

From Individual Hostility to Structural Communication Practice: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Digital Misogyny in Communication Studies (2020-2025)

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine how communication scholarship conceptualizes digital misogyny as a communication practice within the context of social media. The study responds to the growing academic attention to gender-based hostility in digital environments, which remains conceptually fragmented across existing research. To address this gap, it adopts a systematic conceptual mapping approach to clarify the distinctive contribution of communication studies to the understanding of digital misogyny. This research employs a qualitative meta-synthesis method within an interpretive paradigm, analyzing 155 peer-reviewed international journal articles in the field of communication studies published between 2020 and 2025. An inductive thematic synthesis is used to identify dominant conceptual patterns, variations in misogynistic communication practices, and the ways in which social media is positioned as a digital public space. The findings reveal a consistent conceptual shift from viewing misogyny primarily as an individual attitude toward understanding it as a discursive, cultural, and structurally mediated communication practice. Five core conceptual patterns are identified: misogyny as individual hatred, discursive practice, digital cultural expression, a phenomenon shaped by platform structures, and a mechanism of social control. The results further indicate that digital misogyny operates through both overt and covert practices, with subtle forms such as humor and memes playing a significant role in the normalization of gender inequality.

Overall, this study advances a more integrated conceptual framework for understanding digital misogyny as a symbolic, mediated, and structurally embedded phenomenon within the digital public sphere.

Keywords: Gender, Misogyny, Social Media, Meta-Synthesis

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have emerged as the primary channel for contemporary public communication. Social media has been widely conceptualized as functioning both as a means of disseminating information and as a digital public sphere in which social, political, and cultural meanings are produced, negotiated, and contested (Sujon et al., 2025). Its interactive, fast-paced, and participatory nature creates opportunities for broader public engagement than conventional mass media (Smith & Niker, 2021). However, increased participation does not necessarily translate into an egalitarian communication space. Numerous studies have demonstrated that social media can reproduce and reinforce social hierarchies, including gender-based inequalities. In this context, hate-based communication targeting women, often referred to as digital misogyny, has emerged as a significant phenomenon that affects the participation, visibility, and legitimacy of women's voices in the digital public sphere (Schäfer et al., 2024).

As academic interest in this topic has grown, a debate has emerged within communication studies over how misogyny should be conceptualized in digital contexts. One strand of research approaches misogyny from an individualized perspective, framing it as a personal attitude or an expression of hatred (Wrisley, 2023). This view is often reflected in explicit hate speech, verbal abuse, or aggressive behavior in online spaces, and it locates misogyny primarily at the level of individual beliefs and actions. However, a growing body of research challenges this individualistic framework by situating misogyny within broader communicative processes, including discourse, symbolic representations, and the structural conditions of digital platforms (Esposito & Semenzin, 2024; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023). From this perspective, misogyny is understood as a social and symbolic practice that is enabled and amplified through digitally mediated communication.

The growing scholarly attention to digital misogyny is also reflected in the rise of academic publications over the past decade. Numerous bibliometric studies and systematic reviews have mapped the development of research from around 2010 to the early 2020s, with particular attention to online hate speech, sexism, and gender-based violence in digital environments (Fontanella et al., 2024). This mapping is important because

it identifies key thematic trends and shows how the literature is distributed across disciplines such as psychology, sociology, media studies, and computer science. However, existing work has largely emphasized quantitative synthesis or cross-disciplinary mapping. As a result, it has not yet been clarified how misogyny is conceptualized specifically within communication studies. This discipline has traditionally focused on meaning-making, mediation, and the dynamics of public communication, which may help explain why conceptual debates remain fragmented. Studies often examine similar phenomena but rely on different conceptual assumptions that are not systematically connected.

This fragmentation becomes evident when the literature draws on multiple explanatory traditions. In psychology, sexism is often conceptualized as an individual attitude or orientation (Krieger, 2020). By contrast, in sociology, patriarchy is examined as a social structure that organizes gendered power relations (Dugan et al., 2021). Feminist theory conceptualizes misogyny as a practice embedded in patriarchal values that legitimizes domination through symbolic degradation, intimidation, and the silencing of women (Dickel & Evolvi, 2023; Wrisley, 2023). In digital communication studies, recent scholarship suggests that misogyny does not always take the form of overt hate speech. Instead, it can operate through more subtle communicative forms, including metaphors, humor, framing, and symbolic power relations reproduced through discourse (Kopytowska, 2021). Moreover, research on online platforms highlights the role of algorithms, visibility mechanisms, and the attention economy in shaping the circulation and amplification of misogynistic discourse. However, these discursive, cultural, and structural approaches often develop in parallel, and an understanding of how these dimensions intersect in misogynistic communication practices has not yet been systematically mapped.

Despite the growing body of literature on this topic, research remains limited in terms of synthesizing how communication studies conceptualize digital misogyny as a communicative practice within social media environments. Existing reviews more often map dominant themes, methodologies, and publication trends, yet they rarely examine the conceptual assumptions and epistemological frameworks that shape communication analysis. As debates around platforms, governance, and digital public spaces intensified between 2020 and 2025, interpretations of misogyny became increasingly diverse, which may contribute to a more fragmented conceptual landscape. This gap underscores the need for an approach that addresses not only what the literature discusses but also how knowledge about digital misogyny is constructed, negotiated, and stabilized within communication scholarship.

This conceptual gap constitutes a methodological and theoretical problem for communication scholarship. When studies examine similar misogynistic phenomena but rely on different and only partially compatible assumptions (e.g., individual hostility, discursive normalization, cultural styles, or platform-structural explanations), it becomes difficult to compare findings, build cumulative theory, and clarify the analytical implications of research within mediated public communication. This issue becomes particularly salient in the 2020–2025 period, as debates on platforms, moderation, governance, and digital public spheres intensified and communication scholarship increasingly engaged with questions of visibility, legitimacy, and participation. The novelty of this study lies not merely in applying a qualitative meta-synthesis method, but in producing a structured conceptual map of communication scholarship (2020–2025) by (1) reconstructing recurring analytical lenses used to conceptualize digital misogyny, (2) explicating their intersections and tensions to avoid rigid typologies, and (3) offering a careful descriptive temporal scan of shifting emphases without making statistical generalizations. To address this problem, the present study employs a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to systematically review international communication scholarship published from 2020 to 2025.

