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"AMBIENT MISOGYNY": POCKETS OF GENDERED HATE ACROSS PLATFORMS AND CONTEXTS

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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

Recent years have shown a surge in literature on online misogyny much of which focuses on digital gender-based violence, described for example as mediated, online, or networked misogynies (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Bulut & Can, 2023; Vickery & Everbach, 2018). Misogyny, a "virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments" (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016: 171), may include gendered or sexist text- or image- based hate speech, death/rape threats, doxing, online flashing, and other forms of abuse that aim at shaming, harassing, or silencing women, queer, and non-binary individuals. It is also part of wider and often conservative value systems and, as such, closely intertwined with other antagonistic and/or divisive social attitudes

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including racism, islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-multiculturalism, and far-right or conspiracy-theorist thinking (Askanius, 2021; Weiss et al., 2025). However, despite regulatory efforts such as platform Terms and Conditions and the Digital Services Act that try to prevent and remove online hate, online misogyny continues to evade content moderation, regulation, as well as persecution at national level (Özkula et al., 2024).

A particular challenge lies in contents, dynamics, and accounts where misogyny is not overt, direct, targeted, or otherwise clearly identifiable. To explore these more unseen pockets of misogynistic content, this panel introduces the notion of "ambient misogyny". To do this, we draw on Eugenia Siapera's distinction between organised and ambient digital racism. Here, Siapera describes organised digital racism as overt and explicit, usually deemed "unacceptable and an aberration", often driven by organised or explicitly race-ideological groups and accounts. In comparison, she describes ambient racism as "banal everyday race talk". In line with Siapera's work, this panel discusses "ambient misogyny" as a form of banal, everyday gender commentary, often in unexpected contexts (i.e. spaces not specific to gender, rights, or politics) that establishes and reinforces binary gender-hierarchical/patriarchal gender dynamics that aim to subjugate individuals outside the non-heteronormative (white) male.

Compared to organised forms of misogyny, ambient misogyny has seen little scientific coverage. A substantial amount of literature addresses organised forms of misogyny such as in the different spaces of the manosphere (incels, red pill, pickup artists, masculinity podcasters), anti-feminist movements (e.g. movements in response to feminist movements and queer communities), and social media coverage of controversial gender issues such as abortion or transgender rights (e.g. Desborough, 2018; García-Mingo & Prieto-Blanco, 2021; Ging & Siapera, 2019). Some studies also addresses online practices that may be described as ambient, as expressed in memes and other types of online humour, and have called for these to be taken seriously (see Matamoros-Fernández, 2023; Matamoros-Fernández et al., 2023; Schmid, 2024). Nevertheless, little exists in terms of guidance on how ambient misogyny may be conceptualised, identified, and mitigated.

The aim of this panel is therefore to introduce and establish ambient misogyny as a concept across a diverse set of user communities and practices including 1) in the context of illness content creation on, 2) as expressed in polysemous memes, and 3) feminist practices in the Portuguese context. The contribution of the panel lies in that 1) it illustrates the mainstream ambient/environmental toxicity around women, femininity and effeminate practices, and notions of what constitutes "femaleness"; 2) it discusses how these are overlooked or left unmoderated in light of different factors such as humour, irony, and sarcasm, women's and non-binary persons' choices for exposure, and normative views on femininity and women's bodies; and 3) it opens up a debate on the consequences of ambient and discursive forms of toxicity, as well as ways of mitigating it. In aggregation, these papers aim to illustrate the role of gender performance, feminist politics, female and queer bodies in receiving online toxicity and hate. This includes an illustration of the ways in which women receive backlash for their choices, for example in how they decide to use social media platforms to portray their bodies or discuss gender-based, feminist, or otherwise gendered political issues.

In doing so, this panel aims to illustrate how seemingly harmless contents form part of wider misogynistic regimes that assume gendered hierarchies and wider intersecting ideological narratives (e.g. racism, fascism, and misogyny). As part of the subsequent discussion, the panel will reflect on the potential downplay, normalisation, and alarmist labelling of hate, as well as social harms attached to these. Toward that purpose, the panel will open with a brief conceptual review of ambient and discursive /versus organised and targeted) misogyny that sets the theoretical framework for the presentations, followed by four presentations illustrating what such ambient misogyny looks like across different cases and communities of practices. The presentations will close with a brief discussion of the consequences, risks, harms, and potential forms of mitigation, before opening up the floor for questions.

