SOCIAL MEDIA DEBATE ON DIGITIZED GENDER VIOLENCE: ITALY'S *PHICA.EU* SCANDAL

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Abstract

Social media have revolutionized many aspects of society, from political mobilization to cultural expression. In recent years, these platforms have become critical arenas for debating gender-based violence, enabling victims to share their experiences and challenge established norms. At the same time, digital spaces have opened up counter-public forums, which, on the one hand, help survivors to denounce and find support, and, on the other, have inadvertently facilitated new forms of control or abuse as highlighted by the recent Italian sexist scandal concerning the *Phica.eu* platform. This article provides a sentiment analysis of posts uploaded to Facebook, X and Instagram, about the *Phica.eu* scandal that reveals how social media platforms frame discourses surrounding this scandal and how they shape and open up a debate on online gender violence.

1. Introduction

The case of *Phica.eu* exploded in Italy in the last week of August 2025. *Phica.eu* was a social forum used by thousands of people who shared original and doctored photos of women (taken from their social media profiles) that were accompanied by offensive, vulgar and sexist comments. The platform was created in 2005 and for years remained largely unknown and tolerated as student pranks by those registered on it. This changed dramatically between August 25 and 29 2025 when women in politics, such as Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and the opposition leader, Elly Schlein, publicly denounced the presence of their pictures on the platform (Rainsford 2025; De Michele 2025). From that moment on, political and social outrage flared up on both traditional and social media, supported by numerous Italian MPs, while victims reported it to the Italian Postal Police, the investigative authority in charge of cybercrimes. The protest was so strong that *Phica.eu* administrators deleted some of the most compromising pictures and eventually shut the platform down completely (De Michele 2025; Rainsford 2025; Reuters 2025; ANSA 2025). The scandal rapidly escalated into an emblematic case of digital violence and online sexism, opening up a debate about victim protection, platform responsibility and the need to educate people to be respectful in digital contexts.

This quanti-qualitative study explores how the *Phica.eu* scandal is discursively framed on social media platforms, with a particular focus on Facebook, X and Instagram. Using the open source software CorpusSense (Moreno-Ortiz 2025), a sentiment analysis of more than 400 comments uploaded to these social media platforms was carried out. The aim was to understand, in the relationship between social media and the open debate, how digital discourses frame the *Phica.eu* scandal and the extent to which they shape the open debate on online gender violence. For this purpose, the paper is organized as follows: after the literature review in Section 2, and the methodological approach in Section 3, data analysis and discussion are offered in Section 4, after which some concluding remarks follow.

2. Literature review

Social media platforms have altered the dynamics of public discourse. Their ability to invite participation from diverse demographic groups offers unprecedented opportunities for marginalized groups to articulate their experiences in their own words. For instance, in the case of gender violence victims, social media facilitate the sharing of personal narratives and the challenging of pervasive stereotypes (Maci 2022), institutional biases and patriarchal narratives embedded in conventional media structures (Maci 2026). At the same time, growing evidence shows that social media spaces often serve as sites of gender violence, giving way to the creation of masculinity forums that espouse antifeminist interpretations of contemporary social issues (McGlashan 2023), some of them simply hate-filled and resentment-fuelled with quite chilling levels of misogyny (Nagle 2018; Spallaccia 2020). Routine harassment, trolling and sustained abuse, targeting women and other marginalized groups in particular, have become well-documented phenomena (Cameron 2024; Maci 2024, 2026). This "online 'manosphere' – a loose online network of anti-feminist radical forums and websites dedicated to issues relating to men and masculinity" (McGlashan and Krendel 2024: 87) undermines the transformative potential of online support and a counter-public space for resisting gender violence, by paradoxically becoming a site for both empowerment and victimization. This dichotomy stresses issues of:

- polarization vs participation: while social platforms offer democratic access to dialogue, they increasingly foster echo chambers, harassment and selective participation (Maci *et al.* 2024);
- marginalized voices and silencing: while social media offer marginalized groups sites to make their voices heard, abuse, trolling and platform bias silence them (*ibid.*).

Social media are inherently ambivalent. They facilitate connections, knowledge-sharing and community mobilization, yet, at the same time, they exacerbate patriarchal control in online spaces (Maci 2024; Greer *et al.* 2025), magnifying power imbalances (Bachmann *et al.* 2025).

In Italy, public opinion about gender-based violence is moulded by the traditional and digital media, which create and maintain stereotypes and social standards. Discussions about male blame are often marginalized through de-responsibilization strategies (Anouna 2020), with male perpetrators portrayed through the lens of romanticized emotions in narratives that prioritize sensationalism over the systemic analysis of gender violence (Belmonte and Negri 2021). In addition to hiding the underlying gender

dynamics, such biased reporting reinforces perceptions that portray gender violence as an isolated, sporadic problem, rather than a structural social issue, which thus normalizes abuse and discourages awareness of gender violence as a structural problem, leaving a distorted understanding of its dynamics (*ibid.* 2021; Saccà 2024).

