

# #Feminazis on Instagram: Hate Speech and Misinformation, the Ongoing Discourse for Enlarging the Manosphere

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Social media platforms have become spaces for the viralisation of hate speech and misinformation. Paradoxically, tools that were once used for activism and conversation on behalf of vulnerable communities, nowadays work to gather and reproduce analogous worldviews on polarising issues. This research analyses the behaviour of the protagonists of the conversation around #feminazis on Instagram, as well as the characteristics of the content and the degree of interaction they generate. For this purpose, computational and qualitative social science methods have been applied to a sample of 9,300 posts published between 2021 and 2023. The results show disorderly participation by anonymous accounts, women and self-described feminists, social organisations, and pseudo-media. Content opposed to elective termination of pregnancy, and misogynistic messages lead the conversation, but there are also publications that attack other progressive ideologies. Disinformative content is linked to decontextualisation and manipulation of information to go viral, transnationalising hate speech towards

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feminism and their supporters, framed as a homogeneous group. It is concluded that this space, created by the platform itself, contributes to the enlargement and institutionalisation of the manosphere.

**Keywords:** misogyny, hate speech, manosphere, feminazis disinformation, Instagram

## Introduction: From an enlarged public space to the growth of the manosphere

In the early days of the Internet, the possibility of expanding public space seemed a viable issue. Then, well into this century, hope shifted to social networks: environments that would allow the agora of public communication to be widened by offering themselves as settings in which to exchange opinions, share comments, deliberate, and converse on issues of general interest. However, these ideas, with which the Internet and social networks were originally promoted, did not come to pass. After the initial fervour, those original beliefs began to be questioned in light of the goals pursued in developing these technologies, coupled with an intricate complexification of society. Numerous studies have shown that, rather than the democratic encounter of diverse worldviews and horizontal dialogue of voices, social networks facilitate the creation of homophilic conversation communities (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2018), which result in filter bubbles (Pariser, 2017) and echo chambers (Sunstein, 2003). In these, hate speech is intertwined with misinformation (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022), promoting spaces of affective polarisation (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016).

In this environment – in which the interplay between algorithms and digital practices of Internet users favours and promotes encounters between equals (Santos et al., 2021) – the activism of the feminist movement has managed to make a place for itself to amplify and extend its struggles (Sued, 2023), while at the same time activating a process of democratisation of feminism (García-Mingo & Diaz-Fernandez, 2023). So much so that various research has not only demonstrated the relevance of platforms in feminist digital activism (Tarullo & García, 2020) but also how, in addition, specific and contextualised demands and complaints have managed to be known and extended beyond borders, creating transnational networks of activism and militancy against gender-based violence (Laudano, 2018).

However, in recent years, the digital space has been disrupted by counter-activisms that, at best, seek to discredit the feminist movement with misogynistic and antifeminist discourses (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Ging & Siapera, 2018). Thanks to digital platforms, these movements have achieved a broadening of their narratives as never before (Lopes Miranda, 2023). Such counter-activisms are usually led by men who, protected by the anonymity that the platforms allow, transfer to the digital environment the same chauvinist behaviours that occur offline. In doing so, they collaborate in making the same sexist and antifeminist discourses attention-grabbing (Mantilla, 2013), reproducing and amplifying with digital technologies the same gender inequalities that take place outside of them (Zafra, 2015). In this sense, technologically mediated practices not only perpetuate established

hierarchies and privileges but also drive new phenomena such as male movements and toxic masculinities (Lopes Miranda, 2023). Furthermore, just as digital tools have facilitated the transnationalisation of the historical demands and claims of the feminist movement, thereby creating a network of solidarity and sisterhood among women (Laudano, 2018), the same has occurred with counter-movements: with the use of bots, they have managed to spread slogans, hate speech, and disinformation and misinformation about the feminist movement and its demands (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2017).

These communities of hate speech are promoted by posts, and participation by digital users through comments is crucial in disseminating insults and abusive language (Bajo Pérez & Gutiérrez San Miguel, 2022; Lopes Miranda, 2023; Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022).

Another crucial tool for activists and counter-activists are the hashtags that digital platforms provide to enable a conversation to take place and reproduce. They can be used for mobilisation and activism, a practice known as *hashtivism* (Yang, 2016), and concentrate the discussion on a particular theme (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016). As microhistories, these tags can be advocated by non-institutionalised political actors, successfully incorporating new voices into the public discourse on agenda issues (Giaxoglou, 2018), and uniting similar stances on topics that are frequently polarising (Gamir-Ríos et al., 2021).

The feminist movement was among the first to take to the Internet to express itself and its demands (Sued, 2023), and several studies have shown that hashtivism used to be more closely linked to the activism of groups defending the rights of vulnerable communities (Freelon et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in recent years, evidence has indicated that counter-movements also employ this digital strategy (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022). Engaging in hashtivism, these counter-movements agglutinate worldviews to the conversation that resemble those expressed in the hashtag (Giaxoglou, 2018), and at the same time, they run other practices such as *gender trolling* (Mantilla, 2013), viralising messages to harass and disseminate hate speech (Soares & Recuero, 2021), and even conveying disinformative discourse (AA, 2022) with a low degree of technological complexity (Gamir-Ríos & Tarullo, 2022).

