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TOXICITY & SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

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Introduction

This work explores the intersection of toxicity and symbolic violence to delve into the issue of violence on social media platforms. We posit that these concepts are pivotal in comprehending two crucial dimensions of online violence: its propagation and legitimation.

Drawing on the notion of discourse from Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989), we understand this concept as key to negotiate and build social practices and, more broadly, to negotiate power relationships. Discourse is a crucial element in negotiating and constructing social practices, and more broadly, in shaping power dynamics. In this framework, language serves as the conduit through which power structures and domination manifest (Wodak, 1999). To maintain the *status quo*, dominant groups deploy discursive strategies to legitimize their power. These rhetorical strategies not only negotiate legitimacy but can also be employed in discussions surrounding violence. Hence, on social media, we contend that it is possible to challenge and subvert the predominant and dominant perspective—meaning that the core of violent discourse does not necessarily represent the majority's views. This manipulation of perception within the online environment has the potential to silence larger groups. In this discussion, we build upon our previous work on gender toxicity (Tavares & Recuero,

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2023), examining how it can also be construed as a form of legitimizing violent discourses.

Symbolic Violence, Toxicity, and Social Media Platforms:

The concept of symbolic violence is intricately linked to the idea of the violence inherent in language (Bourdieu, 1991). Symbolic violence pertains to how power operates through the symbolic dimensions of society. Through language, cultural domination,

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inequality, and oppression are not only legitimized but also perpetuated by the power structures sustaining them. Symbolic violence often manifests as a subtle form of violence, existing within social structures, educational systems, and cultural frameworks. Žižek (2008) contends that symbolic violence also has subjective effects, shaping how individuals perceive and understand the world.

Online discourse significantly influences symbolic violence. Social media platforms, and the broader platformization of communication tools, exemplified by Meta's acquisitions of WhatsApp and Instagram, introduce additional conditions for legitimating and disseminating this form of violence. Employing algorithmic governance (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck, 2019), these platforms negotiate visibility with users, wherein increased user interaction with content leads to heightened visibility through trends and other organizational tools. Simultaneously, as this content gains visibility through interaction, it quickly garners legitimacy and shapes public perception, often employing strategies such as humor (Recuero, 2015). The existence of echo chambers (Garimella et al., 2018) establishes distinct public spaces reinforced by platform infrastructures, creating a misleading perception that everyone is talking about something and shares the same opinion, when, in reality, it reflects the system's organization of discourse. Echo chambers can potentially influence the radicalization of views (O'Hara & Stevens, 2015) and the transition of online violence to offline violence, especially in the political realm (Rasmussen & Peters, 2023).

The proliferation of violence, however, is not solely attributed to the platform's infrastructure and governance but also unquestionably to the use of these tools to legitimize and propagate such discourses. By permitting this, social media platforms inadvertently endorse toxicity. Toxicity, in this context, is comprehended as the consequence of the dissemination of violent discourses online, contaminating the public sphere and stifling diverse perspectives (Recuero, 2024). In this scenario, violence transcends the individual realm and infiltrates the collective dimension due to the support of social media platforms. Users leverage these tools to express their thoughts, emotions, and anger. However, in sharing their content, they often perpetuate and reinforce symbolic violence, providing these violent discourses with increased strength.

Discussion

Here, we present a framework for discussing how toxicity contributes to legitimizing symbolic violence by silencing other voices. Legitimation, a crucial aspect of discourse, is linked to the strategies employed to present and justify power relations to audiences (van Leeuwen, 2007). The literature discusses various strategies focusing on different discursive relations. In this paper, we propose a systematization of forms of violence legitimation on social media platforms, divided into two groups: a) discursive structure and b) spreadable structure:

In the "discursive structure," we categorize the forms that violent discourse takes on social media. Initially, we identified two major categories: implicit and explicit violence. Implicit violence is more connected to symbolic violence, often encompassing elements like humor and stereotyping. Humor is a key form of legitimizing symbolic violence, as discussed by various works (see Martínez-Guzmán & Íñiguez-Rueda, 2017; Volcan, 2018), especially through the memetic culture of social media platforms (Crawford et al., 2021). Another form of legitimation is stereotyping, using language to generalize and categorize individuals or social groups based on perceived characteristics, leading to biased portrayals. Stereotyping constructs "the other," a key form of symbolic violence (Ladegaard, 2012). Explicit violence, extensively discussed in the literature, includes name-calling, incivility, and intolerance (Rossini, 2022).

In the second category, "spreadable structure," we observe the characteristics of the discourse legitimized by spreading on social platforms and why it occurs. This dimension helps us understand the meaning of the violence and whether the view is predominant or if platforms favor specific perspectives and/or minor ideologies. To comprehend these categories, it is necessary to consider the social and infrastructural power prevailing in that context. The first one is polarization, akin to stereotyping but serving as a strategy of division (Simchon et al., 2022). Polarization aids echo chambers and justifies violence within a group, making certain viewpoints dominant and part of a larger collective. The second is toxicity, seen as a quality that poisons online messages (Recuero, 2024). Toxicity creates a dominant discourse shared by a large number of users, emulating the majority. If any group targets someone or something with name-calling, it quickly spreads and contaminates the debate, allowing implicit or explicit violence.

Conclusions:

In this work, we focused on discussing how symbolic violence and toxicity are intertwined, proposing a framework and categories for discourse and sociological research. We argued that toxicity is an effect of the spread of online violence and symbolic violence. However, we also contended that toxicity is only possible as individuals engage in sharing violent discourses. Thus, the combination of social media platform affordances and individual actions enables toxicity to be a form of legitimation, as toxic discourse silences and overwhelms other voices.

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