
Shaping Queerphobia: How X Amplifies Hate Speech against Iranian Queer Activists

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This article examines how queerphobic hate speech is mobilized against Iranian queer activists on X (formerly Twitter) and situates these dynamics within the heteronormative and authoritarian gender regime of post-revolutionary Iran. While X is framed as a “digital town square” committed to maximal free speech, this study demonstrates that expanded circulation does not distribute vulnerability evenly. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with five Iranian queer activists in the diaspora and a critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) of 59 Persian-language tweets directed at activists, the article analyzes how hate speech operates as a patterned and infrastructurally amplified practice. This paper shows that misgendering, sexualized threats, bodily degradation, and nationalist delegitimation function as public enforcement of gender and sexual norms. Integrating the framework of communicative capitalism, the article argues that X’s engagement-driven logics convert queer visibility into circulation value, intensifying exposure to harassment while weakening moderation protections. These findings position platform-mediated hate as a structural extension of authoritarian gender governance. By foregrounding an underexamined authoritarian context, this study contributes to platformized violence scholarship and calls for more context-sensitive approaches to platform governance in multilingual and politically restrictive environments.

1 Introduction

“Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated,” Elon Musk said in an April 2022 post on X (Ortutay 2024). Musk further stated, “By ‘free speech,’ I simply mean that which matches the law...” (Musk 2022). Framed in this way, Musk positioned X as a maximally open arena of expression, governed primarily by US laws rather than

by consideration of how speech may differentially expose marginalized individuals and communities to harassment, intimidation, exclusion, and other forms of harm. Yet what appears as an increase in expressive liberty for some can translate into intensified exposure to harassment and silencing for others (Morales et al. 2025). This tension becomes particularly visible in the case of Iranian queer activists whose visibility on X exposes them to waves of queerphobic abuse and hate speech that reproduce the heteronormative and authoritarian logics of the Iranian state. In this context, the promise of a “digital town square” collides with the lived realities of those whose identities are criminalized and heavily policed within their country of origin. Building on this paradox, this paper examines how online hate speech is mobilized against Iranian queer activists in the diaspora, situating these dynamics within the heteronormative structures of Iranian society and the authoritarian gender politics that regulate bodies and identities.

Anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric has long been deployed to marginalize vulnerable groups, but its proliferation in online spaces illustrates how queerphobia is continually reproduced, amplified, and normalized through the affordances of digital platforms (Mkhize, Nunlall, and Gopal 2020; Chakravarthi 2024). While digital platforms have become integral to everyday life, serving as spaces where users communicate, share stories, question oppressive regulation, and create networks of resistance (Li et al. 2021; Hooman 2022), these environments are also increasingly characterized by harassment, hate speech, cyberbullying, and abuse, manifestations of what scholars termed “platformized violence” (Recuero 2024; Morales 2025). Although the global scope of this phenomenon has garnered growing scholarly interest (Di Lisio, Sorrentino, and Trezza 2022; Liao 2024), its manifestation within authoritarian and heteronormative contexts like Iran remains critically underexplored.

In Iran’s restrictive sociopolitical environment, where queer identities are criminalized and heavily policed (Najmabadi 2011), social media platforms can provide relatively safer grounds for LGBTQ+ individuals to connect, negotiate identity, and resist heteronormative norms (Hooman 2022). Yet, the same affordances that empower marginalized voices can also expose them to intensified harassment and surveillance. Therefore, our study demonstrates that experiences of platformized violence are profoundly shaped by local sociopolitical and cultural dynamics.

Drawing on the framework of communicative capitalism (Dean 2014, 2019), we argue that hate speech directed at Iranian queer activists on X cannot be understood as isolated acts of individual hostility. Rather, it functions as a structural extension of authoritarian gender governance within platform capitalism. Hate speech is defined as “language that is used to express hatred towards a targeted group or is intended to be derogatory, to humiliate, or to insult the members of the group” (Davidson et al. 2017, 512). Scholars have demonstrated that social media platforms can normalize and facilitate the spread of hate speech against queer people (Chakravarthi 2024; Unlu, Truong, and Kotonen 2025; Morales et al. 2025).

As most research in this field is Western-centric (Brody, Greenhalgh, and Sajjad 2024) and little has addressed authoritarian contexts like Iran, our paper will address this gap by answering these questions: (1) How does X shape and amplify discourses of hate directed at Iranian queer activists; and (2) In what ways do these discourses reproduce heteronormative and authoritarian logics associated with the Iranian state? To address these questions, we draw on in-depth interviews with five Iranian queer activists to document their lived experiences of hostility, harassment, and self-censorship, alongside Brock's (2018) CTDA of tweets directed at them.