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MEMETIC MISOGYNY: WHEN VIOLENCE IS FUNNY

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Context: Memes and misogyny

Memes have been a significant point of interest for both gendered hate and wider practices of online hate and violence (Andreasen, 2021; Koch, 2024). A wide array of scholarship already exists on digital gender-based violence, described for example as mediated, online, or networked misogynies (e.g. Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). This article focuses on platformed visual misogyny, a form of digitally mediated misogyny that draws on the technological affordances of networked visuals. This includes visual iterations of gender-based online violence that are typically graphic and image-based, and include practices such as revenge and fake porn, image-based sexual abuse, online flashing, and non-consensual applications and dissemination of sexual, explicit, or intimate imagery through digital networks for purposes of shaming and harassment. Some scholarship already addresses different forms of visual misogyny to document, for example, how women are dehumanised or devalued through animal imagery, stereotyped as vain or trivial or sexualised and commodified through gendered practices, or rendered vulnerable and childlike through aesthetic choices (see Jacobs, 2022). However, wider systematic analyses of the phenomenon remain scarce.

In response to this issue, this paper discusses contextual factors of an *implicit and ambient* form of visual gender-based hate: memetic misogyny. Memes significantly draw on affordances offered by visual communication, but unlike the examples listed above, they tend to be less explicit in their articulations and visualisations of violence. The prevalent ”mash-up” character of memes often infuses socio-cultural and -political narratives with sarcasm, insider jokes, double-speak, and other forms of humour. The

conventional use of humour in memes “masks” or trivialises hate and violence, a dynamic that has been said to need investigation in more contextualised ways (see Schmid, 2023: 15). The aim of this article is therefore to begin a systematic exploration of the diverse polysemous nuances and contexts of memetic misogyny. We do so by asking (1) what kinds of contexts are referenced in polysemic misogynistic memes, and how; and (2) in what ways do these creative processes reflect the specific contexts in which they have been shared? In doing so, we aim to generate an inductive overview of the contextual complexities of memetic misogyny.

Data, methods, & cases

This article investigates these contexts through a context-sensitive ethnographically informed visual analysis of memes from three case studies: 1) Greta Thunberg memes in a climate-sceptic Facebook group, 2) memes shared on Twitter under #SisterIDdoBelieve, a movement in response to a gang rape case in Spain, and 3) Karen memes on YouTube, Twitter, and Reddit. These memes were posted in different contexts based on the political climate they were produced in and the platform spaces in which they were distributed. The resulting polysemy is typically challenging for visual analysis as the interpretation may vary depending across spaces and audiences due to differing understandings of symbols and contextual references (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2014).

These specific cases were chosen here based on their different iterations of memetic misogyny. #SisterIDoBelieveYou was anchored in a specific regional case with an identified victim/target and perpetrators. This resulted in targeted movements, both feminist and anti-feminist within a preferred platform. In comparison, the Greta case was not a gendered or rights-based case. Gender was decentred here and any gendered commentary a by-product of the group’s wider political leanings and values, which were reinforced as part of the specific Facebook subspace in which they were active. Finally, the Karens constituted a mainstream trope that promised different applications and readings depending on the spaces and communities these memes were shared in. Both the Greta and (above all the) Karen memes were therefore more ambient in nature than #SisterIDoBelieveYou and not situated in legal or formal-political contexts. In particular the Karen memes were often situated in seemingly depoliticised contexts. The different case studies therefore allowed for a capture of different types and attributes of misogyny, such as implicit and explicit, targeted and ambient forms, directed at named or unnamed individuals.