Against this backdrop, Italian social media, such as Facebook and X, have become a public, heated arena for contesting the narratives surrounding gender violence often revealing the dual nature of digital engagement: while providing a space for solidarity and collective action (D'Ambrosi and Polci 2017; D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2018), they also reveal deep-seated prejudices and misogynistic attitudes that continue to pervade online discourse (Anouna 2020). Longstanding traditions, coupled with a media system that often reinforces patriarchal values, complicate efforts to achieve substantial change in Italy. The *Phica.eu* scandal is emblematic.

Scholarship in digital discourse analysis has emphasized how platform architectures shape not just what is said, but how discourse unfolds through specific affordances (Gibson 1979; Norman 1988; Bucher and Helmond 2018). Facebook's threaded comments enable protracted argumentation; Instagram's visuality privileges affective solidarity; X's brevity favours viral provocation (Papacharissi 2015; Highfield and Leaver 2016). These technological constraints become discursive opportunities that either amplify or silence particular framings of gender violence, warranting platform-specific analysis rather than generic "social media" treatments.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the theoretical lens for unpacking these dynamics (Fairclough 2014; Maci and Sala 2022). CDA reveals how linguistic choices – from minimizing rhetoric ("just banter") to whataboutism – reproduce power asymmetries online, while sentiment analysis (via tools like CorpusSense: Moreno-Ortiz 2025) quantifies their prevalence across platforms. Applied to the *Phica.eu* case, this mixed-methods approach illuminates how Italian digital publics negotiate between feminist counter-publics (Fraser 1990) and entrenched misogynistic echo chambers, directly addressing RQ1:

RQ1: What role do social media platforms play in elaborating discourse frames surrounding the *Phica.eu* scandal and in shaping the open debate on online gender violence?

3. Methodological approach

This corpus-driven (Hunston 2002) study draws on digital discourse analysis (Maci and Sala 2022) combined with CDA (Fairclough 2014). I believe this mixed approach provides a principled method for exploring discourse in open debates about gender and online gender violence on social media.

To carry out this examination, I first read all Italian and English digital newspaper articles available in the week of 25–31 August 2025 about the *Phica.eu* scandal to gain some context. I then explored how the news was reported or commented on, on social media platforms, by victims and platform users to investigate the role social media play in framing the discourse around the *Phica.eu* scandal. To this end, I considered three social media platforms: Facebook (FB), Instagram (IG) and X. The Italian Government's *Annual Report on Information* (AgCom 2025) shows that 52.4% of Italians

find information on social media, with the following demographic: FB, IG, Telegram and X are mainly used by millennials and Gen X, while TikTok and YouTube are preferred by Gen Z (AGI-Agenzia Italia 2023). As the former group is more interested in news interactions (likes, comments), and the latter in influencers and videos (uploading pictures and selfies), and given that the investigation was primarily focused on social media posts containing reactions to and comments about the *Phica.eu* scandal, FB, IG and X were considered for the investigation. Telegram was not taken into consideration because it does not normally offer space for proper open debate, as it is a semi-closed platform based on channels, group chats and private messages. Moreover, in the specific case of *Phica.eu*, there is no evidence that Telegram channels played a central role in shaping the open debate, which primarily unfolded on the three mainstream platforms considered here.

As FB, IG and X policies do not allow scraping posts using APIs, I decided to proceed manually and find all the posts on those three platforms dealing with the *Phica.eu* scandal by using the hashtag #*phica*. I began my analysis on Instagram, as this was the platform where the case first gained public visibility: Ms Alessandra Moretti, a Member of the European Parliament, publicly reported the *Phica.eu* platform on IG, triggering the initial wave of reactions. Starting from this discursive point of origin allowed me to reconstruct the early circulation of the hashtag and related comments. My manual search on IG retrieved 92 posts containing #phica; however, only 18 posts with comments discussing the *Phica.eu* case were found, which were, therefore, downloaded and saved[1]. To ensure reliability and representativeness, I followed the same procedure for both FB and X and used 18 posts as a cutoff point. I then downloaded all the comments contained in the first 18 posts found with the #*phica* search dealing with the scandal. I managed to collect 54 posts with a total of 427 comments, forming a small corpus of 23,131 words, as shown in Table 1.

Social media platform	Post #	Comment #	Word #	Token #
FB	18	244	10,998	11,796
IG	18	92	9,103	9,786
X	18	91	3,030	3,584
TOTAL	*54*	*427*	*23,131*	*25,166*

Table 1. Corpus breakdown

The analysis will not be *across* corpora but *within* corpora. This means that differences in size are not relevant for the purposes of this investigation. When needing to

[1] The downloaded posts have been saved and archived with all sensitive details deleted to ensure privacy. For this reason, posts needed as examples are (partially) cited with no indication of the author. Examples are identified indicating the relevant social media company (e.g. FB for Facebook, IG for Instagram, and X for X), followed by a number representing the chronological order of post downloading (as in FB1, FB2, I3, X4) with the order of the comment appearing under the post (as in FB1-3, FB18-1 etc.).

compare results across the three different subcorpora, standardization will be given with reference to percentages.