The paper begins with an overview of Iranian gender and sexuality discourse, then employs communicative capitalism to discuss how platform architectures convert affective hostility into circulation value, reinforcing existing hierarchies while amplifying queerphobic discourse. Then the methodology and method are explained, followed by a detailed analysis of how hate speech against Iranian queer activists is mobilized, intensified, and experienced as a structural extension of authoritarian gender governance and platform affordances. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the broader implications for platform governance and future research on digital harms in authoritarian contexts.

2 Gender and Sexuality Discourse in Iran

Gender and sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran are not merely matters of personal identity or cultural debate; they are central sites of state governance. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has institutionalized a tightly regulated heteronormative order that organizes citizenship, morality, and national belonging through the management of bodies and desires (Afary 2009; Najmabadi 2014; Saeidzadeh 2016). As Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014) argues, this framework does not simply regulate sexuality but produces distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable identities that determine how subjects become legible to the state. Researchers describe the Iranian state as enforcing a system of sexual and gender policing that disciplines bodies falling outside a binary cis heteronormative order (Tahani-Bidmeshki 2018; Rahbari 2022). Within this system, heterosexual marriage and reproductive family life are positioned as the moral foundation of the nation.

This heteronormative order differentiates between categories of sexual minorities. Transgender identity is framed as a diagnosable medical condition subject to psychiatric regulation, while homosexuality is constructed as criminal deviance and social corruption (Najmabadi 2014; Alipour 2017). This distinction enables the state to tolerate gender transition under strict medical supervision while continuing to criminalize same-sex desire (Najmabadi 2014). Iranian medico-legal systems require individuals to receive a diagnosis of gender dysphoria through extensive psychiatric evaluation to access legal recognition of trans identity (Sanaeikia and Saeidzadeh 2025). Individuals who do not meet these diagnostic criteria may instead be labeled homosexual and directed toward psychotherapy. The result is a medico-legal framework that not only regulates bodies

but also weakens queer individuals as epistemic agents and contributes to systemic marginalization.

Beyond formal punishment, queer individuals face family rejection, employment discrimination, social ostracism, and, in some cases, physical violence. The criminal status of homosexuality contributes to fear and silence, shaping how individuals navigate visibility in both public and private spheres. Within this restrictive and often hostile environment, digital spaces emerge as important sites of survival and implicit activism. Hooman (2022) and Rahbari (2022) show that queer Iranians use online platforms to identify, express, and perform non-normative genders and sexualities despite surveillance and censorship. However, the same platform infrastructures that enable queer survival can also amplify vulnerability. In the Iranian context, this dynamic intersects with heteronormative state discourse, amplifying backlash across both domestic and diasporic digital arenas (Tahani-Bidmeshki 2018). Examining this intersection is necessary for understanding how digital spaces simultaneously function as sites of survival and arenas of contestation for Iranian queer activists.

3 Communicative Capitalism on X

After Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in October 2022, the platform underwent substantial organizational and governance changes, including leadership restructuring, significant reductions in trust and safety personnel, and the dissolution of the Trust and Safety Advisory Council (Hickey et al. 2025). Emerging research suggests that the post-acquisition period was accompanied by a significant increase in hate speech and other forms of harmful content on the platform (Frenkel and Conger 2022; Hickey et al. 2025). As Imran Ahmed, chief executive of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, argued, "Elon Musk sent up the Bat Signal to every kind of racist, misogynist, and homophobe that Twitter was open for business" (Frenkel and Conger 2022).

Tech CEOs like Mark Zuckerberg often promote the central driving idea behind Musk's statement about freedom of speech on X, which stems from the central capitalist concept of the marketplace of ideas. Popularized by a US Supreme Court decision in 1919, the marketplace of ideas metaphor compares speech to a marketplace and puts the onus on the "consumer" of ideas to differentiate between good and bad speech. Through these consumer decisions, the best speech is assumed to prevail (Maddox and Malson 2020). This metaphor has been widely employed in the social media era as a reason why content on platforms should not face the same regulation as, for example, television, radio, or newspaper content, and is used to justify social media self-regulation (Maddox and Malson 2020).

Social media sites like X and others do indeed run on capitalist logics, but not ones in which the best ideas win out. In fact, as Maddox and Malson (2020) have noted,

social media instead promote conspiracy, misinformation, and online violence. The reason destructive forms of speech tend to endure on these platforms is likely due to the “invisible hand” of communicative capitalism. Under communicative capitalism, communication can no longer provide a “critical outside” to capital (Dean 2014, 4). Instead, it serves capital interests, reinforcing existing inequalities, power structures, and capitalist accumulation. These technologies, as part of the capitalist subsuming of communication, entrench hierarchy. In fact, Dean (2019) notes that networks are always hierarchical, with few nodes receiving the bulk of the attention compared to others. In an attention economy, every act of speech is a contribution, and its value lies in its presence, rather than the content itself. In other words, more contributions receiving more attention are more valuable in a communicative capitalist marketplace of ideas than the highest quality contributions (Dean 2014). Furthermore, the dynamics of attention in an environment that commodifies communication is one in which the content of ideas becomes less important than their emotional or affective quality. Dean writes, “That something is shared online does not depend on what it means. It depends on its affective capacity: does the shared item manifest outrage: is it funny and diverting? We attend less to the meaning of an utterance than to its affective dimension, which is most powerful when it contains different, conflicting meanings” (Dean 2019, 332). Online abuse has tremendous affective capacity. It inspires anxiety, distress, outrage, and, importantly, attention. Thus, it is not surprising that this particular form of speech would be a particularly effective tool for policing gender hierarchies on sites like X, while also providing economic benefit to platform owners like Musk.

