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Commentary

Gendered disinformation as violence: A new analytical agenda

The potential for harm entrenched in mis- and disinformation content, regardless of intentionality, opens space for a new analytical agenda to investigate the weaponization of identity-based features like gender, race, and ethnicity through the lens of violence. Therefore, we lay out the triangle of violence to support new studies aiming to investigate multimedia content, victims, and audiences of false claims. Finally, we define gendered disinformation as the employment of systematic and multidirectional flows of violence through (un)conscious content manipulation, audience engagement, and victim-blaming to prevent women and gender minorities from further political participation.

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Introduction

Gendered disinformation, the weaponization of stereotypes related to women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in disinformation content, has scarcely been addressed by scholars (Camargo & Simon, 2022) despite the recent pleas to critically examine the phenomenon (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Though a few industry and policy-making reports (e.g., Jankowicz et al., 2021), book chapters (e.g., Bardall, 2023), and commentaries (e.g., Veritasia et al., 2024) have addressed the overall issue, essential questions deserve further investigation. Technological advances such as generative artificial intelligence (gen-AI) merit further attention as a form of gendered harm, as false and stereotypical claims may be enhanced in manipulated images, including sexually explicit deepfakes (Rodriguez & Mithani, 2024), which may discourage women and gender minorities from public life and political participation.

In this commentary, we propose a two-fold analytical agenda to foster new research and policy-making solutions. First, we suggest shifting the focus away from intentionality as a defining element in disinformation by applying the lens of *gendered disinformation as violence*. Our argument is inspired by decolonial feminism and critical approaches to mis- and disinformation studies, thereby acknowledging the existence of *potential for harm* (Freelon & Wells, 2020) regardless of intentionality in the distribution of online content in mis- and disinformation narratives. In other words, we contend that violence through discourse is not always inflicted consciously. With this, we aim to move forward and abandon the

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frequently acknowledged "malign actor" of disinformation. Second, we offer an analytical framework to study the phenomenon as *a triangle of violence* (Figure 1). Our approach addresses the multiple angles from which violence flows travel among the three vertices: multimedia digital content (i.e., the combination of text, audio, picture, and video) and its creators who enact violence; victims, who are targeted in false and stereotypical or misogynistic claims and suffer from violence; and audiences, who witness and sometimes engage with violent behavior and content.

A unified conceptualization

Current definitions of gendered disinformation often overlap with other forms of violence (e.g., hate speech, incivility, political propaganda, harassment, and bullying), leaving the very definition fragmented. Judson et al. (2020) suggest that gendered disinformation "exists at the intersection of disinformation with online violence" (p. 11). Similarly, Jankowicz et al. (2021) add that it encompasses "falsity, malign intent, and coordination" (p. 1). Alternatively, Bardall (2023) calls "gendered disinforming" (p. 113) the means of "weaponizing information" (p. 117) to perpetrate violence against women in politics, considering that gender abuse, and the response to it, shapes political participation (Sobieraj, 2020).

To include identities that frequently intersect with gender—like race, ethnicity, age, class, and religion—specialists, particularly in policy making, prefer concepts such as *identity-based disinformation* (Bradshaw, 2024), g*endered online disinformation* (Frau-Meigs & Velez, 2024), or *gender and identity disinformation* (GID), as used by Artemis Alliance (EU DisinfoLab, 2025). These approaches suggest that, so far, policy-making projects have focused on actors spreading gendered disinformation, such as Russia, in relation to anti-gender narratives (Stolze, 2025). In the rare cases wherein policy initiatives dove further, such as the EU's *Gendered Online Disinformation Policy Brief* (Frau-Meigs & Velez, 2024), policy makers highlighted the conceptual fragmentation as an obstacle in engaging platforms and governments.

