

# Gendered Hate Speech and the Silencing of Women on Social Media: Perspective from Malaysia

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Online harms are increasingly becoming a colossal challenge especially with the amplification of platform designs. Social media platforms facilitate online harms by leveraging provocative, hostile, and polarising content. Engagement-driven designs, such as algorithmic amplification, virality, and frictionless interaction have caused hateful content to spread faster and reach a wider audience than non-hateful content. Hate speech on social media is particularly a dangerous form of online harm, especially as it attacks one's identity factors. While hate speech affects everyone, its gendered dimensions are significant. Drawing on the findings from our qualitative study, the authors found that hate speech victims often lack of support due to the features of platform designs. The study conducted an in-depth interview with ten individuals (four male, six female) who had personally experienced hate speech while expressing their views on social media. Although all ten were attacked based on their identity factors, the findings reveal that female informants experienced more gendered and sexualized hate speech compared to male informants. The informants highlighted poor platform governance, noting the lack of effective human moderation, design features that misattribute reported or quoted hate speech to victims themselves, and the failure of platforms to address coordinated inauthentic behaviour that intensifies harassment. It offers critical insights for relevant stakeholders by revealing key weaknesses in existing platform and technological governance.

**Keywords:** Gendered Hate Speech, Online Discourse, Social Media, Platform Designs, Tech Governance

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Online harms, such as cyberbullying and online hate speech, are increasingly becoming a colossal challenge especially with the amplification of platform designs. Social media platforms facilitate online harm by leveraging provocative, hostile, and polarising content. Engagement-driven designs, such as algorithmic amplification, virality, and frictionless interaction have caused hateful content to spread faster and reach a wider audience than non-hateful content. A report by the World Health Organisation (2024) reveals that 15% of adolescents (around 1 in 6) have experienced cyberbullying, a concerning increase from previous years [1]. In Malaysia specifically, online harms present similar challenges. Malaysia ranks among the highest in Asia for cyberbullying incidents, with studies indicating that up to 30% of young Malaysians have experienced cyberbullying [2]. Digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp are the most common environments for cyberbullying, with offensive comments, body shaming, and intelligence-related insults being the most frequent forms of abuse [3].

Compared to cyberbullying, research on online hate speech is still scarce in Malaysia, despite its broader and more profound societal implications. Unlike cyberbullying, which often targets individuals, hate speech is directed at protected identity characteristics such as gender, race, or religion, making it a particularly dangerous form of online harm. Hate speech continues to pose a silent threat to one's freedom of expression, exacerbated by the pervasive reliance on social media. While hate speech affects everyone, its gendered dimensions are significant. The findings from our qualitative study reveals that hate speech victims often lack of support due to the features of platform designs. The study conducted an in-depth interview with ten individuals (four male, six female) who had personally experienced hate speech while expressing their views on social media. Although all ten were attacked based on their identity factors, the findings reveal that female informants experienced more gendered and sexualized hate speech compared to male informants. The informants highlighted poor platform governance, noting the lack of effective human moderation, design features that misattribute reported or quoted hate speech to victims themselves, and the failure of platforms to address coordinated inauthentic behaviour that intensifies harassment. It offers critical insights for relevant stakeholders by revealing key weaknesses in existing platform and technological governance.

## **2 POSITION STATEMENT**

From a theoretical perspective, the study underscores how unaddressed gendered hate speech undermines the inclusivity of the digital public sphere. Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and an important pillar of democracy. The theory of liberty, based on the work of John Stuart Mill, claims that freedom of expression should be protected for individual autonomy or self-realization [4]. However, the liberty theory could propel individuals to misuse their freedom of expression to cause harm to other individuals through hate speech. Unrestricted freedom of expression would not only affect the victim's right to equality and human dignity, but would also bring about many other detrimental effects to the individual and its society. When victims of hate speech are stripped off the right to express their opinions, the underlying message is that they do not have rights and a place in society. This contradicts the value of freedom of expression through the lens of the liberty theory that encourages opinions from all individuals. As such, the right to this freedom must also be looked from the perspective of the listener or the recipient, and not just the speaker. Freedom of expression does not justify depriving other individuals from expressing their own thoughts. Individuals must be able to speak up without anticipating that their message would be devalued to online discourse. Online hate speech reveals an asymmetry in how freedom of expression is protected and experienced, whereby the autonomy of speakers is prioritised at the expense of the autonomy of those targeted by hate speech.

Gendered hate speech on social media platforms functions as a form of structural silencing rather than merely individual harassment. This harm is actively shaped and sustained by prevailing sociotechnical imaginaries of platform design. The authors contend that genuinely responsible design must move beyond content removal and adopt an explicitly gender-aware approach that recognises silencing, self-censorship, and withdrawal from political discourse as core indicators of harm. Addressing gendered hate speech thus requires reimagining platform responsibility not only as regulation of speech, but as the creation of sociotechnical conditions that enable equitable political voice. Prevailing harm mitigation strategies, such as post hoc content removal or user reporting mechanisms, are insufficient to address the cumulative impacts of online hate speech. This reframing challenges platforms and policymakers to recognise participation, safety, and voice as interdependent design outcomes rather than competing values.

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