Findings

The findings show a polysemic make-up of memes that resulted from group-specific humour, regional politics, insider knowledge, community values and cohesion, and platform affordances. These include narratives that exploit and discredit women, but also prominent depictions and aesthetics that underlie these narratives. Prominent depictions included the targeted women (e.g. Greta Thunberg, the perceived Karens, and the gang rape victim) or conversely the perpetrators, as well as animals representing targeted women, fictional violence towards women (e.g. cartoon depictions of women being hit), cute symbols (e.g., hearts, stars, fictional animals), multimodal

depictions of supposedly “deserved” consequences such as physical violence, and memetic references and tropes such as Karens. These visual representations were often informed by text, either embedded in the images or used as framing in social media posts, tags, and hashtags.

Despite the mainstream applicability of these memes, platform specificities mattered, above all in terms of the digital mechanisms available to users. They were harnessed for visibility markers or invisibility and as framing devices, for example hashtags for visibility and framing in the case of Twitter, sub-group description and administration for limiting visibility on Facebook, title descriptions and compilations for framing on YouTube, and subreddits for the creation of Reddit meme collections. Depending on the specific cultural communities these were subject to, networked features were used for organised, targeted, coordinated, and amplified misogyny (#SisterIDoBelieveYou on Twitter), but particularly so for ambient forms of misogyny that resulted from carefully curated homogenous communities (e.g. Reddit communities and Greta memes in the Facebook group). As such, the ways in which misogyny was expressed extended beyond the memetic content to how affordances were (re)imagined and practised by the cultural communities in which they were shared, including how they were circulated, (re)contextualised, and (in)visibilised. These contextual complexities demonstrate that, while visual depictions and their textual framing play a significant role in how memetic misogyny is generated, there are further influences that impact their reading and visibility. These influences relate to platform specificities, user practices, and the cultural communities surrounding these.

Discussion

These results illustrate how memetic misogyny is both a global and cross-platform phenomenon, albeit within situated platform-specific subcultures of use. This suggests that memetic misogyny is created, spread, and maintained through a range of (1) contents (i.e. common depictions, narratives, and aesthetics), (2) platform affordances - both real and imagined, and (3) the cultural communities surrounding these - including memetic cultures. These contextual complexities carry significance for various stakeholders. Outsiders/viewers may only be able to interpret these memes denotatively and/or connotatively, thereby missing their hateful character (i.e. interpreting the meme with lacking tacit/insider knowledge), particularly in cases of ambient misogyny. For non-community members such as policymakers, the scientific community, platform providers, and the general public, this means that misogynistic memes bypass voluntary and hired human and automated content moderation, and identification processes conducted through artificial intelligence. We therefore join other scholars with a call to policymakers to take humour seriously and to differentiate harmful from harmless humour, but also caution that memetic harm may be difficult to ascertain and identify without an understanding of the individual cultural communities.

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NAVIGATING AMBIENT TOXICITY IN PLATFORMISED FEMINIST PRACTICES

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Introduction

For decades, digital and online settings have been a key site for feminist practices (Marwick, 2019) – with digital presence becoming imagined as crucial both for mobilising efforts and for one's own sense of identity as a feminist (Fotopoulou, 2016). While discussions about online feminisms often centre highly visible moments of feminist protest, (e.g.the #MeToo movement) (Quan-Haase et al., 2021), these practices also permeate everyday experiences. Everyday feminisms (Pruchniewska, 2019) occur on familiar social media platforms, co-existing with personal and professional uses. This opens feminist engagement to a wide range of actors – including politicians and

activists, but also “ordinary” social media users who may not self-identify as feminists. These practices can also include different degrees of engagement (Caldeira, 2024) thus inviting an holistic understanding of contemporay platformised feminisms (Barbala, 2024).

As these platforms expand the scope and visibility of feminisms, this increased popularity has been accompanied by rising anti-feminist backlash (Banet-Weiser, 2018) – with digital visibility exposing people to varied levels of toxicity. Deeply entrenched toxic technocultures (Massanari, 2017) and the growth of misogynistic online communities that boost sexual and gender-based harassment (Ging, 2019; 2023; Jane, 2014) can contribute to establish a baseline of ambient toxicity which can seep into everyday digital life. The harms of this toxicity tend to be intensified for historically minoritised groups (Hanckel et al., 2019).