The content that drives counter-activism labels contributes to and fuels sexist communities that appear in the many and varied digital spaces (Schmitz & Kazyak, 2016), giving rise to what has been termed the *manosphere*: an interconnected and digital spectrum of misogyny (McCarthy & Taylor, 2024), where heterogeneous voices converse and share the perspectives, needs, grievances, frustrations, desires, and perceived rights of white western men (Farrell et al., 2019). These websites and social media communities target women and feminism as the cause of their “aggrieved manhood” (Ging, 2019) and militate against them through disinformation campaigns, dominated by cheapfakes (Gamir-Ríos & Tarullo, 2022) and hate speech (García-Mingo & Diaz-Fernandez, 2023). “Even though the manosphere has existed since the early 2000s, its activities have been arguably influenced and increased by the perceived need for counterbalancing the growth of online feminist discourses” (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023, p. 1393), one of the characteristics of the fourth wave of feminism.

Among the various groups that make up the manosphere, *Incels* (involuntary celibates), *Men Going Their Own Way* (MGTOW), *Pick-up artist* (PUA) community,

*Red Pill Theory* and *Men's Rights Activists* (MRAs) have received the most attention from a linguistic perspective (Heritage, 2023; Krendel, 2020). All of these show a strong belief that there are two “clearly delineated and diametrically opposed genders” (Krendel et al., 2022, p. 22). In particular, they portray women as “a homogenous group with many negative traits” (Krendel et al., 2022, p. 22). However, these studies have not examined the use of deliberation strategies and framing mechanisms, nor have they explored the representation of feminism and feminists” (Krendel et al., 2022).

Although it is not a confined network with a single ideology, the manosphere seems to be deeply connected to neo-Nazi, alt-right, and white supremacist groups. The storytelling strategy of victimhood dominates their counter-narratives (Blommaert, 2018), as well as the idea of a supposed awakening of men in the face of the reality that, in their opinion, feminism imposes. This awareness is referred to as *taking the red pill*. The concept takes its name from a scene in the film *The Matrix* in which the protagonist has to decide whether to accept the truth (red pill) or to continue living in unreality (blue pill) (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999, 29:38; Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019).

Their view is heteronormative and androcentric (Halpin, 2022) with a belief that women should be subordinate to men. On gender-based violence, members argue that women have “sexual-economic capital” (Heritage, 2023, p. 15), and hold the view that “sexual violence is a gender-neutral problem; in this regard, they assert that “rape culture is a fictional concept made up by feminists” and that “false rape allegations against men are a widespread issue” (Gottel & Dutton, 2016, p. 609).

Han & Yin (2023) have identified various communities in the manosphere, which merge into two discursive strategies: a critical narrative against the postulates of feminism aimed at obtaining influence in the public sphere and personal masculinist discourses based on the cultivation of a personal lifestyle and the total rejection of inclusive masculinity. The manosphere is usually described “as a set of communities with porous boundaries” (Han & Yin, 2023, p. 1936); one of them could be the conversation around the #feminazis, on Instagram, a social media platform that has been used traditionally for women and feminist activism in recent years (Acosta, 2020; Simancas et al., 2023).

## Feminazi, the same insult at different moments

*Feminazi* is a portmanteau term combining the words *feminism* and *Nazi* and refers to women who seek to silence their opponents by using authoritarian means and strategies (Williams, 2015). The expression was coined in 1992 by the American political analyst and writer, Rush Limbaugh, who defined abortion as the modern holocaust and the defenders of this right as Nazis (Aragón, 2017).

Nowadays, the term *feminazi* has achieved a high media impact because it is used to attack and insult women rights activists (Engler, 2017): it is the term used by anti-feminists to discursively represent feminism in social networks (Bonet-Martí, 2020). Counter-activisms (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012) have increased in recent years and have

gained more space in the transnational public sphere, favoured by the growth of populist leaders, far-right parties (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and conservative groupings (Biroli & Caminotti, 2020). *Feminazi*, together with *feminazismo*, are locutions that have become established among antifeminist activists as primary labels (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2017, Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Núñez Puente et al., 2019; Villar-Aguilés & Percourt Gracia, 2020). To this extent, they have been associated with radical right anti-feminism (Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Villar-Aguilés & Percourt Gracia, 2020; Varela-Guinot, 2021) linked to the manosphere (Han & Yin, 2023). In the Sigma Dos Report (2021), which studies sexist hate speech in the digital environment, *feminazi* is one of the keywords with the highest number of mentions (Sigma Dos, 2021, cited in Rodríguez Ponce, 2022) and has emerged as a leading hashtag in trolling campaigns (Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2017; Núñez Puente et al., 2021; Williams, 2015), especially at crucial moments for the feminist agenda such as the #8M march or the Women's Strike (Núñez Puente et al., 2019), the parliamentary debates on the Law on Termination of Pregnancy in Argentina (Amnistía Internacional, 2020) and the feminist demands for the legalisation of abortion in Chile (Vacarezza, 2023). It is a term used in Spanish-speaking contexts, but also in other places, where other languages prevail, such as Portuguese, German, and English, to name but a few (Plath et al., 2022; Williams, 2015; Mushaben, 2007).

Most of these studies have examined the behaviour of conversation revolving around #feminazis on the Twitter platform (today X), but little is known about what happens on Instagram concerning this hashtag, despite the network gaining space to channel practices of political participation and activism (Acosta, 2020; Chávez et al., 2021; Murumaa-Mengel & Muuli, 2021) and counter-activism (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022; Lopes Miranda, 2023). For this reason, the present research aims to contribute to knowledge of the particularities of the digital conversation generated around #feminazis on Instagram, to understand the voices and formats, as well as to identify the type of messages conveyed under this hashtag.

