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CROSS-PLATFORM GENDERTROLLING: A CASE STUDY ON A PROMINENT HARASSMENT CASE IN BRAZIL

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Introduction

Previous research has shown that online platforms and their functionalities have been used to attack women (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Halpin et al., 2023; Massanari, 2016). Indeed, there is growing evidence of the inventive strategies misogynists employ to cultivate hostile online communities operating under the radar (Manne, 2017; Silva, 2023; Solea & Sugiura, 2023; Han & Yin, 2022) or even achieving mainstream media visibility (Reidy, Abbott, & Parker, 2023; Han & Yin, 2022). However, little is known about the adoption of cross-platform strategies for disseminating misogynistic content online (Di Meco, 2023; Hua et al., 2024), particularly in the Global South.

Online hate campaigns can be instrumentalized to perpetrate psychological violence (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017) or influence public opinion (Sobieraj, 2017; Giglietto et al., 2020). These malicious actions can be orchestrated to target and harm women who report sexual violence (Sheikh & Rogers, 2024; Gianino, 2017; Killeen et al, 2022) specially in high-profile harassment cases. A notable example is the Amber Heard vs. Johnny Depp trial (Reidy, Abbott, & Parker, 2023; Robinson & Hiltz, 2024), where posts and comments defending sexist and abusive behavior flooded social media with misogynistic attacks. This case's repercussion provides insights into the online misogynist ecosystem (Lorenz, 2022; Bot Sentinel; 2022) and illustrates the concept of

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gendertrolling (Mantilla, 2013).

Gendertrolling is a form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (Bansal et al, 2023) where individuals become targets of coordinated cyber harassment based on their gender. It aims to destabilize victims, often women, to provoke negative public reactions, manipulate organic interactions, and disrupt women's participation in social media. Frequently, gendertrolling results in silencing victims in public debates (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how gendertrolling campaigns can be orchestrated across multiple social media platforms to inflate support for misogynistic claims. We propose a case study of one of Brazil's most prominent sexual harassment allegations involving celebrities from the country's largest television network, Rede Globo. In 2019, twelve women accused their former boss, Marcius Melhem (MM), of harassment and/or attempted rape, supported by witnesses who corroborated their testimonies (Latam Journalism Review, 2021). The main accuser was the comedian Dani Calabresa (DC). Following widespread public discussion, in 2022, Melhem and supporters, particularly the journalist Ricardo Feltrin (RF), systematically produced online content about the allegations after being dismissed from mainstream media due to the case. Against this backdrop and considering the increasing reports of online misogyny in Brazil (Safernet, n.d.), this study addresses the following research question: is there evidence of cross-platform gendertrolling orchestrated campaign against Dani Calabresa? If so, are there signs that it was a coordinated action?

Materials and Methods

To address this question, this study examines content production user interactions, potential coordination dynamics, and audience incitement. We employ a cross-platform approach encompassing YouTube videos and user comments on Instagram.

On YouTube, we collected 164 videos published by Melhem and Feltrin between June 2022 and July 2023. These videos received over 64.7K comments and were extracted using the scraper YTDLP (yt-dlp, 2020/2024).

On Instagram, we collected 1,513 comments from three posts made by two brands that featured Dani Calabresa, the main accuser, in advertisements. These companies will be referred to as Company V (228K followers as of September 2024) and Company G (192K followers). We removed comments made by the companies' official profiles, resulting in 1,436 comments. We manually categorised these comments to flag those containing attacks or denigrative messages.

To detect coordinated campaigns, we employed quantitative models to identify anomalous trends in selected posts. First, we applied an anomaly detection model to recognize unusual patterns in Instagram comments. We calculated the following daily metrics for the Instagram comments: a) Number of comments; b) Number of distinct commenters; c) Average time interval between comments.

We applied the Isolation Forest algorithm (Liu, 2008) to detect outliers in the time series data for each company. To further analyze the coordinated nature of the comments, we

used Natural Language Processing techniques, network analysis, and a community detection algorithm. These methods helped identify groups of potentially interconnected users whose comments exhibited high semantic similarity.

Results and discussion

The analysis identified unusual activity in Instagram comments directed at the victim following pro-defendant live streams on YouTube. Initially, the three Instagram posts had low engagement levels, but they gained significant traction after July 15, when the defendant and his main supporter, RF, mentioned the marketing campaigns on YouTube. During a live broadcast on his channel, the defendant subtly referenced the company's name while users contextualized the remark in the comments. On the night of July 15, RF hosted another live stream, explicitly mentioning the targeted YouTube comments. After this date, all analyzed variables showed a sharp increase. Simultaneously, the average interval between comments dropped, indicating a more concentrated flow of responses.

The Isolation Forest model identified anomalous spikes in comment metrics on July 15 and 17 for Companies V and G, respectively. These results confirm that pro-defendant YouTube live streams preceded a sudden increase of comments on Instagram. Most comments aimed to harm the victim's reputation. Of 1,436 comments, 1,214 (84%) were manually classified as attacks. Negative comments had more user engagement, averaging 12 likes per comment, whereas the others received only one like on average.

Overall, the comment distribution was right-skewed, with most users posting only once. A group of 152 users (16%) generated 21% of the comments, with highly similar semantic content. These comments used repetitive phrases and emojis to express rejection of DC and criticism of the companies that had her starring in their ads.

Our findings provide evidence of cross-platform campaigns targeting the victim's reputation, a recurrent pattern in cases of gender violence both in digital and offline contexts (Marwick, 2021; Segato, 2021). This demonstrates how content on one platform (YouTube) can trigger actions on another (Instagram). Online campaigns can rapidly gain momentum when users leverage different platforms to amplify their messages (Chakraborty, n.d; Lim et al, 2015).

Our results suggest that live streams appear to be a critical factor in cross-platform gendertrolling campaigns. There is a strong temporal relationship between pro defendant live streams and the subsequent surge in hostile comments against the victim, frequently recurring to the same pejorative words and expressions to refer to the women involved. This suggests that live streams act as rallying points, mobilizing users across platforms for reputational attacks.

Finally, gendertrolling campaigns can be both coordinated and organic. Although repetitive phrases and emojis suggest deliberate coordination, the right-skewed comment distribution suggests that, while systematic attacks occur, many users engage individually, expressing genuine sentiments rather than merely following scripted actions. This blend of coordinated and organic participation underscores the complexity of online reputational attacks.

The research highlights important aspects of content creators' and users' behavior, providing insights for future investigations into online misogyny and gendertrolling. One aspect that could be further explored in future studies is content monetization. We found indications that while comments on Instagram sought to damage the victim's reputation and financially harm the involved companies, the pro-defendant YouTube videos were monetized. Additionally, supporters frequently called for boycotts against the companies, while the defendant used YouTube's Super Chat feature to collect donations.

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