As a response to this conceptual fragmentation, this study offers a conceptual output that can be used within communication scholarship. It does not aim to propose a single, definitive model; rather, it develops a conceptual map of how communication studies (2020–2025) explain digital misogyny. Specifically, this qualitative meta-synthesis summarizes five recurring analytical lenses most frequently used to examine digital misogyny, shows how these lenses often overlap, complement one another, or at times generate explanatory tensions, and provides a descriptive account of shifting emphases across the period of analysis without claiming statistical trends. In doing so, this study offers a clearer conceptual reference that can help researchers more precisely position their work and make findings across studies easier to compare and cumulatively develop over time

Qualitative meta-synthesis is a form of research integration that synthesizes conceptual and interpretive findings across studies to build a more structured theoretical understanding (Borna et al., 2022). Unlike bibliometric analyses and systematic reviews, which primarily map themes, methods, or publication patterns, meta-synthesis is better suited to addressing conceptual fragmentation because it focuses on reconstructing theoretical frameworks and analytical lenses, as well as examining how knowledge is produced within a particular discipline. This study moves beyond conventional quantitative meta-analyses by emphasizing the

synthesis of conceptual frameworks, analytical orientations, and interpretive assumptions within communication scholarship. Rather than aggregating empirical findings or estimating effect sizes, it seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of digital misogyny by examining the theoretical foundations of communication research in this area. Using a systematic review informed by qualitative meta-synthesis, this study identifies recurring conceptual patterns, examines points of convergence and tension across approaches, and clarifies how social media is positioned as a mediated public space in analyses of misogynistic communication. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions: RQ1: How is digital misogyny conceptualized within communication studies in the context of social media? RQ2: What forms of misogynistic communication practices are most emphasized in communication scholarship? RQ3: How is social media conceptualized as a digital public sphere in analyses of misogynistic communication?

2. Method

The present study adopts an interpretive paradigm and employs a qualitative meta-synthesis approach. This paradigm was selected because the study does not aim to test causal relationships between variables or produce statistical generalizations. Instead, it seeks to understand how digital misogyny is constructed, interpreted, and theorized within communication studies scholarship. From this perspective, knowledge is understood as socially constructed and shaped through discourse, symbolic practices, and meaning-making processes within academic contexts.

This study employed a meta-synthesis approach because the goal was to integrate conceptual and interpretive findings across studies, rather than aggregate empirical data or estimate effect sizes, as in quantitative meta-analyses. Compared with meta-ethnography and critical interpretive synthesis, this study adopted the thematic synthesis procedure (Borna et al., 2022; Thomas & Harden, 2008) because it provides systematic and transparent analytic steps, from coding to theme development. This approach enables the structured mapping of conceptual patterns while maintaining an audit trail, aligning with the study's objective of addressing conceptual fragmentation in communication studies. This study is grounded in an interpretive approach within communication studies, with critical attention to gendered power relations in the digital public sphere. This orientation encourages a focus on discursive and structural explanations rather than purely individual-level accounts. To minimize interpretive bias, the synthesis process follows several steps: (1) documented manual coding using a coding sheet; (2) double-coding during the initial stages of analysis; (3) researcher consensus discussions to resolve

discrepancies; and (4) systematic documentation of analytic decisions, particularly when articles can be interpreted through multiple conceptual lenses.

2.1 Search Strategies

This study used the Scopus database as the primary source of literature. Scopus was selected because of its broad coverage of peer-reviewed international journals in communication studies, media studies, and the social sciences, which align with the disciplinary focus of this review. Limiting the search to a single database was a deliberate scoping decision rather than an attempt to capture the full scope of interdisciplinary scholarship. Accordingly, the study does not aim to map all research on misogyny across fields such as gender studies, psychology, or digital humanities; instead, it examines how communication studies constructs knowledge about digital misogyny. Restricting the dataset to Scopus, therefore, helps maintain disciplinary coherence and supports deeper conceptual analysis.

The search was conducted in November and December 2025. Articles were retrieved by applying Boolean search terms to titles, abstracts, and author keywords to capture both the core concepts (misogyny/sexism) and the communication context (social media/online platforms). The search string was as follows: ("*digital misogyny*" OR *misogyny* OR *sexism* OR "*gender-based hate*" OR "*gendered harassment*") AND ("*social media*" OR *online* OR *digital* OR *platform*) AND (*communication* OR *media* OR *discourse*). The publication period was limited to 2020–2025 to ensure conceptual relevance to the study's research focus.

2.2 Study Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria. Articles were included in the analysis if they met the following criteria: (1) Peer-reviewed journal articles (2) Indexed in Scopus (3) Published between 2020 and 2025 (4) Employ a qualitative or conceptually oriented approach (e.g., interpretive, discourse-based, critical, or theoretical analysis) (5) Address misogyny, sexism, or gender-based hate in the context of digital media or social media (6) Demonstrate clear relevance to communication or media studies, either through disciplinary classification or the use of communication-centered analytical frameworks. Exclusion criteria.

Articles were excluded if they met any of the following conditions: (1) Primarily quantitative studies focusing on statistical measurement without substantial conceptual or interpretive discussion (2) No explicit focus on digital communication or social media contexts (3) Outside communication or media studies and lacking a clearly articulated communication-analytical framework (4) Non-peer-reviewed documents (e.g., editorials, opinion pieces, non-refereed materials). While

quantitative studies can provide valuable insights into the prevalence and distribution of digital misogyny, this review focuses exclusively on qualitative and conceptually oriented scholarship. This decision aligns with the study’s objective of examining meaning construction, theoretical orientations, and epistemological assumptions, dimensions that are typically articulated more explicitly within qualitative research traditions.

2.3 Article Selection Process

The selection process was conducted in several stages. First, the keyword search returned 2,148 records. After removing duplicates and non-English publications, 1,982 articles remained for screening. Titles and abstracts were then screened for relevance to the study’s focus, resulting in the exclusion of 1,417 records. The remaining 565 articles underwent a more detailed abstract review based on the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Following this step, 410 articles were excluded, yielding a final sample of 155 articles for inclusion in the meta-synthesis. The screening process was conducted independently by two researchers (the principal investigator and an assistant researcher). Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus to strengthen interpretive reliability and reduce subjective bias in article selection. The overall search, screening, and inclusion process is summarized in Figure 1.