## Methodology

This research examines the conversation around #feminazis on Instagram to understand better the particularities of the space in which the messages that spread this hashtag on the platform are concentrated. We have chosen the plural form of the word because it is intended to bring together all defenders of feminism as a group. It is not an individual critique of a person or a woman, but rather a critique of the collective.

To this end, three specific objectives are pursued: 1. to determine the relevance of the social actors in the conversation under study; 2. to examine extent to which the presence of hate speech and disinformative content in the messages published are significant; and 3. to investigate the degree of participation of the community of Internet users who follow this conversation.

Therefore, the research questions guiding this research are:

**RQ1. What** are the characteristics of the protagonists in the conversation that revolves around #feminazis on Instagram?

**RQ2. What** are the characteristics of the content that spreads #feminazis on Instagram?

**RQ3. What** are the characteristics of the messages that generate the most engagement in the conversation studied?

Different methodological actions were carried out to achieve these objectives, using quantitative and qualitative techniques. Traditional communication research methods have been combined with computational methods for social studies. The use of a variety of techniques is a response to the increasing complexity that characterises the study of digital circulations, particularly in a social network on which publishing images is ubiquitous and plays a relevant role in dialogue accompanied by text, thus attaining diverse meanings (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022).

The phases that we went through were:

1. For the digital-quantitative actions the PhantomBuster and R programs were used. The former made it possible to extract the publications grouped under #feminazis on Instagram. This digital resource allowed us to obtain data based on the text published over a three year period (2021–2023). Data collection was conducted during the week of 8 March 2023. A total of 25,334 posts were collected. In the second step, R software was used to process the data that had been garnered by PhantomBuster. The following sub-phases can be distinguished:
  - 1a) the collected content was filtered, and repeated content was discarded. The final sample consisted of 9,360 posts.
  - 1b) the data on the general characteristics of the conversation were systematised per account: languages, location, the format of the publication, dates of publication, number of likes and number of comments.
  - 1c) from this extant online data sample, four sub-samples were obtained within #feminazis conversation:
    - Subsample 1: formed by Instagram accounts that have published the most number of content using #feminazis (n = 25)
    - Subsample 2: set up by Instagram accounts with the most prominence (it is, with the highest number of followers) (n = 25)
    - Subsample 3: shaped by the posts that received the most number of likes (n = 25)
    - Subsample 4: formed by the posts that received the greatest number of comments (n = 25)
2. For the qualitative approach, netnographic research (Krendel, 2020; Krendel et al., 2022) was applied to the four subsamples. To achieve it, we use qualitative discourse analysis focused not only on the protagonist of the conversation (subsample 1 and 2), but also on the frames of the 50 posts with most likes and

comments (subsample 3 and 4) and of the comments expressed in these posts. Moreover, through this method, we observe verbal and nonverbal strategies that maintain prejudices in these 50 posts. Recent studies, such as those Fairclough (2015) and Wodak (2021) have demonstrated the effectiveness of in discourse analysis to delve deeply into the nuances of communication, uncovering underlying meanings, ideologies, and societal norms embedded in texts and interactions. In these cases, our aim is to detect how ideologies are discursively constructed and interlinked between #feminazis' users (Heritage, 2023). In particular, the following variables are analysed:

- 2a) supported and refuted viewpoints (frames) of the most relevant social actors and their commentators (Krendel, 2020)
- 2b) the 'feminazis' portrayed by the most relevant social actors and their commentators
- 2c) the presence of hate speech formula: dehumanisation, stereotype promotion, insults or offensive terms and irony (Noriega & Iribarren, 2013; Tortajada et al., 2014) used by the most relevant social actors and their commentators

## Results

The exposition of the results follows the following structure: first, the data obtained from digital-quantitative actions (accounts, languages, location, the format and dates of publication) are presented, and then the variables observed in the qualitative discourse analysis (frames, portrayal of feminazis, and the presence of hate speech) of the most successful posts and their comments.

### *Users of the #feminazis hashtag*

The most active users who employ the hashtag #feminazis do not fit into a specific profile (Table 1). In other words, they cannot be considered users from the same organisation or political party using the hashtag for coordinated and effective political activities. We have observed that #feminazis in Spanish is widely used and serves different accounts that apparently have no connection with each other. However, we can highlight certain users who consistently engage with this hashtag and generate conversation around it.

One of the accounts that extensively uses this hashtag belongs to the Chilean anti-abortion movement. This is the case for @provida.chile, one of the most active accounts using the #feminazis hashtag on Instagram. With 237 posts in the conversation, this account has managed to gather an audience of more than 11,000 followers for its profile, which is one of the most popular accounts in this study. Its activity and followers indicate a significant commitment to the subject, as its posts in #feminazis' conversation on Instagram have accumulated 89,127 likes and 7,181 comments. Additionally, there is the less active @providas.chile, which works as a replica of the former, with a similar number

of posts in the conversation (225) but with significantly lower activity, reflected in its smaller number of followers (less than 100).