The gender of the post authors was not always identifiable, as many use a nickname. However, whenever possible, gender classification was taken into consideration.

CorpusSense is an open-access program used for corpus query and analysis, it is designed for the exploration of large language data sets through a combination of statistical and linguistic techniques using Python (Moreno-Ortiz 2024). The range of functionalities offered by CorpusSense facilitates both quantitative and qualitative textual analysis, including the generation of frequency lists, keyword extraction, collocations, colligations and semantic analysis (available at: https://corpus-sense.uma.es/).

This step facilitated a CDA-informed analysis, assessing how comments on the three social platforms construct meaning and critique. This approach made it possible to identify specific discursive patterns in all three corpora.

4. Data analysis and discussion

4.1. *Data analysis*

4.1.1. *Facebook*

CorpusSense semantic analysis revealed that the main theme of the collected corpus is focused on the topic of digital violence and issues linked to social media.

The theme extends to include discussions about:

- online abuse;
- privacy issues;
- personal data protection and violation;
- negative attitudes towards women, in particular; and
- references to specific events such as the closure of controversial sites and arguments centring around legal responsibility in digital crimes.

The prevailing sentiment is negative and can be elaborated by women against men as in (1):

(1) Sei parte del problema [you are part of the problem] (FB3-1)

by men against women who ironically comment on the fact that women judge all men on the basis of some other men's actions as in (2):

(2) La cosa più brutta è che non si può giudicare un gruppo dalle azioni di pochi [the worst thing is that you cannot judge a group by the actions of a few] (FB 3-32)

or even by men and a few women against the post authors, especially if they are journalists:

(3) Il problema è chi lo paga per scrivere [the problem is who pays them to write] (FB3-91)

A manual reading made it possible to group posts in discursive categories, which can be seen in Table 2, below:

Semantic category	Comments	%	Gender (when identifiable)			Examples
			M	*F*	N/I	
Solidarity/ indignation	60	24	25	*30*	5	Bisogna pubblicare i nomi delle persone coinvolte come si fa per altre indagini. È l'unico modo [The names of those involved must be published, as is done in other investigations. It is the only way.] (FB10-10)
Minimization/ justification	41	16	37	*3*	1	Outrage? They should be flattered… (FB1-2)
Misogynistic/ hostile comments	53	21	47	*3*	3	Un po' ritardatine ste femmine [a bit slow these 'ere females] (FB2-1)
Political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism	36	14	29	*6*	1	Qua l'unico problema è che XXX pensa ancora di essere un giornalista [The only problem here is that XXX still thinks he's a journalist] (FB3-129)
Whataboutism	29	11	25	*2*	2	O ma questo però mai una parola sullo stupratore di Milano [Oh, but not a word about the rapist in Milan.] (FB3-130)
Male self-criticism	25	10	22	*0*	3	Gli uomini hanno causato quei problemi, la riflessione deve partire da noi [Men caused those problems, so we must be the ones to start reflecting on them] (FB4-1)

Table 2. Breakdown of semantic categories in FB posts

FB comments on *Phica.eu* posts are grouped in Table 2 into the following categories: *solidarity/indignation; minimizing/justification; misogynistic/hostile comments; political/media/police delegitimization or criticism; whataboutism;* and *male self-criticism*. Their incidence is as follows: *solidarity/indignation* (24%, 1st row), *misogynistic/hostile* attitude (21%, 3rd row) and *minimization* comments (16%, 2nd row). When *delegitimization of the media* is present (14%, 4th row), it is normally linked to *whataboutism*. All other comments have an almost even distribution among the semantic categories thus detected, with a decrease to about 10–11% of *whataboutism* and *male self-criticism* (5th and 6th rows). While all the categories include comments written by men, the *solidarity/indignation* category is equally authored by both men and women.

4.1.2. *Instagram*

A semantic analysis of the IG subcorpus shows that the main themes dealt with are:

- digital violence;
- online legal rights; and
- social dynamics and abusive practices on social networks.