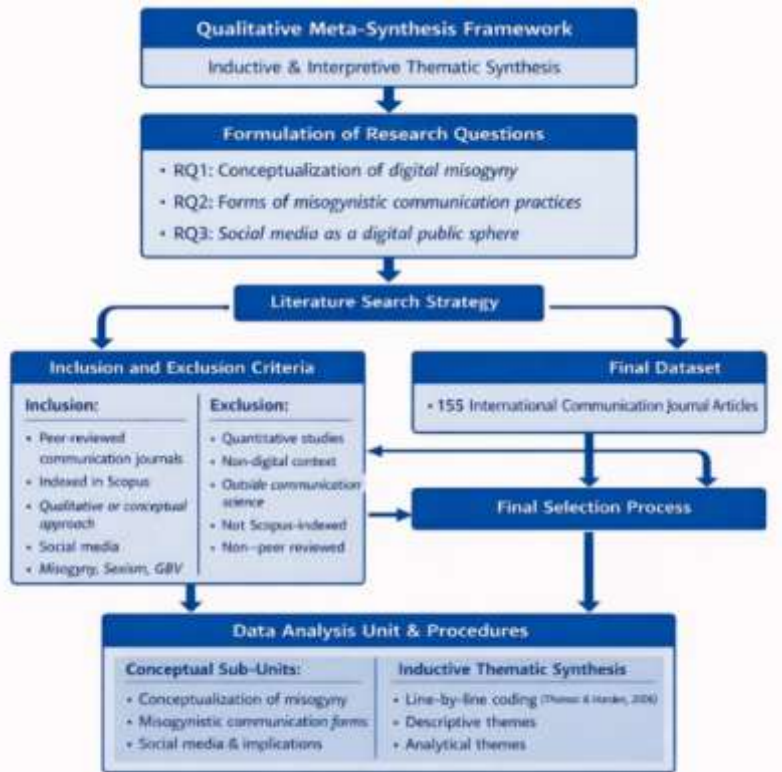


Figure 1. Research Method Flowchart

As a quality assurance measure, the articles included in the final corpus were also assessed for the depth of their conceptual discussion. Specifically, each article was examined to determine whether it articulated clear definitions or theoretical positioning, developed analytical arguments, and demonstrated explicit relevance to digital communication contexts. This quality assessment was not based on a quantitative scoring system; rather, it functioned as an additional screening step to ensure that the final corpus aligned with the aims of conceptual meta-synthesis.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The unit of analysis in this study is peer-reviewed international journal articles. Data analysis followed the inductive thematic synthesis procedure outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008), which involves three main stages: (1) line-by-line coding of conceptual arguments and theoretical positions across the included articles; (2) development of descriptive themes capturing recurring conceptual patterns; and (3) generation of analytical themes at a higher level of abstraction and theoretical interpretation. Coding was conducted manually using a coding sheet to maintain traceability between article excerpts or arguments and the assigned code labels. Initial coding was performed independently by two researchers, after which the coding outputs were compared and discussed to resolve interpretive differences. Final themes were refined and validated through reflective discussions among the researchers, with attention to internal coherence and alignment with the overall literature corpus. Themes were treated as emergent analytic constructs, allowing for overlap, intersections, and conceptual tensions across categories.

2.5 Emergent Analytical Framework

Accordingly, the thematic synthesis produced an analytical framework comprising six primary conceptual dimensions. Rather than being predetermined as initial categories, the framework was developed iteratively through coding and cross-study synthesis. The resulting framework functions as a reflective tool for synthesizing dominant conceptual patterns in the existing literature, rather than as a normative or definitive theoretical model. The analytical framework is presented in Table 1 and serves as a conceptual map to help readers understand how the meta-synthesis findings are organized in the Results section.

Table 1. Analytical Framework for the Thematic Synthesis of Digital Misogyny

No.	Thematic Dimension	Analytical Focus	Key Indicators
1	Conceptualization	Defining and interpreting misogyny	Discursive practices; platform structures; social control

2	Communication Practices	Communicative manifestations of misogyny	Hate speech; silencing; symbolic objectification
3	Language and Discourse	Symbolic strategies and framing	Sexist humor; patriarchal metaphors; victim-blaming
4	Social Media Context	The role of social media in the analysis	Digital public sphere; platform ecosystem
5	Structure and Mediation	Technological and infrastructural conditions	Algorithms; affordances; platformization
6	Implications	Effects on public communication	Constrained participation; symbolic marginalization

Source: Researcher's Process, 2025

This framework highlights that the conceptualization of misogyny in communication studies is multidimensional and non-hierarchical. Instead, it emerges through the intersection of discursive practices, cultural dynamics, and the structural conditions of digital platforms.

3. Results

This study used the Scopus database, yielding 2,148 records identified through keyword searches. After removing duplicates and non-English publications, 1,982 articles remained for screening. During the initial screening based on titles and abstracts, 1,417 articles were excluded for not meeting the scope of the study. This resulted in 565 articles being retained for further eligibility assessment.

The eligibility assessment was conducted using more specific criteria aligned with the interpretive and conceptual focus of this meta-synthesis. Articles were excluded for the following reasons: (1) they did not substantially address digital misogyny or sexism in the context of social media and platform-based communication; (2) they were not grounded in communication or media analysis (e.g., they were outside the communication discipline and lacked a coherent communication-analytic framework); (3) they examined digital environments but were not situated within social media contexts; (4) they were not peer-reviewed journal articles; or (5) they relied primarily on quantitative approaches and did not provide sufficient conceptual or interpretive discussion for thematic synthesis. Applying these criteria led to the exclusion of 410 articles, resulting in a final sample of 155 articles published in peer-reviewed international communication journals between 2020 and 2025, which were then analyzed using qualitative meta-synthesis. The article selection process is summarized in Figure 2.