If being active on social media is often an anxiety-inducing experience, fears of being judged or “getting it wrong” (Gill, 2021) can be exacerbated when engaging in political talk – which is felt as particularly sensitive (Ekström, 2016). While these anxieties are heightened for high-visibility users, they can nonetheless be shared by “ordinary” users (Gibbs et al., 2015) – warranting strategies to avoid potential criticisms (Scharff, 2023).

This paper explores how the threat of online hate and normalised ambient toxicity around platformised feminisms can affect those who engage with these topics (both as creators and as audiences), having a potentially disciplining effect. Focusing on everyday practices, we explore toxicity as reified not only in explicit acts of online hate, such as receiving hate messages or comments, but also through smaller acts like uncomfortable comments or interactions.

Methodological approach

This paper draws on extensive empirical research conducted in the Portuguese context, bringing together insights from two different projects on digital activisms and feminisms conducted between 2022 and 2025 funded by the European Union’s Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101059460 and by the FCT—Foundation for Science and Technology, under the scope of the project “On & Off: Atmospheres of dis/connection” (2022.01282.PTDC / DOI: 10.54499/2022.01282.PTDC).

Portugal provided a rich and underexplored context for this research. In recent years, there has been a growth of social media feminist mobilisation (e.g. Caldeira & Machado, 2023; Lamartine & Cerqueira, 2023). However, both this climate of political polarisation (Willem & Tortajada, 2021) and persisting socio-cultural resistance and scepticism towards feminism (Simões & Silveirinha, 2019) can be linked to risks of pushback and backlash, creating hostile environments that further contribute to stifle feminist participation (Dickel & Evolvi 2023).

Following a qualitative approach, it combines 18 interviews with women who share feminist content via Instagram, 8 focus groups with 46 participants who use Instagram largely as feminist audiences, and 22 interviews with people engaged with online

feminisms and activisms in Portugal. Both interviews and focus groups followed a semi-structured format (Gaskell, 2006).

Individual interviews and 4 of the focus groups were conducted online (via Zoom), with the other 4 being conducted in-person in Lisbon. Participants include purposefully selected interviewees (based on earlier studies by the authors), and people recruited through the circulation of calls for participation on social media and in-person. Amongst participants we find people with different feminist and activist positionings. While this sample is not representative, these varied profiles help to illustrate different dynamics of platformised feminist practices and tensions transversal to both high-visibility and 'ordinary' users.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants, and thematically coded (Legard et al., 2003) using MaxQDA, identifying emerging themes and topics within the data and establishing relationships between the themes and with existing scholarship on feminist media studies, platform cultures, and digital activisms.

Findings

Although participants saw social media as an important tool for contemporary feminisms, many recognised the low-level undercurrent threat of being misunderstood or receiving backlash accompanying engagement with these topics. Toxicity was seen as an unfortunate but normalised part of the platformised feminist experience, particularly for users who garner wide public visibility. However, similar anxieties and concerns also affected "ordinary" users, with the awareness of pervasive toxicity shaping how they engaged online. Even if hate was never directly experienced, participants felt the need to be prepared for such eventuality, feeling they were a 'lucky exception'.

Some participants shared experiences of explicitly hateful interactions coming from unintended audiences – hostile comments, sexual harassment, or even coordinated attacks. Yet, most who engaged with social media platforms at a more personal capacity tended to experience more ambient forms of toxicity – (e.g. less-explicit comments, passing critiques from more conservative or 'apolitical' friends or family members) — thus reflecting culturally embedded resistances to feminisms in Portugal (Cerqueira et al., 2023; Simões & Silveirinha, 2019). These interactions can transpose digital settings, giving rise to awkward in-person interactions.

Much like feminist practices differ across different platforms (Barbala, 2024; Keller, 2019), experiences of ambient toxicity also depend on particular platform vibes (Lupinacci, 2024). For example, expectations of Facebook and Twitter as more conservative or hostile platforms, or of Instagram as a "nicer" platform can affect participation. Furthermore, the impacts of this perceived toxicity can also be dependent on people's current mental state, being at times experienced as demotivating while at others it can galvanise people into action.