The topics dealt with are centred around personal experiences, complaints and analyses of legal norms relating to digital violence. The sentiment is predominantly negative, with a strongly critical and indignant tone, usually found in women's comments:

(4) Non è uno scherzo, non è 'goliardia': è un reato [This is not a joke, it is not 'student pranking': it is a crime] (I3-1)

(5) Sarei curiosa di sapere come reagirebbero questi 720mila, che affermano fosse 'solo per scherzo' 'solo battute' 'che sarà mai', se i loro piselli finissero sul web tra i commenti di 720mila donne. Posso anticipargli che non sarebbero in elogio alla loro virilità [I would be curious to know how these 720,000 men, who claim it was 'just a joke', 'just banter', 'no big deal', would react if their willies ended up on the internet among the comments of 720,000 women. I can tell them in advance that it would not be in praise of their virility] (I1-9)

A manual reading of all posts and comments allowed us to semantically group comments into the categories shown in Table 3, below:

Semantic category	Comments	%	Gender (when identifiable)			Examples
			M	*F*	N/I	
Solidarity/ indignation	28	20	3	*22*	3	Disgusto e rabbia. Ma chi abbiamo in casa?! [Disgust and anger. Who on earth do we have in our house?!] (IG3-3)
Minimization/ justification	12	13	7	*1*	4	Sono solo 3 scemi che commentano Diletta Leotta 😂 [They're just three idiots commenting on Diletta Leotta 😂] (IG2-3)
Misogynistic/ hostile comments	8	9	7	*0*	1	Una donna si fa foto da troia e poi si lamenta [A woman takes slutty photos of herself and then complains] (IG13-9)
Political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism	15	16	4	*6*	5	La postale lo sapeva da 20 anni e non ha fatto nulla. [The cybercrime police knew about it for 20 years and did nothing] (IG16-11)

Whataboutism	9	10	7	*1*	1	ma perché non parlate dei centinaia di casi al mese di immigrati che st%%prano ragazze nel nord italia [But why don't you talk about the hundreds of cases every month of immigrants r%%%ing girls in northern Italy?] (IG13-9)
Feminist structural analysis / activism	6	7	1	*4*	1	Siamo talmente immersi da centinaia di anni nella cultura maschilista e patriarcale da non accorgerci quanto condizioni i nostri comportamenti [We have been so immersed in a male-dominated and patriarchal culture for hundreds of years that we do not realize how much it conditions our behaviour] (IG4-4)
Political/ feminist complaints	14	15	0	*11*	3	Io denuncio. Basta anonimato sul web [I'm reporting it. No more anonymity on the web]. (IG7-1)

Table 3. Breakdown of semantic categories in IG posts

IG comments on *Phica.eu* posts can be grouped in exactly the same categories as the FB comments, with the exception of *male self-criticism*, replaced instead by a *feminist structural analysis* category. Unlike FB, IG comments are characterized more by *solidarity/ indignation* attitudes (20%, 1st row), followed by an almost equal incidence of *political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism* (16%, 4th row) and *political/ feminist complaints* (15%, last row). However, when the *political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism* category is present, it invariably criticizes the position taken up by these institutions. Furthermore, the extra category identified as *political/ feminist complaints,* mainly authored by women, reveals women's proactivity in relation to the scandal whereas *misogynist* feelings, *minimization* and *whataboutism* are mainly written by men.

4.1.3. *X*

The main themes associated with X comments seem to be linked to:

- social and political discussions in Italy;
- feminine oppression;
- gender violence; and
- power dynamics.

The subcorpus contains elements that refer to online groups and movements, with heavy criticism of public figures and institutions. Overall, the sentiment is predominantly negative, with a strongly critical and indignant tone, usually found in women's comments, as in excerpt (6):

(6) Se posti le foto di tua figlia non sei uno che ha sbagliato, sei probabilmente un malato da curare [If you post photos of your daughter, you are not someone who has made a mistake; you are probably someone who needs treatment.] (X4-8)

but also a critical one found in men's comments against women or institutions complaining about online gender violence:

(7) È piuttosto ridicolo da parte loro mettersi a fare la morale ora [it's rather ridiculous of them to start preaching now] (X4-6)

A manual reading of all posts and comments made it possible to semantically group comments into the categories shown in Table 4.

Semantic category	Comments	%	Gender (when identifiable)			Examples
			M	*F*	N/I	
Solidarity/ indignation	28	31	12	*12*	4	Lo trovo terribile ma, purtroppo, non mi sorprende. Quello che trovo ancora più terribile e che continuiamo a non essere credute, che servono cose come questa perché venga riconosciuta l'esistenza del problema [I find it terrible, but unfortunately, it doesn't surprise me. What I find even more terrible is that we continue to not be believed, that things like this are necessary for the existence of the problem to be recognized] (X7-3)
Minimization/ justification	13	14	9	*0*	4	Ripostare foto già pubblicate non è reato, però [Reposting previously published photos is not a crime, however] (X4-6)
Misogynistic/ hostile comments	15	16	12	*0*	3	Quelle 4 troie che vedo tutti i giorni sui social [Those four sluts I see every day on social media] (X1-6)