The attempt to drive gendered minorities out of positions of power reveals a potential connection between gendered disinformation and democratic erosion. In recent German elections, the only female candidate, Annalena Baerbock, was targeted by disinformation campaigns on Facebook more often than her male counterparts (Smirnova et al., 2021). In the United States, the American Sunlight Project found 35,000 mentions of nonconsensual intimate imagery on deepfake websites depicting 25 female members and only one male member of Congress (Rodriguez & Mithani, 2024). In Brazil, one-third of 4,700 YouTube comments during 2024 city-level elections contained personal attacks against women politicians based on intersectional identities, with misogyny present across all content and transphobia and ageism targeting specific individuals (Coelho, 2024).

The study of visual forms of disinformation has lagged further behind, despite recent headway (see Dan et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2025; Weikmann & Lechler, 2023). We call attention to this due to the unique sense of truthfulness attached to visual imagery, with videos and photos deemed a proxy for "evidence" (Brennen et al. 2021). Scholars have placed different levels of image-manipulation on a continuum, ranging from cheap-fakes to deepfakes (Paris & Donovan, 2019): Cheap-fakes are low-sophistication interventions (e.g., authentic content that recirculates out of its context, see Weikman & Lecheler, 2023), while deepfakes involve doctored videos synthetically impersonating someone's voice and image. Deepfakes are particularly harmful to women and gender minorities in public-facing jobs, who are often targeted in sexualized content (Jankowicz, 2023). Though visual disinformation contributes to the delegitimization of political actors (Hameleers et al., 2024) and is incorporated into digital politics to anchor informationally precarious claims (Amit-Danhi & Aharoni, 2023), its identity-based components are understudied. According to Gehrke & Pasitselska (2024), only 7% of the papers presented in 2024 at two relevant conferences with a strong political communication division had gender and/or race in the

titles. Such papers were placed in gender- or race-themed sessions, thus limiting the discussion to specialized scholarly audiences.

Thus, we propose to unify the many definitions by applying the lens of *gendered disinformation as violence*, defining the phenomenon as the employment of systematic and multidirectional flows of violence (experienced, directed and witnessed) through (un)conscious content manipulation, audience engagement, and victim-blaming to prevent women and gender minorities from (further) political participation.

Approaching gendered disinformation as violence

In an early definition of *misinformation* and *disinformation*, Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) categorized both as false and misleading information belonging to the realm of information disorder, differentiated by intent. While misinformation has no intention to cause harm, disinformation is designed to cause it. The conceptualization of disinformation has since gained more layers, now defined as fabricated content designed to achieve a political or economic goal (Tandoc et al., 2018), as well as the role of legacy media in the perpetuation of gender and racial stereotypes and societal inequalities (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Our approach is informed by Freelon & Wells's (2020) three defining characteristics of disinformation: deception, potential for harm, and intent to harm. By framing gendered disinformation as violence, we acknowledge that the potential for harm is present across both mis- and disinformation.

Unlike earlier definitions that viewed misinformation as mostly incidental and harmless, particularly in early stages of COVID-19 prevention (Gehrke & Benetti, 2021), our perspective acknowledges that false or harmful content is not always fabricated or shared by a malign actor. In other words, someone does not necessarily fabricate or share false, stereotypical, or misogynistic content with the awareness that it might be experienced as violence or a violent social control mechanism (see Manne, 2018) by the target (e.g., a woman politician) or parts of the audience.

A relevant strand of scholarship locates the origins of social inequalities in colonial exploitation of lands and bodies through violence for wealth acquisition (Sánchez-Acochea, 2021; Vergès, 2020). Genocides, massacres, rapes, and slavery have established hierarchies of domination, creating lasting extractivist economies exploiting environmental resources and peoples of the Global South (Vergès, 2020). Violence remains hierarchical, translating into alarming femicide rates (Segato, 2016; 2021) and into uneven resource distribution for poor and racialized populations. Governments around the world perpetuate social inequalities by selectively punishing or protecting certain groups (Vergès, 2020). With the digital environment functioning as a continuation of land as the primary arena for colonial violence, those same hierarchies are what allows disinformation to thrive, toxically contaminating digital discourses and debates on social media platforms (Recuero, 2024).