Platformised visibility can also be ambivalently experienced by participants. On one hand, it can be conducive to a sense of connectedness and feminist community building, both in practical and affective senses. On the other, it can be seen as potentially dangerous – opening doors to potential backlash (Stegeman et al., 2024). Fears of hate can lead to favouring "feminist bubbles" (Kanai & McGrane, 2020), smaller circles of like-minded people less prone to harsh judgements. Labour-intensive practices of blocking, unfollowing, or limiting the reach of one's content with functionalities such as Instagram's Close friends can be used to manage toxic interactions and create safer digital spaces (Clark-Parsons, 2018). Yet, these practices evoke questions regarding their political efficacy in social media contexts that often collapse different personal, professional, and political aims or bring together different social groups (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

This normalised fear of toxicity can also prompt a sense of imagined surveillance (Duffy & Chan, 2019), inviting careful considerations about one's imagined audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010). To avoid offending, annoying, or overwhelming people – as well as avoiding more explicit backlash – participants expend considerable emotional and digital labour. In addition to creating feelings of insecurity, this can also stifle feminist participation, shaping or even limiting what is being shared and how.

Ambient toxicity can create fraught experiences and feelings of emotional fatigue. As desires to disconnect from these toxic environments can clash with deep feelings of political responsibility (Mendes, 2021), participants often balance reluctant participation (Cassidy, 2018) in these platforms with temporary efforts to disengage themselves. This paper highlights how the ambient toxicity surrounding platformised feminist practices can affect feminist participation, at all levels of intensity, thus impacting the perceived potential of these platforms for political action.

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“IT CAN BE DEVASTATING”: MISOGYNY AND DISCURSIVE TOXICITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ILLNESS CONTENT CREATION ON TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM

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Introduction

Misogyny online has been highlighted as a “serious cause for concern” (Ging and Siapera, 2019) with scholars emphasising its close entanglement with the affordances of social media platforms (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016; Ozkula et al., 2024). Despite much scholarly attention, whether and how misogynistic discourse shows up in the context of illness content on social media remains underexplored.

Thinking of illness content as a potential home for misogynistic discourse may be surprising as social media is often highlighted as a supportive, therapeutic and safe space to share stories of illness (see Myrick et al., 2016; Kingod et al., 2017; La et al., 2019). Illness creators' content, though, includes high degrees of self exposure. This is often meant to produce positive outcome (Pluta and Siuda, 2024) but is also particularly vulnerable to cultural narratives of ableism (Tembeck, 2016), regimes of shame (Frohlich and Zmyslinski-Seelig, 2016; Philpot et al. 2022; Rademacher, 2018) and gendered notions of sexuality, responsibility, physical attractiveness and body propriety (Pitts, 2004; Vicari et al., 2025). Therefore, despite framings and expectations that position online spaces as “safe”, we argue that these factors actually make illness content creators vulnerable to gender based hate online. Because of this, our paper asks whether and how misogyny is experienced in the context of illness content creation on Instagram and TikTok, paying particular attention to how this may be entangled with platform infrastructures such as algorithms and moderation policies.

To do this, we employ the concept of discursive toxicity (Recuero, 2024). Here, a toxic discourse is understood as a violent discourse (such as misogyny) that is enabled by platform infrastructures resulting in 1) spread, 2) legitimisation and 3) harm. With regard to illness content on social media, scholars have acknowledged how platform affordances can enable the spread of toxicity. Rademacher (2018), for instance, found that negative comments were present when illness selfies reached “outside the highly sympathetic audience that populate online health communities” (pg. 3858). However, alongside spread, what do legitimisation and harm look like when it comes to misogynistic discourse in the experiences of illness content creation?

