallenged (Venäläinen & Virkki, 2019).

In this context, the production and dissemination of misogynistic discourse fulfill a dual purpose: first, to reassert male solidarity and strengthen male bonds; and second, to sustain hegemonic masculinity by reinforcing traditional gender roles and hierarchies (D'Souza et al., 2018). These patterns illustrate how misogyny is mobilized as a tool for restoring a sense of male dominance in a rapidly changing world.

These dynamics have long been a focal point in feminist scholarship on gender-based violence. Scholars adhering to this perspective argue that violence against women is deeply intertwined with the social construction of gender identities and relationships, as well as with broader systems of male domination and female subordination (Romito, 2000; Lombardi, 2016; Creazzo, 2008; Bimbi, 2014). Contrary to essentialist narratives that attribute male violence to innate biological tendencies, this framework posits that such violence is perpetuated

through a complex interplay of cultural values, social norms, and institutional practices that sustain gender inequality (Russo & Pirlott, 2006; Koss et al., 2003).

Central to this argument is the concept of "symbolic violence," as articulated by Bourdieu (1998). Symbolic violence refers to the subtle and often invisible mechanisms through which power dynamics and gender asymmetries are reproduced and normalized within a shared cultural framework. Gender-based violence, therefore, is not merely the result of overt acts of aggression but is embedded within the social fabric that defines power relations and legitimizes inequalities. While physical violence against women serves as a direct method for maintaining male dominance (Romito, 2000), the broader mechanisms of social order, institutional norms, and gendered practices contribute to rendering these inequalities invisible and thus more difficult to challenge.

Ultimately, this framework underscores the structural and systemic nature of gender-based violence, situating it within the broader context of cultural and institutional practices that perpetuate male supremacy and female subordination. By examining these interrelated dynamics, it becomes evident that addressing cyber misogyny requires not only a focus on individual acts of aggression but also an interrogation of the cultural and institutional forces that enable and sustain such behavior.

Rubin (1975) introduced the term "sex-gender system" to describe the framework through which gender serves as a mechanism for imposing divisions between sexes based on social roles. This concept highlights the process by which the division of these roles is naturalized within a functionalist view of society. From this perspective, society operates as an organic system, where individual components fulfill specific functions. Within this structure, social organization arbitrarily assigns tasks, thereby differentiating and reinforcing the concept of gender as a fundamental organizing principle. Gender becomes both a category and a tool through which societal functions are maintained, emphasizing the constructed nature of these divisions.

A related concept, "doing gender," as proposed by West and Zimmerman (1987), builds on this foundation by underscoring that differences between men and women are not innate but are socially structured and perpetuated through ongoing interactions. According to this perspective, gender membership is a process of identity construction that is internalized by individuals and continuously developed through social practices. The categorization of roles and identities is embedded within society and serves to transform structures by assigning meanings of belonging, thereby legitimizing these constructed differences. For example, stereotypical models of masculinity and femininity are introduced from birth and perpetuated as natural distinctions. These norms often restrict opportunities for children, discouraging them from pursuing educational paths or professional aspirations that deviate from these socially enforced expectations.

This process of socialization into gender norms and associated stereotypes fosters a shared set of beliefs aimed primarily at maintaining the asymmetry of power between genders. This asymmetry is embedded in the broader societal model and the cultural heritage that defines it. Raewyn Connell (2006) emphasizes that social bodies are simultaneously objects and subjects of social practices. According to Connell, the social structure that constructs and reconstructs gender through interactions does not impose rigid masculine and feminine roles arbitrarily or from above. Instead, it is continuously shaped and reshaped through everyday practices, which in turn mold these roles. Thus, the differences between men and women are not fixed or immutable but are socially constructed and reinforced on a daily basis through shared practices and interactions.

Bourdieu (1998) takes this analysis further by highlighting the role of symbolic violence in perpetuating gendered power dynamics. Symbolic violence refers to an asymmetric interaction governed by an invisible, non-physical form of violence that exerts domination in the most insidious and enduring ways. Unlike overt, coercive physical force, symbolic violence operates subtly, embedding itself within cultural practices and social norms. It acts through the body rather than upon it, shaping behavior and reinforcing the status quo (Bourdieu, 1998; Topper, 2001). Bourdieu also notes that these representations of gender asymmetries are deeply embedded in the symbolic universe shared by both men and women. The dispositions imposed by the social order are internalized by individuals, leading to a situation where female submission is both spontaneous and coerced, a duality that underscores the pervasive nature of symbolic domination.