→

Political/ media/ police delegitimization or criticism	9	9.9	7	*1*	1	Mediaset ha prodotto le tettone di Drive In, le lolite di Non è la Rai, le veline, le letterine eccetera eccetera per decine di anni, istigando generazioni di donne allo zoccolismo e di uomini al segaiolismo. [Mediaset has produced the busty girls of Drive In, the Lolitas of Non è la Rai, the showgirls, the letter girls, etc., etc., for decades, inciting generations of women to promiscuity and men to masturbation.] (X1-4)
Whataboutism	8	8.8	6	*0*	2	Mentre l'intera 🇮🇹 (Parlamento femminile compreso) discute, indignata, di #Phica, vi segnalo che, in 20 mesi (ovvero, dal 1 gennaio 2024 ad oggi), su un totale di 168 attacchi ransomware condotti verso aziende, organizzazioni pubbliche amministrazioni, strutture sanitarie, etc., i gruppi criminali attaccanti hanno pubblicato la modica quantità di ben circa 51 TB di dati personali e sensibili di cittadini, società, etc. italiani. [While the entire 🇮🇹 Parliament (including the Women's Parliament) is indignantly discussing #Phica, I would like to point out that, in 20 months (i.e. from 1 January 2024 to today), out of a total of 168 ransomware attacks carried out against companies, public organisations, public administrations, healthcare facilities etc., the attacking criminal groups have published a modest amount of approximately 51 TB of personal and sensitive data belonging to Italian citizens, companies, etc.] (X4-14)
Feminist structural analysis / activism	9	9.9	0	*7*	2	Il caso di Phica racconta che nel nostro paese il patriarcato è sistemico [The Phica case shows that patriarchy is systemic in our country.] (X7-1)
Conspiracy theories / negationism	9	9.9	5	*0*	4	Quelli che hanno postato su Phica non esistono. Sono tutte storie inventate [Those who posted on Phica do not exist. They are all made-up stories.] (X6-2)

Table 4. Breakdown of semantic categories in X posts

Posts in the X subcorpus mostly correspond to those for the FB and Instagram subcorpora, except for the absence of the *male self-criticism* or *political/feminist complaints* categories. Unlike FB and IG, comments include those labelled as *conspiracy theories/ negationism*. As Table 4 shows, men dominate in *misogynistic* (16%, 3rd row), *minimizing* (14%, 2nd row) and *whataboutism* (8.8%, 5th row) comments. Women focus on *feminist analysis*. Both men and women, however, place emphasis on *solidarity/ indignation* (31%, 1st row), the top-ranking comments. Unidentifiable profiles appear mainly in short, ironic or conspiracy-theory tweets (9.9%, last row).

4.2. Discussion

The distribution of semantic categories across gender and across social platforms reveals the following insights. Figure 1 is a bar chart showing the distribution of the semantic categories across gender. When the overall distribution of the 427 comments is viewed as gender percentages (265 men, 109 women, 53 Non Identified people [N/I]), the stance adopted in comments by women is shown to equate with solidarity or indignation (14.9%), whereas men's comments, instead, focus on misogyny (15.4%), minimizing the scandal (12.4%), whataboutism (8.8%) and institutional (political, media or police) delegitimization (9.3%).

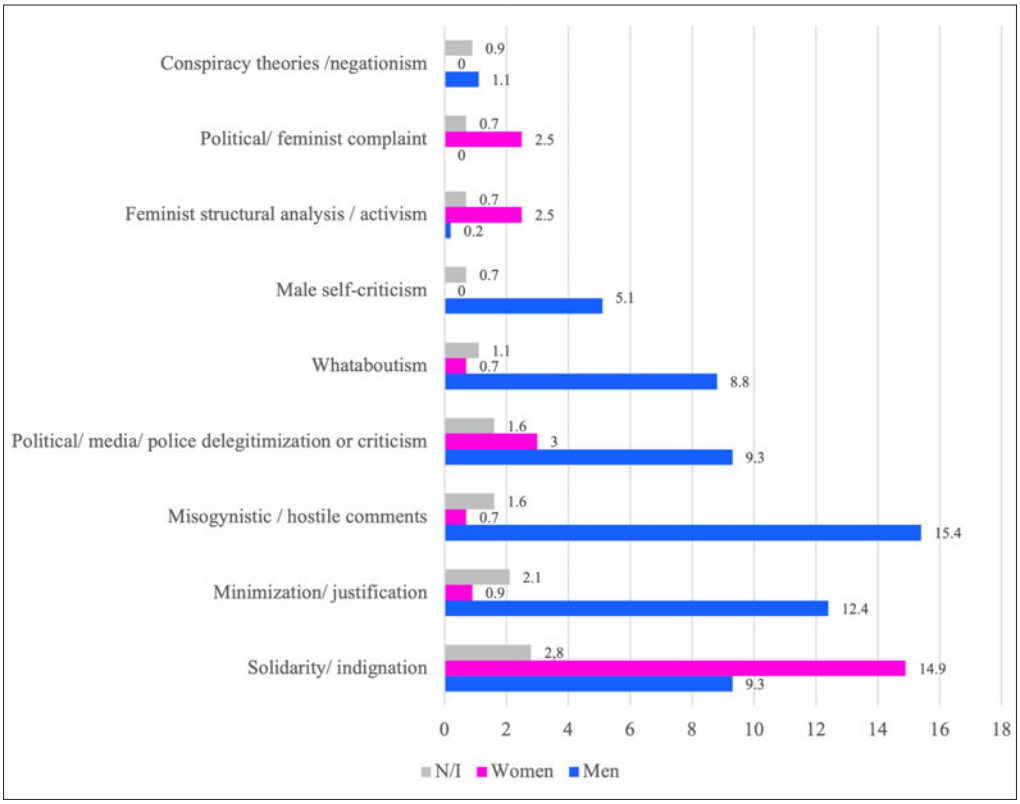

Figure 1. Semantic categories across genders (%)