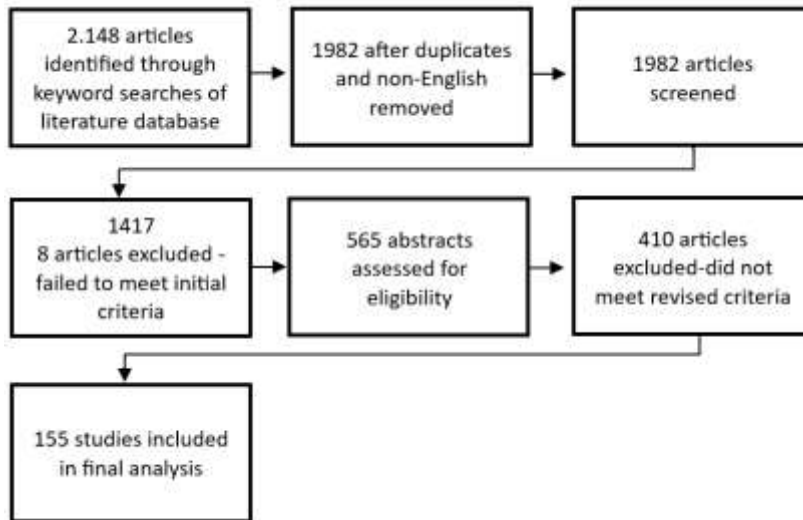


Figure 2. The paper selection process (adapted from Watson (2024))

3.1 Shifts in the Conceptual Emphasis of Digital Misogyny (2020–2025)

A synthesis of 155 articles reveals a shift in how communication studies have conceptualized digital misogyny between 2020 and 2025. Across the literature corpus, misogyny is increasingly less often understood solely as an individual attitude or an expression of personal hatred. Instead, a growing body of research conceptualizes misogyny as a communicative phenomenon that operates through practices in the digital public sphere and is mediated by social media. From this perspective, misogyny is understood as a process enacted through language, symbols, representations, and interactional patterns, and sustained through the circulation of communication on social media platforms.

The findings also indicate that this shift is not uniform. A substantial body of research continues to frame misogyny as individual hostility, particularly in studies that focus on explicit hate speech, verbal abuse, threats, and aggressive behavior that can be clearly categorized as misogynistic. Yet even within this individual-level perspective, misogyny is often discussed in relation to communication dynamics and social media conditions that enable the escalation, visibility, and repetition of such practices. Overall, the literature shows a discernible shift toward a more communicative and contextual understanding of digital misogyny. Importantly, however, this change does not represent a complete transition from one paradigm to another.

To examine temporal dynamics more closely, this study conducted a descriptive analysis by year of publication. Table 2 summarizes how frequently the reviewed articles are grounded in a dominant analytical lens

that shapes their central arguments. Although some articles draw on multiple lenses, each article was counted only once for the purpose of temporal mapping, based on the most prominent lens in its analytical framework. Articles published in 2025 were included in the corpus; however, their number is relatively small. This is partly because Scopus indexing for the most recent publication year may not yet be complete. Accordingly, the interpretation of trends relies primarily on comparisons between 2020–2022 and 2023–2024, and the pattern should not be assumed to be strictly linear over time.

Table 2. Distribution of dominant analytical lenses by publication year

Year	Individual Hostility	Discursive Practices	Digital Culture	Platform Structure & Governance	Social Control
2020	2	27	5	5	3
2021	1	8	1	4	3
2022	0	12	2	1	1
2023	1	17	6	5	3
2024	6	27	4	7	2
2025	0	1	0	1	0
Total	10	92	18	23	12

Source: Researcher's Process, 2025

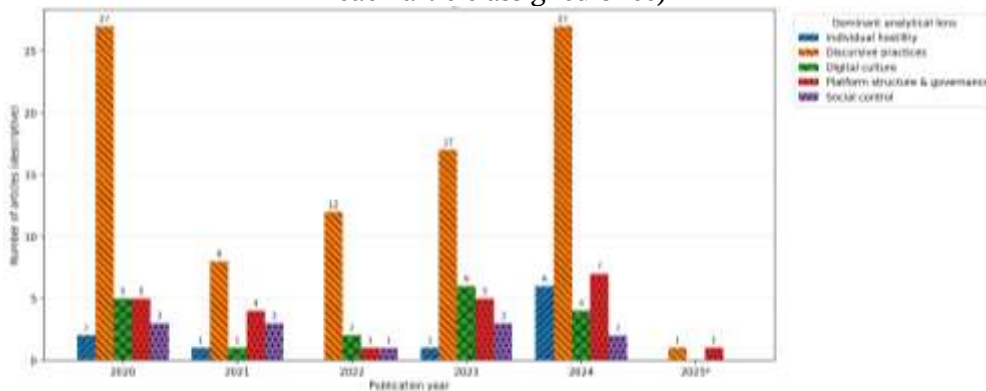
A descriptive analysis of the 2023–2024 period shows a notable increase in studies emphasizing platform structures and governance compared with 2020–2022. At the same time, the conceptual patterns identified in this review remain present across the entire period, often appearing in layered and overlapping configurations.

To clarify this study's contribution, it is useful to compare these results with existing bibliometric and systematic reviews of online sexism and gender-based hostility, which primarily map publication growth, disciplinary distributions, and cross-disciplinary research agendas. For example, recent multidisciplinary reviews document both the rapid expansion of research on misogyny and the heterogeneity of labels used across fields (e.g., online misogyny, gender trolling, hate speech, harassment), but they are not designed to reconstruct how conceptual assumptions are consolidated within communication scholarship as a discipline (Ferguson et al., 2022; Fontanella et al., 2024; O'Hanlon et al., 2024). Likewise, research that examines the quantification of online sexism and misogyny shows how methodological choices and disciplinary boundaries shape what gets operationalized and "counted," which is valuable for measurement debates but serves a different purpose than

discipline-specific conceptual reconstruction (Garg & Yang, 2023; Koch et al., 2025; Weiss et al., 2025). Building on, but moving beyond, these mappings, the present temporal scan and thematic synthesis show that discursive approaches remain the most common point of entry in communication journals, while platform-structural and governance-oriented explanations become more visible in 2023–2024. This study does not claim a single integrative model or statistical trends. Rather, its distinctive contribution is to identify five recurring analytical lenses and to make their overlaps and tensions explicit, helping explain why studies addressing similar manifestations of misogyny can arrive at different explanations and implications.

To complement Table 2, Figure 3 visualizes this descriptive temporal scan by showing the year-by-year distribution of dominant analytical lenses (each article counted once); it is included to support readability rather than inferential claims

Figure 3. Descriptive distribution analytical lenses by year (n=155) (counts; each article assigned once)



*2025 includes a small number of indexed articles at the time of data collection; interpret cautiously

Building on this temporal overview, the next section details how communication scholarship constructs digital misogyny through five recurring conceptual lenses, while noting overlaps and tensions across lenses.