Richardson-Self (2021) expands on this by examining how women navigate objectification within this framework. Women often attempt to align themselves with male standards, measuring their self-worth by the extent to which they succeed in fulfilling these expectations. Their value becomes tied to their ability to meet the criteria of male desire, perpetuating the notion that women's bodies exist primarily for male consumption and gratification. This shared societal image reinforces the idea that objectification is not only normalized but also internalized by both genders.

In line with this logic, evidence suggests that these forms of representation are often perpetuated by women themselves. For instance, Musi and colleagues (2022) conducted a study on the insults directed at political figures within the Italian social media landscape. The findings revealed that both male and female users frequently directed similarly toxic language and content toward female political figures. This demonstrates that the internalization of gendered stereotypes and biases is not exclusive to men but is shared across genders, further illustrating how these dynamics are reproduced and sustained within society.

Through social mechanisms, the arbitrariness of the gender-based social order is systematically concealed, interpreted in ways that converge with dominant narratives, and ultimately perceived as natural, inevitable, and un-

changeable by both men and women (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2006). These mechanisms render the inequalities and asymmetries within which violence occurs invisible, as they normalize and naturalize the differences that underpin these dynamics. As Bourdieu (1998) argues, these "naturalized" mechanisms of difference make even the most intolerable conditions of existence appear acceptable, or even inevitable, by embedding them into the fabric of everyday life. Such mechanisms manifest in diverse aspects of social life, including behaviors and norms that shape gender roles and expectations related to sexuality, reproductive decisions, the distribution of paid and unpaid labor within households, access to education, healthcare, and political participation, as well as personal mobility and freedom during both day and night. These mechanisms also materialize in systemic gaps, such as the lack of robust guarantees for equal access to employment opportunities, career advancement, and fair compensation[1]. Symbolic violence, as a subtle and pervasive form of domination, operates precisely because it often eludes recognition by its victims. It functions through mechanisms that mask its oppressive nature, making it difficult to perceive as violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Language itself serves as a potent tool of domination, structuring the terms of inclusion and exclusion in discourse and formalizing asymmetries between men and women (Bourdieu, 1998). In this context, language reinforces power dynamics by establishing the parameters of what is deemed legitimate or acceptable behavior and thought.

This mechanism is vividly illustrated in the case of online hate speech directed against women, which uses language as a means to confine them to roles and spaces traditionally considered appropriate—typically domestic and reproductive domains. Women who challenge these boundaries by expressing themselves in public spheres, particularly in fields such as politics or activism, often face punitive responses in the form of hate speech (De Costa, 2021; Venäläinen & Virkki, 2019; Nurik, 2019; Carlson, 2017). Such attacks function to reinforce traditional gender norms and discourage women from asserting their presence in spaces historically dominated by men.

The feminist movement has also been instrumental in highlighting the constructed nature of gender roles and masculinity. Within this framework, the emergence of "men's studies" has been significant in deconstructing the notion of masculinity as a biological destiny, emphasizing instead its socially constructed character (Hearn, 1991; Seidler, 1992; Tosh, 1996). Among these contributions, the pro-feminist perspective (Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992; Stoltenberg, 1990, 1993; Hearn & Morgan, 1990; Brod & Kaufman, 1994) has been particularly impactful. This

perspective, informed by left-wing activism and deeply engaged with feminist scholarship, has encouraged men to view the proliferation of feminist questions not as a threat to their power but as an opportunity for critical self-reflection and a reimagining of their relationship with power structures.

Proponents of this perspective argue that men themselves can play a role in dismantling sexist cultures by interrogating the historical privileges associated with masculinity. Bourdieu (1998) insightfully describes male power as a "trap" in which men become both prisoners and victims of the dominant representation of masculinity. Male privilege, while conferring certain advantages, imposes a constant tension on men, requiring them to demonstrate their masculinity through economic, sexual, and social success. This relentless pursuit of approval, often validated through violence or aggression, becomes a source of vulnerability for men, perpetuating a cycle of dominance and insecurity.

The glorification of male values—strength, dominance, and sexual prowess—is often juxtaposed with the denigration of qualities associated with femininity, such as weakness, virginity, and fidelity. This dichotomy fosters an anxious fear of failure, leading to frustration and vulnerability. Masculinity, therefore, is frequently expressed not only in opposition to women but also in a disharmonious relationship with them, characterized by a pervasive fear of the feminine. As Bellassai (2011) observes, violence against women becomes a means of maintaining and reaffirming a historical notion of virility that is perceived to be in decline.