The@provida.chile account is the only collective account that has achieved a significant impact with its posts. However, it is not the only case in which accounts related to the anti-abortion movement use #feminazis, although they do so from more individual and less organised positions. Two accounts that partially concentrate the conversation are opposed to the pro-choice movement and accuse feminists of being Nazis:@zorroantiaborto account, whose messages refer especially to the Argentine context, use this hashtag in 107 posts. The second one – which concentrates on a relevant number of comments (1,086) – is@corazonespervida, which presents itself as a radio program based in Miami, USA. It uses social media platforms to spread content about “God, Life, Family and Gender Ideology states in its profile”.<sup>1</sup> The account is in Spanish, suggesting a link to Latino diaspora in Miami.

In general, it is common to find anonymous users occupying positions of high activity to convey messages contrary to feminist principles. Here, we find@meninist\_humanist, an anonymous account that collects the second-highest number of likes (109,791) and many comments (3,795). The account’s name is based on the term feminist but is used satirically to promote men’s rights. The posts from@policia.de.cristalitos are active in the conversation, not only because of the number of posts (103) but also because it has concentrated a relevant number of interactions (5,633 likes and 2,303 comments). It is an account managed by five anonymous users dedicated to posting memes that ridicule feminists and other vulnerable groups, such as transgender people. Most of the comments received followed these lines of mockery. They link feminists and transgender people with mental health problems, as well as parodying the inclusion of ‘e’ as a linguistically neutral gender.

Other highly active users present themselves as real individuals with some influence who also focus part of their activity on opposing feminism; for example,@biadescobre, with 26,472 likes and 2,173 comments, defines herself as an “ex-feminist” in her profile. On the other hand,@alejagrande, who uses Instagram as a replica of her TikTok account, has made 111 posts. In these two last cases, the accounts are run by women, but we find both men and women among the followers.

There is also a group of anonymous accounts with various activity levels and influence amplifying their ideological framework. These accounts position themselves against feminism but also against anything related to progressive views to defend conservative positions in social matters and liberal ones in the economy. One of the accounts that most extensively use #feminazis is@la\_\_peste\_\_roja. It has fewer than 1,000 followers but has posted 3,880 messages with this tag, accumulating 75,973 likes and 3,407 comments. It is located in Spain and spreads content against progressive ideologies and left-wing parties. The account@vamana\_tattoo, which defends the authoritarian government in Chile, has more than 6,500 followers and uses the hashtag on 117 occasions. In their posts,@thewlass, from Venezuela, occasionally uses the tag but generates a lot of activity, with 121,404 likes (the highest number of likes recorded in the analysis) and 5,053 comments.

<sup>1</sup> From now on, all post contents will be translated by authors into English from Spanish or Portuguese.



Finally, it is worth noting the presence of accounts that define themselves as media outlets and use #feminazis when disseminating gender-related content. This is the case of @mediterraneo\_digital, based in Spain, with over 2,500 followers, using the hashtag 84 times. In Chile, the media outlet @meganoticiascl has accumulated 47,052 likes and 5,455 comments with only one post. This so-called media outlet is the most popular account in the studied conversation: it has more than three million followers.

*Table 1: Most active users around #feminazis' conversations*

| Protagonist users of the conversation |       | Users with more likes in the conversation |         | Users with more comments in the conversation |          |
|---------------------------------------|-------|---|---------|--|----------|
| User                                  | Posts | User                                      | Likes   | User   | Comments |
| la_pesto_roja                         | 3,880 | thewlass                                  | 121,404 | provida.chile                                | 7,181    |
| provida.chile                         | 237   | meninist_humanist                         | 109,791 | meganoticiascl                               | 5,455    |
| providas.chile                        | 225   | provida.chile                             | 89,127  | thewlass                                     | 5,053    |
| meninist_humanist                     | 167   | la_pesto_roja                             | 75,973  | meninist_humanist                            | 3,795    |
| vamana_tattoo                         | 117   | policia.de.cristalitos                    | 55,633  | la_pesto_roja                                | 3,407    |
| alejagrande                           | 111   | meganoticiascl                            | 47,052  | policia.de.cristalitos                       | 2,303    |
| zorroantiaborto                       | 107   | stalin_aliado_2                           | 34,765  | biadescobre                                  | 2,173    |
| policia.de.cristalitos                | 103   | biadescobre                               | 26,472  | corazonessprovida                            | 1,086    |
| a_antifeminista                       | 92    | chalequeo_venezuela                       | 22,039  | familywenceslau                              | 1,075    |
| mediterraneo_digital                  | 84    | _poder.feminismo_                         | 18,918  | cakeminuesa                                  | 1,018    |

*Source: Compiled by the authors.*

### **Characteristics of the conversation content**

Instagram is a social media platform that inherently relies on a visual format. Consequently, hashtags on Instagram are always associated with multimedia content. In fact, 5,169 posts contained no textual content but only hashtags (see [www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/)). This implies that #feminazis is sometimes used to organise a conversation that is not text-based but rather multimedia in nature. Out of the 9,360 posts analysed, the majority (81.85%) are presented in a photo format, followed by videos (11.16%) and carousel-type posts (6.99%).

The image with the highest number of likes (120,310) pretends to be a news item about the trial between the actor Johnny Deep and the actress Amber Heard, which points to her alleged physical assault: “Johnny Deep is innocent. Amber Head admitted to being the one who hit him” is the title of the post that simulates to be a piece of news (see [www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/)). However, the verification by the Spanish fact checker platform *Maldito Buló* at the bottom of this post indicates that it is partially false information.