3.2 *Five Conceptual Patterns and Cross-Approach Intersections*

A comprehensive review of the existing literature on digital misogyny identified five recurring conceptual patterns through thematic synthesis. Across the reviewed studies, misogyny is conceptualized in five primary ways: (1) individual hostility, (2) discursive practice, (3) digital culture, (4) platform structure, and (5) a mechanism of social control. These patterns are not meant to function as a rigid or mutually exclusive

typology. Instead, the findings suggest that many studies adopt layered configurations, combining two or more patterns to account for the complexity of misogyny within the social media ecosystem.

To help visualize how these lenses overlap in the literature, Figure 4 presents a schematic map of the typical interpretive linkages discussed across the corpus. The arrows indicate recurring conceptual connections (descriptive; not weighted or inferential), and the counts (n) show how many articles were assigned to each dominant lens.

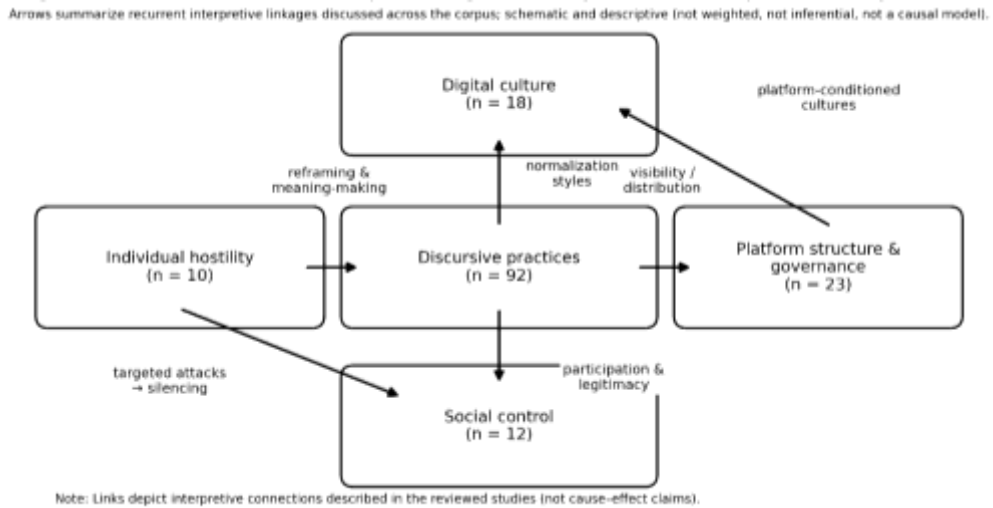


Figure 4. Schematic relationships among five analytical lenses (qualitative synthesis)

The first pattern conceptualizes misogyny as a form of individual hostility (n = 10), expressed through explicit hate speech, sexual insults, threats, verbal abuse, and direct aggression in social media interactions. Scholarship within this lens has historically focused on messages that are easily identifiable and can be clearly categorized as misogynistic acts, often emphasizing problematic user behavior. Studies commonly examine victims' experiences, the forms of attack involved, and the immediate consequences for safety and participation in digital public spaces. For example, a number of studies have documented online harassment targeting female journalists across different national and professional contexts (see Koirala, 2020; da Silva et al., 2023; Fountaine, 2024). Similar dynamics have also been observed in sports and fandom communities, where women are targeted through attacks or delegitimization in social media discussion spaces (Chen et al., 2020; Koirala, 2020). Importantly, this lens rarely stands in isolation. Even when misogyny is framed as "personal attacks," many studies link these practices to platform-specific conditions of circulation and visibility. This observation points toward the

next pattern, which highlights how misogyny operates not only through direct aggression but also through meaning-making processes embedded in language and representation.

The second pattern, which is particularly prominent in the literature, conceptualizes misogyny as a discursive practice (**n = 92**) operating through symbolic strategies and representations in digital communication. Within this framework, misogyny does not always appear as overt aggression; instead, it is enacted through processes such as objectification, dehumanization, delegitimization, and degrading gendered framing. These practices often take subtle forms embedded in everyday communication, making them less readily identifiable as explicit hate speech. Research adopting this perspective typically examines how misogynistic meanings are produced and circulated in digital public conversations, for example, through hashtags, debate styles, and rhetorical strategies that normalize gender-based degradation. For instance, research on #mansplaining discourse on Twitter explores how gender politics are negotiated through interaction and language (Huber & Baena, 2023; Stewart et al., 2021). Other studies analyze how women (e.g., scientists) build visibility while navigating gender stereotypes on platforms such as TikTok (Oden et al., 2025; Vandenberghe, 2019). In sports-related contexts, discursive misogyny is also evident when targeted harassment is intensified through comment styles and toxic discourse tied to gender identities (Forsdike & Giles, 2024). This discursive lens frequently intersects with the platform lens, as questions of meaning are closely linked to the ways discourse is shaped, distributed, and amplified online. The next pattern extends this discussion by framing misogyny as embedded in digital culture and subcultural dynamics, influencing particular communicative norms and practices.

The third pattern links misogyny to digital culture (**n = 18**) and social media, highlighting how misogynistic messages circulate through humor, memes, irony, and specific interactional styles. Within this paradigm, misogyny is understood as embedded in everyday online communication practices, often appearing through entertainment and what is commonly described as “internet culture.” As a result, it is not always recognized as a manifestation of gender inequality. This dynamic is evident in the prevalence of misogyny expressed through demeaning jokes that spread via memes and humor. Such forms can trivialize misogynistic content, making it difficult to contest openly. For example, research on the manosphere/MGTOW (Han & Yin, 2023) community shows how misogynistic communication practices are shaped by community norms and processes of identity formation (Rogstad, 2022). Similar patterns of normalization have been documented in trolling

directed at female journalists (Radmann & Sätre, 2024), as well as in gatekeeping practices within Reddit communities, illustrating how local norms can determine the perceived legitimacy of individuals and content (Jahn et al., 2020). Another study examines how mediated learning may contribute to the normalization of anti-feminist discourse among adolescents. Importantly, this cultural lens often draws attention to the technical conditions and platform regulations that shape which cultural expressions become dominant and widely visible. This observation leads to the next pattern, which conceptualizes misogyny as a phenomenon enabled by platform architectures and governance mechanisms.