Patriarchal hierarchies rooted in hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) coexist with the ambivalent frameworks of a new gender order that increasingly challenges the traditional male-female dichotomy. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasize that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed construct but rather a contested position within gender power relations. This dynamic adaptability allows it to persist even as societal norms shift. As previously noted, the insecurities surrounding masculinity and the anxiety over losing dominance are key drivers of online hate speech against women. These dynamics reveal how societal transformations and shifting gender relations fuel hostility, as men perceive these changes as a direct challenge to their historically privileged position.

Heterogeneity and intersectionality

Regarding the heterogeneity of victims and the intersectionality of violence, online gendered hate speech aligns with feminist analyses of gender-based violence. Specifically, proponents of the "intersectional" approach (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006) have underscored the necessity of an analytical framework that examines the interconnectedness of sexism, heterosexism, racism, and colonial-

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1   In this context, we specifically refer to the "gender pay gap." This term indicates the gender pay disparity, representing the difference between the average salary of men and that of women engaged in paid employment.

ism in the production and perpetuation of male violence. This approach highlights the complex interplay between various forms of oppression, providing a more nuanced understanding of gender-based violence in its many manifestations.

One of the foundational contributions to this perspective was made by the black lesbian researchers and activists of the Combahee River Collective. They argued for the development of an integrated analysis of racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, positing that these systems are not discrete but inherently interconnected. At the heart of these intersecting forms of violence lie processes of "othering," which marginalize individuals not only based on gender hierarchies but also on overlapping axes of class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Mason, 2002; Magarraggia & Cherubini, 2013). This approach has been instrumental in illustrating how different dimensions of inequality intersect, shaping unique experiences of victimization and creating distinct conditions of vulnerability for individuals situated at these intersections (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Nixon & Humphreys, 2010).

In line with this perspective, research on victims of online gendered hate speech emphasizes that such violence frequently targets underprivileged social groups, including immigrants, sexual minorities, and women (Wilhelm & Joeckel, 2018). Scholars note that although all women are potential targets of gendered hate speech[2], the heterogeneity of victims means that not all women face the same likelihood of being targeted or experience the same degree of harm. Women of color, individuals with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and those who deviate from traditional gender norms are particularly vulnerable to severe forms of online hate speech, such as death threats and rape threats (D'Souza et al., 2018). These intersecting identities exacerbate the severity and frequency of attacks, further entrenching systemic inequalities.

For instance, Venäläinen and Virkki (2019) explore the intersection of gender and racial discrimination in online violence, demonstrating how the crises of white and male hegemony are projected onto migrants and women. In this context, these groups are often scapegoated, portrayed as morally culpable for broader societal and economic challenges, and subjected to violence aimed at reestablishing traditional gendered and racial hierarchies.

Saresma and colleagues (2021) expand on this analysis,

emphasizing how hate speech frequently employs the binary rhetoric of populism. This rhetoric constructs a dichotomy between "us" and "them," framing these groups as hierarchically and adversarially opposed. In this binary logic, "us" is often equated with white, male, cisgender individuals, while "them" represents marginalized groups depicted as enemies and existential threats. This framing is used to justify violence and hostility toward these groups, reinforcing systems of domination and exclusion.

The advantages of the online medium

Finally, scholars have critically examined the factors contributing to the prevalence of abusive behaviors in the virtual realm, proposing various hypotheses that emphasize the unique characteristics of online environments. These include the anonymity afforded to users, which eliminates critical social deterrents; the ease of access to digital platforms, which facilitates participation regardless of geographical or social barriers; the ability to reach significantly larger audiences compared to traditional communication methods; the rapid transmission of messages; the enduring availability of online content, which amplifies its impact over time; and the capability to delete content at will, granting users a sense of control over their digital interactions (Schauer, 2019; Brison & Gelber, 2019; Citron, 2011). Collectively, these features establish a context that not only accommodates but often exacerbates harmful behaviors, making the virtual space a fertile ground for incivility and hostility.

A particularly salient aspect of this phenomenon is the role of anonymity, which has been identified as a key factor in diminishing the social and moral costs associated with personal attacks. Anonymity enables perpetrators to distance themselves from the harm they inflict, thereby reducing accountability and fostering a psychological detachment that facilitates the escalation of trolling and other aggressive behaviors. Moreover, repeated exposure to online incivility can lead to a process of desensitization, wherein individuals become increasingly indifferent to the harm caused by their actions, perpetuating a cycle of normalized hostility (Franks, 2019; Ascher, 2019).