Our conceptualization allows gendered disinformation to be defined by the targets and identity-based attributes of the content. That is, the phenomenon's meaning entails what women and gender minorities experience from it: Perceiving gendered disinformation as violence may prevent them from political participation. Inspired by previous theoretical proposals of violence through the lens of media ecology and platforms (Morales, 2023), our approach adopts Dunn's (2021) argument that technology-facilitated violence should be viewed as a continuum without separating digital and physical aspects of harmful behaviors. Thus, the violence lens allows us to view gendered disinformation as the weaponization of identity-based features in multidirectional flows of violence.

A new analytical framework

Our approach views gendered disinformation as a system of violent flows between content (or its creators), victims, and audiences. Through the overarching violence inherent to the societal structure, flows of identity-based disinformation travel around the triangle, thereby highlighting a system enacting, experiencing, and witnessing violence (see Figure 1).
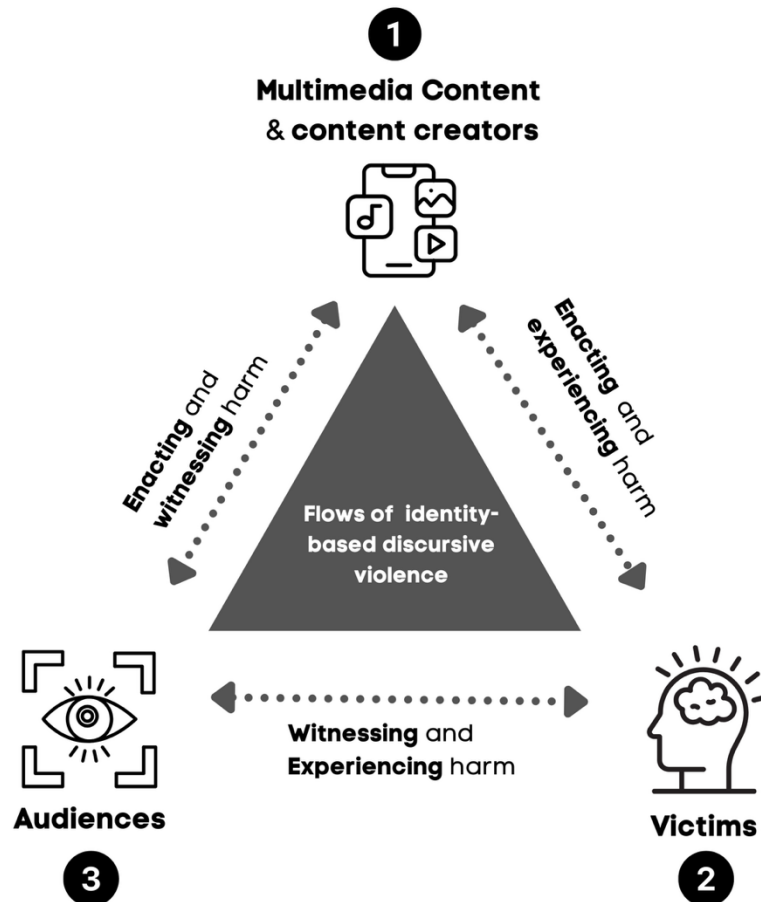

Figure 1. The triangle of violence in gendered disinformation.

To encompass the multifaceted nature of gendered disinformation, the triangle of violence starts with (1) multimedia content and its creators, which expands the content-based approach commonly adopted in disinformation studies. Invoking the concept of media witnessing (Pinchevski, 2009; 2019), it shines a light beyond the creator-target dichotomy and suggests that disinformation folds within it an act of violence or harm mediated by technology linking between content, creators, victims, and audiences. As (1) content is disseminated to (3) audiences, a flow of violence travels to the side of the (2) victims, who experience harm when targeted in fabricated content.