Among the videos with the greatest number of likes, the most popular are clips or montages of women politicians using inclusive language; popular figures such as the tennis player Rafael Nadal questioning the gender gap in sport or a homemade video of a young woman pretending to be assaulted by a man (see [www.instagram.com/p/CbeMz5xgC4n/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CbeMz5xgC4n/)). This post was uploaded by @aquilescorreal, an actor from the Dominican Republic, and is popular on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook.

Another interesting piece of data pertains to the language of publication. The user base is predominantly Spanish-speaking, with 78% of the posts in Spanish. However, it is worth noting that the term has transcended language boundaries, partly due to its proximity to Spanish in some countries and its origin as a Romance language. Approximately 14% of the posts are in English. Other languages include French (4%), Portuguese (2%), and Italian (1%). This linguistic diversity is also reflected in the geographical dispersion of the spaces where messages with the hashtag #feminazis are shared. However, the low rate of these hashtags in other countries shows that it is primarily an established expression in Spanish-speaking countries. In other cases, the usage is leveraged by the malleability of Latin languages. Among all the posts that included location data (this information is unknown in 8,825 instances), some posts came from non-Spanish-speaking countries such as Brazil (8.22%), the United States (2.43%), and France (1.31%). These three countries are geographically and culturally close to Spanish-speaking countries.

However, the Spanish-speaking countries dominate the conversation around #feminazis. Spain (7.85%), Argentina (8.78%), and Chile (6.73%) concentrate a significant portion of the conversation. These three countries have experienced processes where feminism has become a central topic in the public sphere due to its presence in various political processes. In Spain, the massive 8M protests since 2018 and the involvement of a left-wing political coalition, *Unidas Podemos*, in the Ministry of Equality have reinvigorated this debate. In Argentina, the *Marea Verde* and the approval of legislation supporting elective abortion have been highly disseminated in recent years. In Chile, the constitutional process initiated by street protests has also generated extensive debate on gender-related issues. Other countries that participated less in the conversation included Mexico (2.06%) and Uruguay (1.12%). Moreover, some posts (1.50%) are in an imaged country: “Peronistán, República De La Garcha”, which refers to the Argentinean Peronist Party in a highly derogatory manner.

Despite the predominance of Spanish in the conversation, the Portuguese-speaking account@familywenceslau, located in Brazil, receives many comments. The account user introduces herself as a men’s and family law lawyer. With several followers well above average for those involved in the conversation (around 90,000), she has podcasts and channels on YouTube and on TikTok where she disseminates content on “the rights of men who are the most harmed” (see [www.instagram.com/p/CIURXVJubER/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CIURXVJubER/)).

The publication dates confirm that the hashtag is not a recent phenomenon but has remained prevalent over the years. Of the recorded posts, 5,486 belong to the year 2021, 3,373 to 2022, and 498 to 2023. This decline may be due to a variety of reasons: some are discursive, such as in the prioritisation of other hashtags, and others may be related to the platform’s logic, as in the drop in the number of posts compared to other formats, such as reels, which were integrated into Instagram in 2020 (Liang & Wolfe, 2022). Furthermore, there is no notable increase in posts during March of each year to coincide with International Women’s Day commemoration. Therefore, it can be inferred that posts with #feminazis are not aimed at setting the agenda at specific moments but rather constitute an ongoing discourse on social media without a defined posting strategy.

### Engaging messages in conversations

The number of interactions with the posts analysed, such as likes and comments, varies widely.

Table 2: The most popular #feminazis posts on Instagram

| Post URL   | Profile  | Number of comments | Number of likes |
|--|--|--------------------|-----------------|
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/CjWfSXAD_c8/">www.instagram.com/p/CjWfSXAD_c8/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/meganoticiascl">www.instagram.com/meganoticiascl</a> | 5,455              | 47,052          |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/">www.instagram.com/p/CPeNWyVF5Ga/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/thewlass">www.instagram.com/thewlass</a>             | 4,744              | 120,310         |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/">www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/cakeminuesa">www.instagram.com/cakeminuesa</a>       | 714                | 3,915           |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/CLegQ1_rqJK/">www.instagram.com/p/CLegQ1_rqJK/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/brunoenglerdm">www.instagram.com/brunoenglerdm</a>   | 498                | 2,255           |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/CnQTJohT_Xwp/">www.instagram.com/p/CnQTJohT_Xwp/</a> | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/provida.chile">www.instagram.com/provida.chile</a>   | 388                | 244             |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/Cm98Qk5vaYy/">www.instagram.com/p/Cm98Qk5vaYy/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/trini_a_sekas">www.instagram.com/trini_a_sekas</a>   | 338                | 184             |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/CoJQmzqtFON/">www.instagram.com/p/CoJQmzqtFON/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/provida.chile">www.instagram.com/provida.chile</a>   | 322                | 1,025           |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/Caj0X88lgKN/">www.instagram.com/p/Caj0X88lgKN/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/cakeminuesa">www.instagram.com/cakeminuesa</a>       | 304                | 2,868           |
| <a href="http://www.instagram.com/p/CRyZsb2HIM6/">www.instagram.com/p/CRyZsb2HIM6/</a>   | <a href="http://www.instagram.com/biadescobre">www.instagram.com/biadescobre</a>       | 291                | 9,815           |

Source: Compiled by the authors.

On average, posts receive around 103 likes. However, it is essential to note that this figure has a relatively high standard deviation of approximately 1,376 likes, indicating a significant dispersion in the number of likes that posts can accumulate. Regarding likes, this variation ranges from 0 to a maximum of 120,310 likes per post.