Building on this understanding, the Online Disinhibition Effect Hypothesis (Suler, 2004) provides a theoretical framework for explaining how anonymity and other features of the online environment contribute to disinhibited behaviors. This hypothesis identifies several factors that amplify disinhibition beyond anonymity, including invisibility, which reduces accountability by removing face-to-face interactions; asynchrony, which allows individuals to delay responses and detach emotionally from their actions; loneliness, which fosters feelings of isolation that can influence online interactions; time distortion, which alters perceptions of time during online exchanges, leading to a diminished awareness of the consequences; and immersiveness, wherein the engaging nature of digital environments encourages individuals to behave more im-

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2 Also regarding the diversity of victims, interpretative approaches to gender-based violence agree in asserting that it is a pervasive phenomenon, potentially affecting women from any social group, educational level, geographical distribution, age, and ethnic background (Magarraggia & Cherubini, 2013). Feminist studies have also highlighted it as a historically recurring phenomenon, with manifestations recorded in different historical periods and cultures, evident in ancient laws, legal systems, religious texts, as well as in the chronicles of wars and revolutions (Brownmiller, 1975; Roia, 2017).

pulsively or aggressively. These factors interact to create a virtual space where social norms are more easily disregarded, leading to behaviors that diverge significantly from those exhibited offline.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010) extends this analysis by arguing that anonymity functions as a catalyst for online hate speech, creating a "shame-free zone" in which individuals feel emboldened to harm others without facing social or legal consequences. This absence of accountability erodes critical barriers that typically inhibit harmful behavior, fostering a culture of impunity within online interactions.

Further insights into the impact of anonymity on group behavior are provided by the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) (Berger et al., 1977). This model posits that anonymity in group contexts enhances identification with the group, thereby increasing conformity to its norms. In deindividuated settings, individuals experience a diminished sense of personal accountability and a shift in identity, aligning their behaviors with the collective goals of the group. This dynamic often leads to heightened aggression and hostility, as group norms in such contexts frequently legitimize or even encourage harmful actions. Thus, anonymity not only facilitates individual acts of hostility but also strengthens group dynamics that perpetuate and normalize these behaviors.

Although anonymity has long been considered a primary driver of online hate speech, recent developments in digital platforms have begun to challenge its centrality. Social media platforms have increasingly adopted real-name policies, requiring users to register with their authentic identities. These policies aim to reduce anonymity within mainstream online spaces, making it more difficult for individuals to engage anonymously. However, while these measures have reshaped aspects of the digital landscape, they also underscore the multifaceted nature of online hate speech, suggesting that its persistence cannot be attributed solely to anonymity but must be understood as a product of complex social, cultural, and technological factors (Jane, 2017).

Conclusions

This paper has explored how the literature frames gender-based vilification as a dominant discourse that functions to reaffirm and reinforce hierarchical social structures (Elias & Gurbanova, 2018; Richardson-Self, 2021; Venäläinen & Virkki, 2019). The persistence of such behaviors is widely attributed to cultural factors that parallel those underlying physical gender-based violence, emphasizing the deeply embedded nature of these practices within societal norms. Approaches that view gender-based violence as a socially constructed phenomenon highlight the ways in which culture itself embodies and externalizes relationships of social dominance, with gendered bodies being inscribed with the markers of these hierarchies and their associated power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1998). This

violence, therefore, finds its origins and justification in systems of symbolic dominance that are sustained by shared representations of gender relations, wherein the asymmetry between men and women is normalized and perpetuated (Toffanin, 2015; Bimbi, 2014).

Within the digital sphere, gendered hate speech mirrors these mechanisms by enacting processes of othering, through which targeted individuals or groups are constructed as morally legitimate objects of hatred and denigration. These practices operate as tools to reestablish and solidify traditional gender hierarchies, particularly in response to the disruptions caused by social and economic transformations. Such dynamics not only entrench the differentiation between genders but also contribute to the marginalization and devaluation of women. Carlson (2017) underscores the insidious impact of these behaviors, noting that the internalization of offensive messages by those targeted often leads to a profound erosion of self-worth, effectively convincing individuals of their own inferiority and perpetuating their subjugation. In this way, the cybersphere emerges as a powerful space where social identity power dynamics are not only articulated but also reinforced and institutionalized, creating an environment that perpetuates structural inequalities (Richardson-Self, 2021).

The search for viable solutions to such a widespread and complex issue remains a significant challenge. Central to this difficulty is the ongoing debate over the precise definition of hate speech and the distinction between expressions of dissent—however derogatory—and behaviors that qualify as hate speech. This definitional ambiguity reflects broader tensions regarding the permissible limits of freedom of expression, an issue that continues to polarize legal and scholarly discussions (Tanzarella, 2020). Excessively repressive legal frameworks, while potentially curbing harmful speech, risk infringing upon fundamental rights to free expression, whereas overly narrow definitions of hate speech may fail to offer sufficient protection for victims, thereby undermining the principles of equality and human dignity.