In this system, victimization and harm are not singular or individually-targeted instances, but rather ripple further: (3) Audiences' consumption of gendered disinformation may place entire groups at the (2) victim edge, as they may experience hurt due to having similar identity-based characteristics, targeted by (1) the content. Thus, roles in our framework are overlapping, fluid, and interchangeable, making the triangulation of role(s) a key part of the application of our framework. The arrows outside the triangle

indicate that the flow travels back and forth from one side to the other in a feedback system that responds to certain kinds of input. This is not a closed or singular-event system, as harm and hurt echo in the witnesses and victims, as the content continues to spread across the digital world. By challenging the singular focus on the content in studying disinformation, we highlight the ripples of secondary effects caused by gendered disinformation, thus expanding the violent potential of gendered disinformation beyond content and falsehood into the exploration of systemic violence emblematic of colonial and gendered power structures.

We propose that different projects and policy initiatives, particularly considering the rapid development of AI, may choose to focus on the triangle in its entirety or emphasize a singular type of violence flow within the system. This may open new directions for policy initiatives focused on locating regulatory gaps across the system and providing balance that will moderate or suppress the impact of identity-driven disinformation on gendered, intersectional minorities. For researchers, a mixed-method approach or a system-level methodology is often necessary (see Figure 2). Each of the vertices may be tackled via its own set of tools, according to the research question.

Alongside our proposed methods, we encourage the use of innovative and recent approaches, such as Peng et al.'s (2022) exploration of people's credibility perception in three pathways, including *formats* (i.e., photo, video, meme, and data) and two-fold *features* (i.e., from objective characteristics like color and composition to perceived features such as professional quality and aesthetics) of visual data.
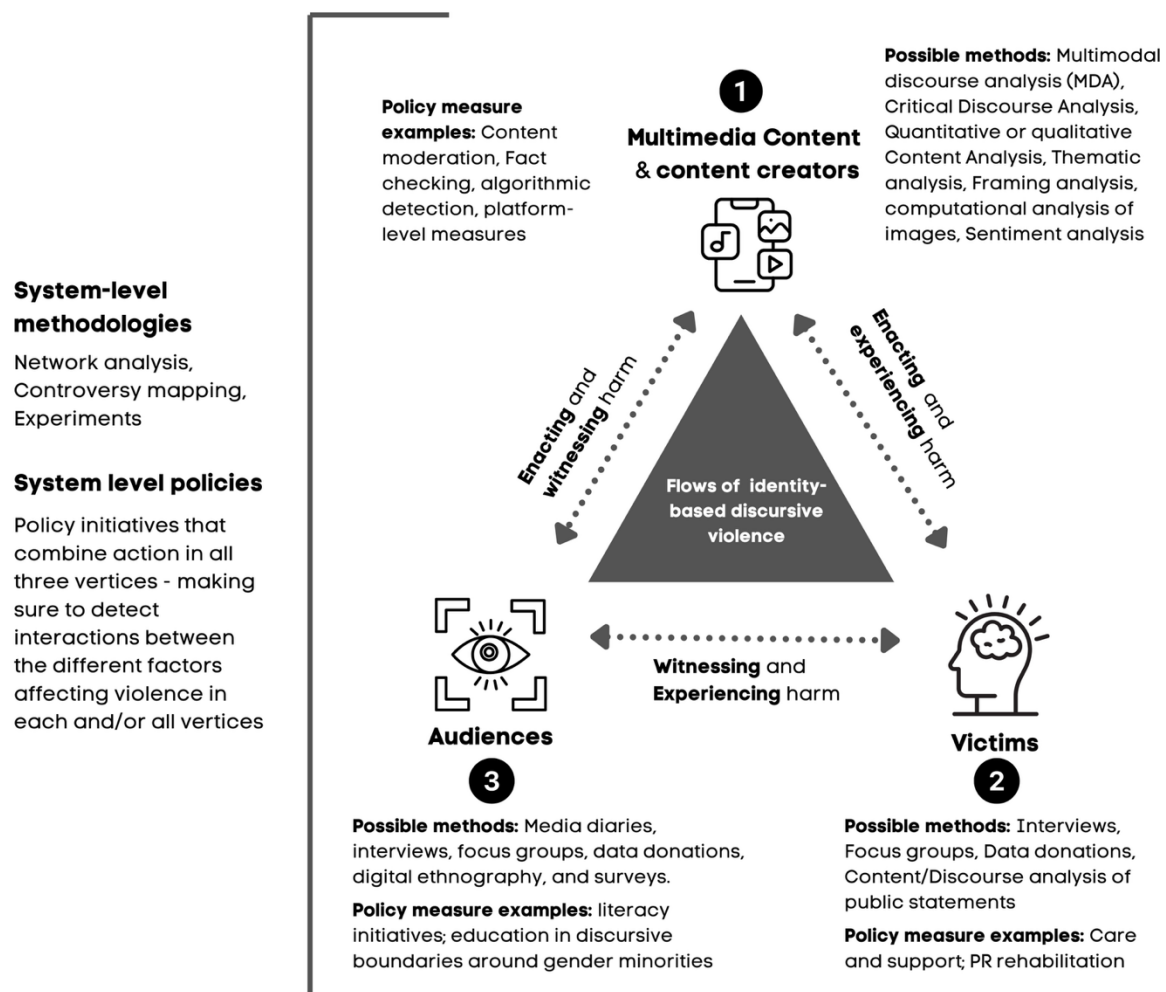