The post with the most likes (47,052), published by @meganoticiascl (see [www.instagram.com/p/CjWfSXAD\\_c8/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CjWfSXAD_c8/)), includes a video of Chilean MP Emilia Schneider demanding an anti-discrimination law against the transphobic and antifeminist discourse of republican and far-right parliamentarians. Although this post is not necessarily against feminism, it underlines the insult #feminazis and opens the debate to its followers. Reading the comments reveals a certain polarisation in participation. Various types of hate speech against Schneider are detected: dehumanisation (“Better go to the racecourse”), stereotyping (“I think all they want is impunity to kill through abortion”), offensive terms (“You are a man disguised as a woman with serious mental problems”), and irony (“Discriminates against a man... being a trans man”). Most of them express transphobic messages (“But if it’s true ..... you will never menstruate ☹️ 😞 😞 😞 😞”) or downplay this type of violence against women (“Why don’t you worry about crime, inflation, and Araucania. Clowns”).

For the whole sample, the average per post is approximately seven comments. However, once again, the dispersion is considerable, with a standard deviation of around 77.2 comments. This suggests that while some posts can generate numerous comments (15 posts exceed 100 comments), others may have very few. The range of variation goes from 0 comments up to a maximum of 5,455 comments on a single post. In addition, we found that users who authored posts with the most likes and messages vary in their overall influence. Some accounts, such as @brunoenglerdm and @cakeminuesa, have many followers. In other cases, however, the number of followers is smaller, as seen with @thewlass. Therefore, while overall influence facilitates activity on these accounts, engagement on this topic is likely generated independently.

It is worth noting that of those with more interactions many tend to be generating more conversation using open-ended questions: “¿feminism or dumbing-down?” (see [www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/); 714 comments); “See how easy it is to get arrested in Brazil as a MAN?” (see [www.instagram.com/p/CNbVaROIV7-/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CNbVaROIV7-/); 251 comments); “¿Where are the women’s movements that do not speak out?” (see [www.instagram.com/p/CRp9o1-AhaR/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CRp9o1-AhaR/); 129 comments). The post shared by @meganoticiascl (see [www.instagram.com/meganoticiascl](http://www.instagram.com/meganoticiascl)) is also an example, and the most commented post (5,455).

The posts from the Spanish journalist@cakeminuesa, a contributor to right-wing media, are repeated in both rankings – more likes and comments. Followed by over 75,000 accounts, his predominantly videos content gives voice to extreme right-wing positions in Spain. Among other issues, this ideological stance runs counter to the efforts of feminists to include the gender perspective in Spanish. This language has two grammatical genders, although the masculine has always been used as the generic. Intending to discredit feminism and the inclusive language it advocates, the journalist edited a compilation of speeches in which generally left-wing female politicians have made grammatical errors in Spanish (e.g. *dereches*, *jóvenas*, *autoridadas*) in their attempts to be inclusive in their public speeches (see [www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CcAk97blN-d/)). The video repeatedly uses the image of the Minister for Equality as a curtain-raiser, saying ‘it may sound strange’.

This kind of content, which aims to ridicule the feminist movement, is common in the conversation, making it particularly polarising, as is evident in the comments in which the commentators express amusement or approval. They may also contain aggressive messages of insult or further ridicule of the people appearing in the videos (“The absurdity of the outdated left destroying the Spanish language with gender inventions and suffixes”; “MY GOD, IF THEY WERE GIVEN AN INTELLIGENCE TEST, THEY WOULD SCORE THE MINIMUM 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔”).

The fourth most commented-on post (498) is from the Brazilian right-wing politician Bruno Engler, a member of the Liberal Party, who points out his support for President Jair Bolsonaro in his biography (see [www.instagram.com/p/CLegQ1\\_rqJK/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CLegQ1_rqJK/)). The politician, with nearly 493,000 followers, adds the alleged screenshot to the account of a woman who says that “the destiny of men is in the gutter” and that the legalisation of abortion will allow women to “abort male fetuses”. Although the person making this statement is not identified, and the eyes of her photograph are covered, the politician gives it the status of discourse and plays with the resource of insinuation. He calls for the term men to be changed to Jews “and watch the magic happen”. On this occasion, the hashtag #feminazis, together with the derivative femicide – the gender-based murder of a woman by a man – coexist with a dozen tags that appeal to the president of Brazil.

Like@brunoenglerdm’s, some of the posts with the most comments focus on promoting anti-abortion views. This is consistent with the messages from organisations and other users who use this hashtag, although their main advocacy pertains to elective abortion (see [www.instagram.com/p/Cmc1tm-t8u\\_/](http://www.instagram.com/p/Cmc1tm-t8u_/)). There is a diverse range of posts, including protest images, carousels featuring specific cases, and excerpts from media interventions from figures supporting or opposing abortion activists. This content

is often accompanied by insults towards pro-choice women, such as *murderers* and *nefarious*, and may point to the neglect of parental opinion in these cases. The anti-abortionist account@provida.chile published eight of the most comments.

Other posts place a greater emphasis on argumentation. These posts involve Instagram influencers sharing their views on gender-related issues (see [www.instagram.com/p/CRyZsb2HlM6/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CRyZsb2HlM6/)). These are videos and texts where the content is intended to explain specific gender-related topics. In this case, the comments primarily express approval of the tenets expressed in the message, although in a more composed manner. There is also space for other comments that attempt to counter the primary message (“I never understood why some women undress as a form of protest. And some dance funk that humiliates them, but they don’t question the sexism and humiliations in the lyrics of the songs”).