The fourth lens, “Platform Structure and Governance” (n = 23), conceptualizes misogyny not merely as a product of user speech but as a phenomenon shaped by platform architecture, including visibility algorithms, affordances, engagement and attention logics, and moderation policies and enforcement practices. From this perspective, the circulation and persistence of misogyny are influenced by platform-level regulatory mechanisms that determine what becomes visible, recommended, and ultimately tolerated. Case studies, for example, examine how YouTube’s visibility mechanisms shape content exposure and prioritization (Bishop, 2020; Febriana, 2025), and how community rules and moderation on Twitch can function as forms of regulating gender expression (Zolides, 2021). Other research similarly shows how platform formats and interactional designs shape gendered practices and communication norms (Foster & Baker, 2022; Kamran, 2023). A 2025 study in the corpus also addresses visibility inequalities on Instagram in sports-related contexts (Woods et al., 2025), which is relevant for understanding how social status, visibility, and platform logics can reinforce gender hierarchies.

Within the social control lens (n = 12), misogyny is conceptualized as a communicative praxis that functions to regulate and constrain women’s engagement in digital public spheres. This perspective is not limited to speech or cultural expressions of misogyny; rather, it emphasizes relational effects, including who is silenced, how the legitimacy of voices is contested, and how gender inequality is reproduced through the dynamics of public communication. For example, a study of the hashtag #EndMaleGuardianship shows how social media can operate both as a space for women’s rights activism and as a site of power struggles (Thorsen & Sreedharan, 2020). An analysis of private Facebook groups illustrates how women create safer environments and professional support networks, while also highlighting how platform affordances shape these practices (Camacho & Barrios, 2022). In other contexts, social control is evident when state or institutional actors regulate and constrain women’s dissent in online spaces (Eichhorn, 2020) or when women’s organizations use

Twitter to frame the pandemic as a gendered experience (Nau et al., 2023). At the same time, it is important to avoid an overly functionalist interpretation. Several studies highlight strategies of resistance, negotiation, and solidarity that complicate silencing effects and suggest that these dynamics are not linear.

The synthesis suggests that these five patterns are best understood as intersecting analytical lenses rather than rigid, discrete categories. Many studies identify discursive practices as a primary way of explaining how misogyny becomes meaningful in everyday communication. The lenses of platform structure and social control are often used to show how such discursive formations gain traction through visibility mechanisms and how their effects relate to constraints on women’s participation. Meanwhile, the digital culture lens helps explain how misogyny can circulate through humor, irony, and community styles, making it appear harmless while continuing to reproduce gendered domination.

Overall, the literature in this corpus has not yet been fully integrated into a unified conceptual model. However, the findings indicate that some studies increasingly connect symbolic dimensions (discourse), cultural dimensions (digital culture), and structural dimensions (platforms and social control) when explaining how misogyny operates in public communication on social media. To help readers understand both the distinct emphases and the relationships among these lenses without repeating detailed descriptions, Table 3 summarizes the five conceptual lenses, highlights their most common intersections, and notes key analytical strengths and limitations. The table is presented as a comparative map rather than a typology, allowing for overlap and tension across patterns.

Table 3. A Comparative Map of Five Conceptual Lenses in the Corpus (N = 155)

Conceptual Pattern (Lens)	n	Analytical Focus & Illustrative Practices	Common Intersections	Analytical Value & Critical Notes
Individual Hostility	10	Direct attacks: sexual insults, threats, verbal abuse, and gender-based hate speech.	Platform structure; social control	Value: clear and easily identifiable; useful for intervention and moderation. Note: risks reducing misogyny to an individual problem and overlooking subtle, normalized forms.

Conceptual Pattern (Lens)	n	Analytical Focus & Illustrative Practices	Common Intersections	Analytical Value & Critical Notes
Discursive Practice	92	Language and representation strategies (objectification, delegitimization, stereotyping, degrading framing).	Social control; platform structure	Value: captures subtle forms operating in everyday communication. Note: often needs to be linked to platform dynamics to explain why certain discourse becomes highly visible or goes viral.
Digital Culture	18	Community norms and styles: memes, humor, irony, “banter,” and subcultural communication that normalizes sexism.	Discursive practice	Value: explains normalization through entertainment and ambiguity. Note: risks depoliticization if detached from power relations; tensions often appear between normalization and contestation.
Platform Structure and Governance	23	Sociotechnical conditions: visibility algorithms, affordances, engagement/attention logics, moderation, and governance practices.	Discursive practice; social control	Value: emphasizes that platforms are not neutral and shape the circulation and intensity of misogyny. Note: may become overly deterministic if framed too technically, overlooking agency and meaning-making.
Social Control	12	Disciplining participation: silencing, intimidation, delegitimization, gatekeeping, and coordinated attacks.	Discursive practice; platform structure	Value: links misogyny to the politics of participation and boundaries of legitimacy in digital public spheres. Note: risks functionalism if it overlooks resistance, agency, and counter-discourse.

Source: Researcher's Process, 2025

3.3 Variations in Misogynistic Communication Practices: The Overt–Covert Continuum

The synthesis indicates that misogynistic communication practices discussed in the literature are often described along a continuum ranging from overt to covert forms. This continuum should not be treated as a rigid binary; rather, it serves as a descriptive heuristic used to capture varying degrees of explicitness in misogynistic messages within public

communication. Across the corpus, studies tend to foreground either overt expressions (e.g., hate speech and threats) or more subtle, normalized forms (e.g., humor and ironic styles) depending on analytic focus; synthesizing these strands, the present meta-synthesis shows that the literature increasingly treats overt and covert expressions as connected communicative dynamics, especially in discussions of normalization, visibility, and escalation in platform-mediated interaction. Overt expressions involve explicit, direct, and confrontational messages, including gender-based hate speech, sexual insults, threats, and verbal abuse (Baider, 2023; Parvaresh, 2023). These practices are relatively easy to identify and are often associated with open conflict and immediate reactions from other users. By contrast, covert forms appear through seemingly innocuous or “harmless” communicative modes, such as humor, memes, irony, dismissive remarks, and subtle delegitimization. Across the reviewed studies, covert misogyny is often more difficult to detect because it frequently takes the form of everyday communication that is normalized within platform cultures (Haslop & O’Rourke, 2025; Rizzi et al., 2023). The findings also show that overt and covert misogyny often unfold sequentially and reinforce one another. Covert misogyny can normalize misogynistic attitudes and practices, creating conditions that enable escalation into overt abuse. In turn, overt abuse may draw social legitimacy from a broader culture of covert communication that has already been treated as acceptable or “normal” (Miller-Idriss, 2025).