The trend emerging from comment analysis confirms gender asymmetry typical of an as yet heavily patriarchal context such as the Italian one (Aloè *et al.* 2025). The strong male incidence in categories linked to *delegitimization*, *minimization*, *misogynist attacks* and *whataboutism* strategies mirrors what several studies have identified as the persistence of patriarchal dynamics in the Italian social media context (Bonu Rosenkranz and Barone 2025); although numerically less present, women emerge in frames of *solidarity*, *political denunciation* and *feminist analysis*, positioning themselves as aligned with forms of linguistic resistance to structural sexism (Azzalini 2023; Giacometti 2025). This discursive polarization demonstrates how digital platforms are not neutral spaces, but places where hierarchies in Italian society are reproduced and at the same time contested, confirming interpretations of patriarchy as a resilient and constantly changing social system (Walby 1990; Connell 2020).

The summary given in Table 5 is remarkable in many respects. It shows the percentage distribution of discourse categories across the three social media platforms considered (FB, IG, and X). The percentages are not based on the total number of comments (427). Instead, the percentages relate to the number of comments on each platform: for example, 31% of posts of solidarity on X correspond to almost a third of the subcorpus for that platform, while the same category represents 24% for FB and 20% for IG. This makes it possible to capture the internal specificities of each digital environment ensuring that absolute quantitative differences (the FB corpus is numerically larger) do not obscure qualitative trends.

Semantic category	**FB (244)**	**IG (92)**	**X (91)**
Solidarity/indignation	24% (60)	20% (28)	31% (28)
Minimization/justification	16% (41)	13% (12)	14% (13)
Misogynistic/hostile comments	21% (53)	9% (8)	16% (15)
Media delegitimization or criticism	14% (36)	16% (15)	9.9% (9)
Whataboutism	11% (29)	10% (9)	8.8% (8)
Male self-criticism	10% (25)	0	0
Feminist structural analysis/activism	0	7% (6)	9.9%(9)
Political/ feminist complaints	0	15% (14)	0
Conspiracy theories/negationism	0	0	9.9% (9)

Table 5. Semantic categories within social media platforms

The analysis reveals different patterns: FB has a high percentage of *misogynistic/ hostile* comments (21%) and *minimizing* comments (16%), as well as a significant amount of *journalistic* or *political delegitimization* (14%), indicating a strong polarization in the discourse. IG, on the other hand, stands out for the predominance of the *solidarity/ indignation* category (20%) and for a more marked visibility of *feminist* frames (15% complaints, 7% structural analysis), with a lower incidence of explicit *misogyny* (9%). X shows a more hybrid landscape: *solidarity* (31%) and *delegitimization* (9.9%)