Another issue detected in the most popular posts is the questioning of gender-based violence. Accounts such as@direitofeministabr collect alleged false reports of assaults; others edit montages with fragments of news stories in which women have assaulted or murdered their children to portray women as the main perpetrators of violence. In this line, a third type of content, manifested through homemade and decontextualised videos or pre-existing files, promotes the stereotype of women as manipulative, lying, dramatic, and violent when it comes to harassment and assault. We also found another mass of engaging content in which the participants in feminist demonstrations, such as 8M, are portrayed as crazy women whose actions in the physical world are ridiculous and meaningless. In content posted by@cakeminuesa (see [www.instagram.com/p/CajOX88lgKN/](http://www.instagram.com/p/CajOX88lgKN/)), women boycott an act in homage to the writer, Emilio Pardo Bazán or exclaim proclamations against the leader of the Spanish far-right VOX party, such as “a vaginal cup in Abascal’s mouth”).

It is also common for the #feminazis hashtag to be *hashjacking* as well, that is, many feminist activists use it in their posts where they explain feminist goals, proclaim their support for the collective organisation, and convey messages in favour of specific feminist demands, including the right to abortion, for instance,@trini\_a\_sekas,@\_poder.feminismo\_, and@brujamixteca. This first account makes a post in which it explained precisely the conservative reaction as a response to the empowerment that feminismo implies for women (see: [www.instagram.com/p/Cm98Qk5vaYy/](http://www.instagram.com/p/Cm98Qk5vaYy/)).

In this way, they seek to influence a conversation that is assumed to be negative to them due to the terminological choice of the hashtag. This means that many of the messages polarise people who end up on them looking for different types of comments. Consequently, they receive both supportive messages (“Let’s aim for development and equity!”) and others that are negative towards their messages and speeches (“Unfortunately, I live in Argentina, but I love my country even though it’s poor and plagued by abortionist killers.”). This hashtag can also be self-referential and claimed by feminism, but its use and impact are more limited.

Finally, some posts include misleading or straightforwardly false messages. These posts often feature images and videos without context, aiming to undermine the feminist movement by portraying it as aggressive. Some may also highlight perceived inconsistencies, accusing feminism of critiquing Western lifestyles while ignoring human

rights violations in Arab countries. This category also includes montages that attempt to simulate news from traditional media outlets. Many of these types of content have been debunked by the platform's fact-checkers.

## Discussion and conclusions

This investigation aims to contribute to the research on hashtags in social networks. Using tags for civic purposes has been well-studied in literature on activism (Yang, 2016). This study shows that the investigation of hashtags by counter-movement communities is also relevant. Research on feminism has highlighted its capacity to amplify narratives, set agendas, and create transnational networks (Laudano, 2018; Santos et al., 2021). Instead, some studies have warned about a significant counter-movement on social networks (Lopes Miranda, 2023). In this sense, research on *hashtivism* should recognise that hashtags are not solely for civic purposes. On the contrary, because of their capacity to concentrate attention on topics (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016) it is natural that they also serve to strengthen polarisation on social networks, especially when the debate on digital platforms is characterised by homophily (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2018).

This study investigates the discourse surrounding the hashtag #feminazis on Instagram, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the unique dynamics within this online space, where all messages associated with the hashtag are centralised. Concerning RQ1, users do not present a specific profile, nor can they be categorised as part of the same organisation or political party using the hashtag for coordinated political activities. Conversely, they have diverse backgrounds that use hashtags for different purposes, so users seem to have no direct connections. While this may be considered a weakness, it may not be so when looking at the tools that platforms, in this case, Instagram, provide: concentrating all voices, the powerful and organised ones and those not institutionalised in a concrete digital space. For this, the use of the hashtag is essential. Giaxoglou (2018) mentions that hashtags empower non-institutional and non-organised voices. Still, in this study, we could see that they nurture a conversation that, except when *hashjacking* occurs (Darius & Stephany, 2022), forms a community of ideologically cohesive voices, enlarging the manosphere with the voices of white Western men (Farrell et al., 2019), but also women who favour traditional and patriarchal society and express their disagreement with the ethos of gender equality.

Certain users engage with the #feminazis hashtag and drive polarised discussions around three central topics framed as the supposed irrationality of feminist demands: the questioning of gender-based violence; the loss of men's rights; and, foremost what are perceived as the dangerous consequences of the right abortion. Specifically, @provida.chile stands out as a very active and much followed account among the anti-abortion voices. However, from more individual and less organised positions, other actors, such as @zorroantiaborto (mainly focused on the Argentine context) and @corazoneprovida (from the Latino diaspora in Miami) can publish a remarkable number of posts with #feminazis and mobilise hundreds of comments on their content. The original notion that led to the coining of the term *feminazi* is present in much of the anti-abortion conversation, that is,

that women who have abortions are Nazis (Hunt, 1996). For this reason, it is common to find the linked term *feticide* next to the hashtag under study. This label, which contains an insult in its narrative, facilitates the dissemination of hate speech.