3.4 Social Media as a Mediated Digital Public Sphere

The synthesis indicates that a substantial portion of communication scholarship in this corpus frames social media as a mediated and non-neutral space of public communication rather than a neutral channel. This positioning is especially visible in studies grounded in the platform structure and governance lens (n = 23) and the social control lens (n = 12), which treat platforms as shaping the conditions under which discourse becomes visible, circulates, and gains legitimacy (see Table 2). In these studies, platforms are discussed as communication systems whose technological design (e.g., affordances and visibility mechanisms) and governance practices (e.g., moderation rules and enforcement) (Haggart & Keller, 2021) influence what is amplified, tolerated, or marginalized in public-facing communication (Bishop, 2020; Lelo, 2024; Zolides, 2021). Across the corpus, platform logics that prioritize engagement and attention are frequently invoked to explain why provocative or emotionally charged misogynistic discourse can become prominent, while women’s participation is simultaneously disrupted through harassment, delegitimization, or coordinated attacks that constrain voice and recognition (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Importantly, this pattern does not imply

a single unified theory of the “digital public sphere” across all studies. Rather, the findings point to recurring ways in which mediated public communication is conceptualized at the intersection of discursive meaning-making (how misogyny is articulated), platform conditions (how it is circulated and moderated), and participation politics (whose voices are rendered legitimate or marginalized). Overall, these results reinforce that communication scholarship analyzes digital misogyny not merely as content or individual behavior, but as a phenomenon tied to visibility, legitimacy, and participation in platform-mediated public communication.

To make these linkages more explicit, **Figure 5** presents a schematic interpretive pathway synthesized from the corpus. The diagram summarizes a recurrent pattern in which platform conditions (affordances, visibility mechanisms, engagement logics, and governance) shape visibility and circulation, what becomes prominent or tolerated in public-facing communication. These conditions intersect with discursive meaning-making (e.g., objectification and delegitimization) and cultural normalization (e.g., humor, memes, and irony), which are frequently discussed in relation to participation politics such as intimidation, silencing, and coordinated attacks. The figure is intended as a descriptive synthesis of recurring interpretive connections across the reviewed studies rather than a tested causal model.

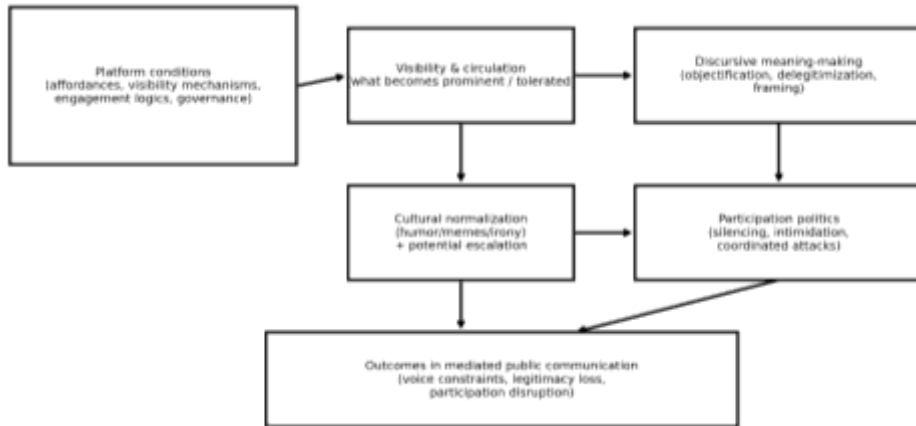


Figure 5. Interpretive pathway used in the corpus to explain digital misogyny

The figure schematically summarizes recurring interpretive connections described across the reviewed studies; it is descriptive (not weighted or inferential) and does not claim a tested causal relationship.

4. Discussion

Across the 2020–2025 corpus, communication scholarship shows a shift in how it conceptualizes digital misogyny. Rather than treating it

solely as an individual attitude or as deviant user behavior, the growing body of research increasingly frames misogyny as a mediated form of public communication. From this perspective, misogyny operates through language, symbols, and interactional styles (O. Alichie, 2023), as well as through the circulation of digital culture and the structural conditions built into social media platforms (Schniter & Shields, 2020). However, these findings should not be read as a complete break from earlier approaches. Feminist media studies have long foregrounded the structural and discursive dimensions of gendered power relations; accordingly, the shift visible in the corpus is better understood as a consolidation and maturation of that attention within the realities of contemporary, social media-based communication (see Table 2; see Figure 3).

Consistent with the mapping of five conceptual lenses, misogyny in the corpus appears not only as overt attacks but also as a durable set of symbolic practices that become normalized in everyday digital communication. Objectification, delegitimization, and demeaning gender framing often show up in ways that are not always openly confrontational, yet they still organize meaning: who is treated as credible, who is recognized as a legitimate speaker, and who is repeatedly positioned as lacking legitimacy in digital public spaces (Loewen Walker, 2024). Read together, the five-lens map shows that discursive accounts are most informative when paired with platform and social-control perspectives, because meanings are not only produced but also circulated and amplified through mediated conditions.

This point becomes even clearer in the digital-culture studies. Across many studies, gendered hostility circulates through popular vernacular forms, memes, humor, irony, and joking styles that can make it seem light, ordinary, or simply “internet culture.” A key tension becomes visible here: some scholarship emphasizes normalization, while other work foregrounds contestation, resistance, and counter-discourse. This strain is worth keeping in view, because online life does not move in a single direction; it can both reproduce misogynistic frames and serve as a terrain of symbolic struggle over them. A temporal reading shows that more recent scholarship, especially work published in 2023–2024, has increasingly relied on platform structure and governance to explain why misogynistic discourse can rise to prominence, persist, and recur. Within this framework, misogyny’s visibility is not attributed only to user intent but also to structural conditions that shape what becomes seen, how content travels, and what is treated as acceptable in platform-based public communication (Lemish, 2012; Paneru, 2021). For that reason, discourse analysis becomes more robust when paired with platform analysis: symbolic forms and distributional conditions are read as mutually

reinforcing. The interpretive scheme in Figure 5 summarizes a recurring pattern in the corpus, how discursive meaning-making interacts with platform conditions (such as visibility mechanisms and governance practices) and connects to participation effects, including delegitimization and the silencing of voices. It is important to note that this scheme is a descriptive interpretive summary of connections that frequently appear across the reviewed studies, not a tested causal model. Relatedly, several studies emphasize that platform influences are not limited to technical affordances but also include communication governance, moderation policies, reporting systems, and enforcement practices that shape which discourses become visible or marginalized (Bushra Amin et al., 2024).