In the absence of comprehensive regulatory frameworks, most countries—both in Europe and beyond, with few exceptions[3]—have adopted fragmented approaches, relying on individual legislative provisions to address specific aspects of the problem. This piecemeal approach, while addressing certain behaviors, has yet to resolve the broader structural and cultural factors that enable hate speech to thrive. The tension between safeguarding free expression and ensuring adequate protections against hate speech underscores the complexity of this issue and the difficulty of devising universally acceptable solutions.

Alongside legal interventions, the literature emphasizes the pivotal role of online platforms in managing and mitigating hate speech. These platforms employ various

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3   It is the case of Germany, France, United Kingdom, Sweden, and Canada.

mechanisms, including content moderation, user reporting, and the removal of harmful content, to address abusive behaviors (Ascher, 2019).

However, the effectiveness and consistency of these measures remain highly variable, often shaped by the platforms' specific policies and their willingness to prioritize the safety of users over other considerations. One significant issue lies in the algorithms tasked with detecting hate speech. These algorithms face inherent limitations, as hate speech does not always contain explicit slurs or narrowly defined expressions of hatred, making automatic detection a complex and imprecise task. Furthermore, perpetrators often adapt their behavior to circumvent algorithmic detection once they understand its operational parameters, thereby reducing the effectiveness of such tools. Compounding this problem is the fact that algorithms are designed by humans and thus may reflect implicit biases, resulting in non-neutral performance and potential inconsistencies in the identification of harmful content (Costello & Hawdon, 2020; Cohen-Almagor, 2017).

Equally problematic are the limitations associated with human moderation. The vast volume of content produced online far exceeds the capacity of existing moderators to review it comprehensively, creating significant gaps in oversight. Additionally, moderators, like algorithms, may fail to act with complete neutrality, as their decisions can be influenced by personal biases or institutional policies, further complicating the equitable management of hate speech (Stjernfelt & Lauritzen, 2020).

In response to these limitations, the concept of counterspeech has been proposed as a non-legal approach to addressing hate speech. This strategy involves directly responding to offensive messages by challenging their content and engaging the perpetrator in a dialogue. Proponents of this method argue that counterspeech represents a more effective alternative to preventive or retrospective censorship, as it actively confronts the hate speaker and seeks to undermine their message through reasoned discourse (Gagliardone et al., 2015; Carlson, 2017). However, the implementation of counterspeech is not without challenges.

One significant concern relates to the identity of the individual or entity responsible for countering hate speech. If this responsibility falls upon the direct or indirect victims of the hate speech, several potential issues emerge. For instance, there is the risk that the victim's response could escalate the conflict by mirroring the perpetrator's behavior, leading to an unending cycle of hostility and potentially amplifying the original harm (Costello & Hawdon, 2020). Moreover, the effectiveness of counterspeech depends heavily on the perceived credibility of the responder. Victims belonging to oppressed or vulnerable groups—the primary targets of hate speech—are unlikely to be regarded as authoritative or persuasive by perpetrators, given the existing power asymmetries that underpin these interactions (Gelber, 2012; Tirrell, 2018).

To address these challenges, scholars advocate for broadening the range of actors involved in counterspeech initiatives. Specifically, they emphasize the importance of institutional support in providing an alternative narrative to that propagated by hate speakers. This approach shifts the burden away from isolated individuals and highlights the necessity of collective action to counteract the effects of hate speech. Entities such as the state, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and authoritative figures capable of challenging harmful narratives are seen as particularly well-positioned to fulfill this role. By leveraging their influence, these actors can effectively confront hate speech, promote alternative discourses, and empower victims through solidarity and support (Maitra & McGowan, 2012; Richardson-Self, 2021).

Academia, too, has a critical role to play in countering online hate speech. Scholars have noted that much of the public discourse surrounding misogynistic harassment is mediated by the media, which often shapes societal perceptions of the issue (Spallaccia, 2017). By conducting rigorous research, developing innovative frameworks, and fostering public awareness through academic outputs, researchers can equip society with the tools necessary to recognize and combat hate speech. Furthermore, academic contributions can help dismantle harmful stereotypes and provide alternative representations of the phenomenon, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable digital environment (Richardson-Self, 2021; D'Souza et al., 2018; Jane, 2017; Carlson, 2017).

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