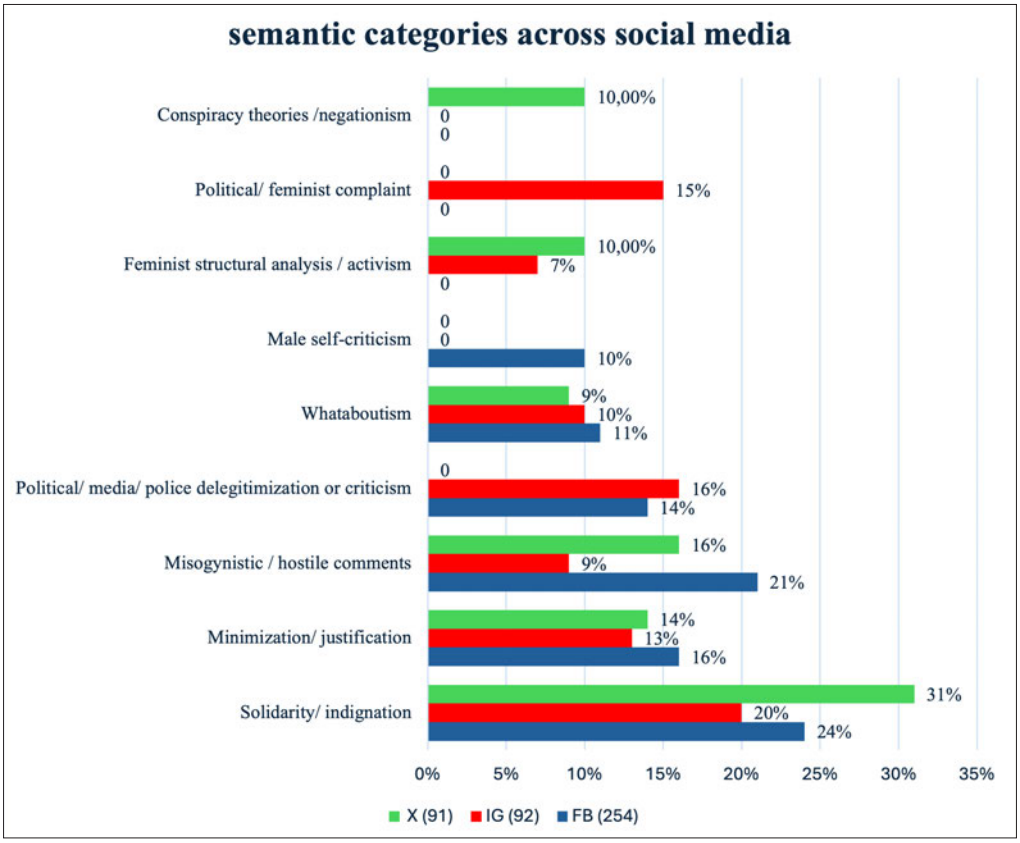

Figure 2. Distribution of semantic categories within social platforms (FB, IG, X)

coexist with significant percentages of *conspiracy theories* and *whataboutism*, which are less evident on Instagram. Figure 2, below, provides a visual representation of this distribution.

The different distribution of frames can also be interpreted in the light of generational variables: FB, which is mainly used by older users (AgCom 2025), and often socialized in controversial television discourse practices, tends to reproduce the dynamics of conflict, delegitimization and minimization. IG, more popular among young people and young adults (AgCom 2025), appears to be a space for counter-discourse, where the linguistic registers of solidarity and feminist activism spread more easily (Banet-Weiser 2018; Mendes *et al.* 2019). Finally, X seems to be a platform for rapid agenda-setting, where brevity and a high density of journalists and politicians among users favour both the visibility of indignation frames and the circulation of disinformation and denialist content (Hermida 2010; Papacharissi 2015).

Beyond discursive practices, the differences emerging across FB, IG and X can also be understood in light of their platform-specific architectures and affordances. In this sense, the role of social media in elaborating discourse frames around the *Phica.eu* scandal is not merely that of a neutral channel, but of a technologically mediated

environment which actively shapes the visibility, circulation and legitimization of particular stances through distinct communicative opportunities and constraints (Mascheroni and Vincent 2016). On each platform, the combination of interface design, content formats and engagement mechanics co-constructs the conditions under which indignation, minimization, misogyny or feminist activism can be expressed and recognized as salient frames.

FB, still largely organized around text-heavy posts, threaded comment sections and persistent discussion threads, affords extended argumentative exchanges, polarized back-and-forth interactions and the accumulation of conflict over time (Boccia Artieri 2012). This architecture favours the emergence of long comment chains in which users can repeatedly quote, attack and delegitimize one another, thus amplifying polemical and misogynistic frames as well as political and media delegitimization. In our data, the high incidence of misogynistic and minimizing comments, combined with systematic attacks on journalists and institutions, can be read as a direct outcome of these affordances, which make it easy to sustain protracted disputes and to normalize antagonistic, confrontational styles as legitimate forms of participation in the open debate.

IG, by contrast, is a visually-oriented platform where posts are structured around images and short captions, and where comments tend to be shorter, affectively loaded and tightly attached to specific visual artefacts (Highfield and Leaver 2016). These visual and interactional affordances, coupled with the centrality of influencers and activist accounts among younger cohorts (AgCom 2025), facilitate the emergence of frames centred on solidarity, feminist analysis and political denunciation (Banet-Weiser 2018). The predominance of solidarity/indignation and the visibility of feminist complaints in our corpus suggest that Instagram's architecture encourages users to cluster around supportive, expressive and identity-affirming framings, turning the platform into a space where counter-public feminist discourses can gain visibility and emotional resonance more easily than on Facebook.

X occupies a hybrid position, shaped by brevity and virality (Papacharissi 2015). The strict character limit, the emphasis on trending topics and hashtags, and the possibility of rapid re-circulation through retweets and quote-tweets create an environment oriented towards immediacy and agenda-setting rather than sustained deliberation (Hermida 2010). In this context, solidarity frames coexist with conspiracy narratives, whataboutism and negationist content, which benefit from the platform's propensity to reward provocative, concise and highly shareable messages. The presence of conspiracy theories and denialist comments in our data illustrates how X's affordances lower the threshold for the diffusion of disinformation and for reframing the scandal as either exaggerated or irrelevant, thereby reshaping the contours of the open debate around online gender violence.