Possible methods: Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), Critical Discourse Analysis, Quantitative or qualitative Content Analysis, Thematic analysis, Framing analysis, computational analysis of images, Sentiment analysis

Policy measure examples: Content moderation, Fact checking, algorithmic detection, platform-level measures

Multimedia Content & content creators

System-level methodologies

Network analysis, Controversy mapping, Experiments

System level policies

Policy initiatives that combine action in all three vertices - making sure to detect interactions between the different factors affecting violence in each and/or all vertices

Flows of identity-based discursive violence

Enacting and witnessing harm

Enacting and experiencing harm

Witnessing and **Experiencing** harm

Audiences
3

Victims
2

Possible methods: Media diaries, interviews, focus groups, data donations, digital ethnography, and surveys.

Policy measure examples: literacy initiatives; education in discursive boundaries around gender minorities

Possible methods: Interviews, Focus groups, Data donations, Content/Discourse analysis of public statements

Policy measure examples: Care and support; PR rehabilitation

Figure 2. The triangle of violence in gendered disinformation: A methodological and policy outline.

Conclusion

So far, scholars and policy-making specialists have tackled a singular portion of gendered disinformation, namely, either gender or disinformation, or framed this phenomenon in the overlap with other forms of (gender-based) violence, such as hate speech, harassment, and other sorts of abuses. While these works are essential, particularly for policy making, there is room for improvement and innovation in theory and methodology—this is why we structured our contribution in a two-fold proposition.

Our commentary proposes to unify the fragmented concept by framing gendered disinformation as violence. What we want to accomplish with this is to name the identity-based aspect and the potential for harm inherent to this type of fabricated content without treating it as something rare and episodic. This means that intent is not always clear and that violence occurs despite intent. Without a comprehensive approach, audiences might perceive gendered disinformation as something occasional that disrupts society, not as the omnipresent systemic violence that targets primarily women, gender minorities, and people of color.

In this sense, rooting our approach in critical disinformation studies and decolonial feminist theories allows us to claim that violence is systemic and requires a multi-sided approach. We also made the conscientious choice of not differentiating digital and technology-based violence under the risk of downplaying harmful behavior in digital spaces. Therefore, we structured our methodological framework in the triangle of violence, where violence is in the flow format that travels from one point to all vertices.

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