Some accounts utilising the hashtag express views contrary to feminist principles and left-wing views. Both influencers and anonymous accounts actively oppose progressive visions in social and economic realms. This research shows that hashtivism, previously concretely related to left-wing activism, has become a tool of counter-movements, circulating and concentrating voices that defend proposals linked to the right and the extreme right (Mantilla, 2013; Soares & Recuero, 2021), the same ideological voices that amplify the manosphere.

Some profiles identifying as media outlets are very active in the conversation we studied. This can be explained as an attempt to present themselves as platforms linked to serious journalism. However, the use of the label #feminazis acts as a rallying cry for homophilic worldviews that agree with their partisan content on the basis of alternative facts and are interested in attacking the feminist movement and gender-related policies (Palau Sampio & Carratalá, 2022).

With regard to RQ2, Instagram is a platform whose content is mainly visual, so #feminazis posts primarily consist of multimedia content. Indeed, many posts rely solely on hashtags as a beacon by which to be found. That means that on Instagram, there is a multimedia-oriented conversation (Tarullo & Frezzotti, 2022) supported mainly by photographs. Posts are mainly in Spanish; however, there are other languages in the conversation which give evidence of the transnational use of the tag #feminazis, which seeks to bring voices from different contexts into a space of peer-to-peer conversation. In this case, the accompanying text may need to be translated. Still, the presence of #feminazis enters into a multimodal dialogue with the visual content, allowing for a reading that transcends the language used.

The countries dominating the #feminazis conversation on Instagram (Spain, Argentina, and Chile) have experienced high-intensity social turmoil and significant discussions around feminism in the public sphere due to various political processes in recent years. When these publications were collected, the governments of these countries were linked to the centre-left. They proposed legal reforms to guarantee the right to elective termination of pregnancy. This explains the presence of content that seeks to discredit feminism, with violent discourse against progressive ideas – abortion rights in particular – and various measures implemented by these governments. In addition, posts in Portuguese that come from Brazil are linked to extreme-right ideas and are disseminated by institutional voices and female influencers.

The publication dates reveal that the #feminazis hashtag has maintained its presence throughout the year. Importantly, there was no significant increase in posts in March. This suggests that #feminazis posts are not intended to set the agenda at specific moments but rather represent an ongoing discourse on social media without a defined posting strategy, while still being linked to the populist and extreme right-wing political currents that have been gaining strength in various European and Latin American parliaments. Moreover, this finding also encourages the idea that Internet conversations do not initiate other violence or hate speech that occurs outside the digital space (Schmitz

& Kazyak, 2016). Still, the online environment allows for its amplification and to appeal to similar worldviews that distribute and add content and expand existing stereotypes and insults. However, a decrease in the use of hashtags in recent years suggests studying other frequently used terms or tagged content, such as reels, might be worthwhile.

Concerning RQ3, we found that likes and comments vary significantly across the posts analyzed. Posts generating more interactions drive more active conversations based on a suggestion, personal opinion, or an open question to the public. These posts receive approving comments, although they allow discussion that counters the main message. However, it is striking that it is precisely in the comments that the greatest variety of hate speech against women and feminists is observed. The posts act as a fuse that ignites the verbal aggression of the participants in the conversation. In this sense, it would be worth investigating to what extent the application selects the audience for this content and the criteria on which that is based.

Consistent with the term “feminazis”, some posts go beyond critiquing feminism and instead equate it with National Socialism, using photomontages to suggest similarities between feminist and Nazi symbols. Feminist activists often use #feminazis with the aim of influencing a conversation by carrying out what is known as *hashtag-hacking*, a strategy hitherto used by movements linked to right-wing ideologies (Darius & Stephany, 2022).

Moreover, there are some misleading messages, often with images, and videos lacking context, which are aimed at undermining the feminist movement. When the text misinforms, platform fact-checkers have debunked some of these posts. Despite that, we found that when the disinformation is part of the image, the social network takes no action to disclose that there are errors in the content. Moreover, misleading content is carried by an interaction of images, text, and hashtags, and it could observe a low tech use of digital tools for manipulating images for spreading debunks and hate speech (Gamir-Ríos & Tarullo, 2022).

The accounts with the most followers are not necessarily the most popular in the conversation. This implies that users forming community conversations in the space created around #feminazis are linked by the discourses and not by the people who publish them, whom they may not even follow. In addition, it has been detected that the most successful content is published by precarious accounts and movements, which are short-lived: some of the accounts whose posts were part of the data collection ceased to exist when the analysis of the information collected was carried out: that is the case of @la\_pesto\_roja and @vamana\_tattoo. This has been one of the limitations of the research, as it was impossible to delve deeper into the characteristics of some popular accounts because they had been removed from Instagram.

Despite the broad period selected, this research is another limitation of analysing a single social network. In this sense, it would be convenient to carry out a multiplatform study where hashtag use in other platforms, such as Twitter and TikTok, could be observed. In this way, it would be possible to check whether the most active actors and the most popular content are also present on these channels. Moreover, the use of other digital method tools – and not only the free version we used in this research – could



contribute to analysing a greater number of posts without the limitations we had to resolve during the investigation process. This investigation has thus far underscored the significance of hashtags in fostering cohesion among a diverse community spanning various locations and languages yet sharing a common ideology. Therefore, the study shows one way in which the manosphere can be mainstreamed, which is an issue of concern. The contents exhibit many perspectives and garner varying levels of participation, yet they effortlessly coalesce within an intricate web facilitated by terms that resonate deeply within the counter-feminism discourse.

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