Taken together, these observations show that social media platforms play a constitutive role in elaborating discourse frames around the *Phica.eu* scandal. Rather than being interchangeable arenas for public discussion, FB, IG and X provide distinct discursive ecologies, in which specific combinations of technological affordances and user cultures make certain interpretations of the scandal – *misogynistic normalization*, *feminist solidarity*, *institutional delegitimization* or *conspiratorial denial* – more likely to emerge, persist and circulate. In responding to our research question, this suggests that the "role" of platforms lies not only in hosting debate, but in structuring the very

possibilities for how gendered violence can be minimized, contested or transformed into a broader political issue within Italian digital publics.

5. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study was to analyse how the *Phica.eu* scandal is discursively framed on social media platforms, with a particular focus on FB, IG and X. To address this focus, I posed the following RQ:

What role do social media platforms play in elaborating discourse frames surrounding the Phica.eu scandal and in shaping the open debate on online gender violence?

The analysis was carried out via a quantitative and qualitative investigation of comments posted as a reaction to some posts about the *Phica.eu* scandal in Italy and uploaded to FB, IG and X. The investigation highlights how each platform constructs a different discursive environment around the scandal.

FB emerges as the site of maximum polarization. The majority of comments adopt a misogynistic or minimizing tone, often accompanied by delegitimizing attacks directed at journalists covering the case, a strongly gendered pattern, as male users overwhelmingly contribute to it. Although instances of male self-criticism are present, they remain isolated and insufficient to balance a space that is, overall, dominated by polemical noise.

On IG, by contrast, solidarity and indignation prevail, particularly among female users, who account for about one-third of contributions. Messages of support for the victims are accompanied by feminist activist voices and broader cultural analyses of patriarchy. Compared to FB, explicit misogyny is less visible. IG can thus be read as a space for counter-discourse, where solidarity and feminist activism gain visibility and resonance.

X presents a hybrid scenario where solidarity coexists with misogyny and minimization, but where conspiracy theories and negationist frames appear more prominently than on the other two platforms. Whataboutism is also particularly evident, with users frequently shifting the debate onto unrelated issues in order to downplay the scandal. The speed and virality of X make it an arena for immediate polarization, in which disinformation thrives and intersects with the dynamics of open debate. Here, too, gender differences are visible: male users dominate hostile, minimizing and whataboutism categories, while female voices are concentrated in solidarity and feminist complaints.

Non-identifiable users are especially active in conspiracy or negationist framings, suggesting that anonymity may facilitate the circulation of disinformation.

Furthermore, the differences across platforms can also be partly explained by generational usage patterns. FB, still dominant among older users (AgCom 2025), socialized in the culture of Mediaset-style polemics, reproduces a discursive environment marked by polarization, misogyny and delegitimization (Boccia Artieri 2012; Carlo 2022). IG, by contrast, is a platform with younger cohorts (AgCom 2025), where popular feminism and solidarity discourses are more visible (Banet-Weiser 2018; Mendes *et al.* 2019). X occupies a hybrid position: while it enables solidarity and advocacy, its affordances

(brevity, virality) also make it a fertile ground for disinformation and conspiratorial framings (Hermida 2010; Papacharissi 2015).

These results clearly demonstrate that social media cannot be treated as a homogeneous block. Each platform structures the conditions for open debate in distinct ways, with implications for how an open debate unfolds. On FB, it can easily degenerate into personal attacks and polarization, reflecting both the communicative habits of its predominantly older user base and the platform's affordances that favour extended, often aggressive exchanges. On IG, by contrast, an open debate aligns more closely with the model of counter-publics theorized by Fraser and Butler (2016): here solidarity, feminist advocacy and cultural critique circulate more visibly, offering a counter-discourse to the minimization and misogyny so dominant elsewhere. While X occupies a hybrid position, where solidarity and feminist voices coexist with misogyny, it clearly highlights the direct nexus between open debate and disinformation. Conspiratorial and denialist narratives gain traction through the brevity and virality of the medium, distorting reality while still claiming the status of legitimate debate.

These discursive ecologies shape differential access to open debate, privileging some linguistic practices (insults, slogans) while marginalizing others (analytical or feminist voices). In this arena, applied linguistics can play a key role in critical digital literacy and policy-making by exposing how linguistic forms (from insults to hashtags) reinforce or contest systemic inequalities.

Theoretically, these findings underscore the need to move beyond platform-agnostic analyses of digital discourse, treating affordances as co-producers of gendered framings (Mascheroni and Vincent 2016). In practice, they highlight policy implications: platforms must address architectural biases that amplify toxicity (e.g. algorithmic promotion of provocative content on X), while digital literacy initiatives should target platform-specific risks. Future research could extend this approach to longitudinal corpora, other scandals, or multimodal analysis of images and hashtags. Ultimately, the *Phica.eu* case reveals social media as ambivalent arenas: sites of resistance for marginalized voices, yet amplifiers of systemic violence unless structurally reformed.

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