We draw on the case of two hereditary cancer syndromes: BReast CAncer (BRCA) and Lynch Syndrome. These genetic conditions increase the risk of developing certain types of cancer (Cancer Research UK, 2025), with carriers being recommended periodic screening to detect cancer in its early stages, and prophylactic surgeries (mastectomies, oophorectomies, hysterectomies) to prevent breast (BRCA), ovarian (BRCA, Lynch Syndrome) and endometrial cancer (Lynch Syndrome) (see Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust, 2021a and 2021b). Existing research on hereditary cancer and social media has explored the important role online spaces play in learning about and experiencing these genetic conditions (see Allen et al. 2020; Finer, 2016; Vicari, 2017 and Wellman et al. 2023). Yet, little is known about the potential harms of sharing hereditary cancer content on social media and how these intersect with specific platform structures.

Data and Methods

This paper draws on data collected as part of a larger Leverhulme Trust funded project looking at experiences and understandings of hereditary cancer syndromes across social media platforms. For this particular paper, we draw on 29 semi-structured, online, interviews with English speaking hereditary cancer creators across two conditions (BRCA and Lynch Syndrome) and on two social media platforms (TikTok and Instagram). Initially we approached creators who we knew posted frequently and whose content was deemed ‘top’ based on a 12-month data collection of relevant public content on Instagram and TikTok (1 May 2022 - 30 April 2023). We also shared our

recruitment messages via the project social media and relevant private Facebook groups and organisation newsletters to increase diversity of creators. In order to understand how creators' experiences may intersect with platform structures (as called for by Wellman et al., 2023) we used prompts within our interview schedule around their practices related to privacy, moderation and algorithms. We targeted these themes because of their relevance to lived experiences of illness (privacy), gendered expectations associated with certain conditions and bodies (moderation), and visibility of rare and often invisible illness (algorithms, moderation). We analysed data via a combination of inductive and deductive coding using thematic analysis approaches and Nvivo software.

In addition to these interviews, our analysis also draws on observational field notes (on our interview participants' social media profiles and posts) and a qualitative content analysis of ‘top’ TikTok content (conducted as part of an earlier work package, see Vicari et al., 2025). Including data from these alternative spaces allowed us to reflect on some of the multiple sites of meaning making (see Rose, 2023) involved in experiences of hate and harm in the context of illness content on social media.

Preliminary findings

Our findings indicate that misogyny is experienced by illness content creators in both relational and platformized ways. First, via negative comments, especially in cases where women visually expose their post-surgery bodies. Mary posts content of her flat, non reconstructed, chest to show that a “body like hers can exist” yet is often told she is “not worthy of taking up space” and that “she should not be alive”. For Mary, this experience of hate is entangled with platform algorithms and virality as such comments have resulted in Mary worrying about her posts “that go a bit viral” as it is those that receive the most backlash. In fact, she states that it makes her not want her content “to reach” despite her motivations to raise awareness.

We also found that in addition to spread and virality, platform moderation practices are experienced as legitimizing toxicity (Recuero, 2024). Content being flagged, censored or removed is both hurtful and frustrating for creators whose aim is to educate and support the hereditary cancer community. A lot of frustration lies in the fact creators see other problematic content in circulation, yet theirs is targeted. Isabel notes how she sees pornographic and antisemitic content and it does not get taken down yet “she has two bags for tits” and her visibility is restricted by the platform. In this way, illness content creators are fighting a two way fight: not only are they “fighting comments from strangers” but they are also “fighting the AI systems” (Mary). To avoid losing this fight, creators choose to limit their reach or “keep emotions intact” (Isobel) in fear of losing their content and accounts. We argue these relational and plaformized forms of misogyny result in harm as hereditary cancer creators are silenced, with some even seeking mental health support to navigate their social media lives.

Yet, despite these challenges, our observational notes and content analysis showed evidence of resistance in that creators actively responded to harmful audience and platform actions within their own content. We found creators to defend themselves, their decisions, and their wider communities, sometimes directly addressing the extent of the

harm inflicted through audience and platform reaction. Leslie, for example, explains in one of her TikToks how comments that misgender ‘flattie’ women “can be devastating”.

Overall our paper contributes to existing knowledge by showing how misogyny manifests in the (somewhat surprising) context of illness content creation. Our findings build on literature that shows misogyny to be entangled with platform infrastructures, yet we extend this by arguing that moderation policies also work to legitimise toxic discourse.

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