Through the social-control lens, misogyny is understood as a communicative practice that constrains women's participation in digital public spaces, via silencing, intimidation, gatekeeping, or coordinated attacks that undermine legitimacy. At the same time, the corpus calls for conceptual caution. A social-control framework can become overly functionalist if it assumes women's participation is always "successfully regulated," leaving little room for agency, resistance, and survival strategies. A more balanced reading, therefore, needs to hold two realities at once: the tangible, participation-limiting effects and the presence of pushback that disrupts deterministic narratives of domination.

On the other hand, this meta-synthesis does not negate the value of individual-level approaches. The "individual hostility" lens remains especially useful when studies require clear operational definitions, for example, in contexts tied to content moderation, policy design, or accountability. Even so, the mapping suggests that individual approaches are most productive when connected to discursive and structural dimensions, so misogyny is not reduced to a matter of "personal temperament" but understood as a recurring communicative practice within platform ecosystems.

In sum, this discussion yields three main answers. First, in response to RQ1, communication scholarship in the 2020–2025 corpus conceptualizes digital misogyny through five overlapping lenses: individual hostility, discursive practice, digital culture, platform structure and governance, and social control, which are best treated as analytic perspectives rather than a rigid typology. Second, for RQ2, misogynistic communication practices in the corpus operate along a continuum from explicit to subtle; coded forms (such as humor, memes, irony, and understated delegitimization) contribute to normalization and, in some contexts, can enable escalation into more overt expressions. Third, for RQ3, social media is framed as a mediated and non-neutral digital public sphere: platform design and governance shape visibility, circulation, and

the legitimacy of participation. This framework helps explain why many studies position misogyny as a public communication problem, not merely “problematic content” or individual misconduct. These three answers are interconnected and point to a single through line: communication scholarship tends to understand digital misogyny as a communicative practice that operates through meaning-making (discourse and culture), gains force through mediated conditions (platform structure and governance), and intersects with the politics of participation (visibility, legitimacy, and the curtailment of voice). From this vantage point, differences across studies in the corpus are better read as variations in analytic entry points rather than simple disagreement about the phenomenon itself.

Implications follow directly from this mapping. Theoretically, the five-lens framework provides a shared vocabulary for comparing studies that appear to examine similar phenomena but rely on different starting assumptions (see Table 3). Methodologically, the findings point toward more layered research designs in future communication studies: not stopping at identifying utterances or representations, but linking them to distribution pathways, visibility dynamics, and governance arrangements that give certain narratives social traction. Practically, the synthesis underscores that efforts to curb digital misogyny are unlikely to succeed if they rely only on individual-level actions (such as user reporting) without addressing visibility systems, moderation regimes, and enforcement practices that shape what becomes prominent and what is treated as acceptable in platform-based public communication.

The interpretations in this discussion remain bounded by the synthesized corpus: English-language Scopus-indexed articles (which may underrepresent Global South research traditions), an emphasis on qualitative and conceptual work (rather than estimating prevalence), and a descriptive temporal reading that is not intended as a strict longitudinal claim or a causal account of how the field has evolved. In addition, the depth of the mapping depends on the quality and clarity of conceptual reporting in the reviewed articles. For these reasons, the findings should be read as a disciplinary conceptual map that supports orientation and comparison across studies, not as a statistical generalization or a causal model.

5. Conclusion

This study conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of 155 articles (2020–2025) to map how communication studies conceptualize digital misogyny in the context of social media. The synthesis indicates that scholarship during this period increasingly frames digital misogyny as a

mediated public communication phenomenon, operating through discursive practices, digital culture, platform structures and governance, and mechanisms of social control, while recognizing that an individual hostility lens remains salient, particularly in discussions of explicit attacks and the need for operational definitions in moderation, policy, and accountability contexts.

The primary contribution of this research is not the proposal of a single, definitive conceptual model, but the development of a structured conceptual map of five recurring lenses and the intersections and tensions among them. This mapping helps clarify the distinctive contribution of communication studies: digital misogyny is not treated merely as “problematic content,” but as a meaning-making process shaped by the politics of visibility. These dynamics are produced through communication practices, platform cultural norms, and the conditions of mediation and governance that structure what becomes visible, circulated, and sustained in the digital public sphere.

More broadly, these findings can serve as a point of convergence for interdisciplinary dialogue. Psychology contributes insights into individual motives and impacts; sociology offers tools for analyzing patriarchal structures and power relations; legal and policy research supports the design of accountability and intervention mechanisms; and communication studies bridges these approaches by foregrounding discourse, mediation, circulation, and the legitimacy of participation in digital public spaces. In this sense, the study provides a conceptual foundation for integration that functions as a “bridge” rather than forcing unification into a single framework.

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, relying on a single database (Scopus) and restricting the sample to English-language articles may reduce the representation of scholarship from the Global South and local research traditions. As a result, the conceptual map developed here may reflect dominant trends in international publishing and potentially reproduce existing epistemic inequalities in communication studies. Second, the focus on qualitative and conceptually oriented studies was intentional in order to capture nuanced processes of meaning-making and theoretical development. However, this meta-synthesis does not aim to determine the empirical prevalence or intensity of digital misogyny. Conceptually strong quantitative or mixed-methods research could complement these findings by offering insights into scale, variation across populations, and policy implications, but such questions fall outside the scope of this study. Third,

the temporal analysis (2020–2025) is descriptive and should be interpreted cautiously. While the results suggest shifts in emphasis across the corpus, they should not be read as evidence of standardized longitudinal change or as causal claims about the field’s development. In addition, the relatively small number of articles in certain years (particularly the most recent year) may affect interpretations of publication trends. Fourth, as with meta-syntheses more broadly, the results depend on the quality of conceptual reporting in the included articles. Studies that provide minimal definitions or limited theoretical argumentation can constrain the reconstruction of conceptual lenses and may prevent some nuances in ongoing debates from being fully captured.

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