4 Methods and Data Collection

In this paper, we employed a qualitative mixed-methods design that combined semi-structured interviews with Iranian queer activists in the diaspora and a CTDA of hate speech on X directed at them. Although X has been officially blocked in Iran since 2009, it remains a central platform within Persian-language networked publics, where users continue to access it through circumvention tools and engage in highly visible public debate (Kermani 2025), making it a particularly important site for examining queerphobic hate speech targeting Iranian queer activists.

We used purposive sampling to recruit five activists who met three criteria: (a) self-identification as queer; (b) active involvement in public-facing LGBTQ+ advocacy; and (c) personal experience with online harassment on X. The five participants ranged in age from their early thirties to mid-forties and were living in the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and the United States at the time of the study. Participants represented diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, including trans women, a gender-fluid bisexual activist, and queer-identifying activists engaged in trans rights advocacy, queer rights activism, feminist organizing, journalism, and public education. Given the risks associated with public discussions of gender and sexuality in relation to Iran, only demographic and

professional information explicitly approved by participants has been included.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom in November and December 2025, with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. All interviews were held in Persian, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and translated into English by a native Persian-speaking member of the research team. The Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board granted ethical approval for this study.

Because this study concerns a highly visible yet vulnerable population, we treated confidentiality and risk mitigation as ongoing ethical concerns throughout the research process. Participants are referred to by the names they use publicly in their activist work, rather than by researcher-assigned pseudonyms. This decision reflects participants' existing public-facing activist identities; however, it also required careful attention to what additional information could be included without increasing risk. For this reason, identifying details not already public or not explicitly approved by participants were removed or generalized. During the revision process, participants were also given the opportunity to indicate what, if any, demographic or professional information they felt comfortable having included in the final publication. One participant specifically requested that no identifying information be shared beyond their involvement in trans rights activism and their departure from the platform. Consistent with this participant-centered approach, the gender identities and pronouns used throughout the article are based on participants' self-identification, as articulated during interviews and subsequent correspondence, and are not assigned or inferred by the researchers.

Data analysis proceeded through a recursive and interpretive process. Interview transcripts were first read to reduce the data (Lindlof and Taylor 2011), then the remaining data was reread to achieve analytic immersion, followed by inductive open coding (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006) to identify recurring patterns in participants' narratives related to visibility, emotional labor, and hostility. Through focused coding, these initial codes were refined and consolidated into higher-order categories. This process resulted in five main themes that captured participants' experiences with platformized violence.

To complement these narrative accounts, participants were asked to share screenshots or archived examples of hate tweets they had personally received. This strategy ensured that the dataset consisted of targeted, context-specific harassment rather than decontextualized or randomly scraped content. Three participants provided screenshots of abusive tweets, which were incorporated into the corpus for qualitative analysis. Two participants did not provide examples of archived tweets. One had deactivated her account and no longer had access to prior content. The other had left the platform but retained an inactive account; however, due to the volume of harassment and the emotional burden associated with revisiting past abuse, no specific tweets were retrieved. In total, the dataset included 59 tweets that contained insults, misgendering, sexualized harassment, and other forms of queerphobic content.

In the next phase, the tweet dataset was analyzed using André Brock's (2018) critical technocultural discourse analysis to contextualize the tweets as queerphobic hate speech acts sustained by the Iranian gender/sexuality norms and the platform vernacular. CTDA "integrates an analysis of the technological artifact and user discourse, framed by cultural theory, to unpack semiotic and material connections between form, function, belief, and meaning of information and communication technologies" (1012). For the purposes of this analysis, the technological artifacts (the tweets) were contextualized within the platform design of X as well as the heteronormative and authoritarian gender discourses in the Iranian context.

The researchers' respective positionalities also informed the interpretation of the findings. The first author is an Iranian scholar whose research specializes in feminist media studies, digital culture, and platform-mediated activism. She brings both scholarly expertise and lived familiarity with Iranian socio-cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts to the design and conduct of this research. The second author is not Iranian and brings expertise in platform governance and technology-facilitated violence. She identifies as queer and was able to offer the additional lens of queer experience to the analysis.

Building on these methodological considerations, the following section explores the participants' experiences of platformized violence, paying particular attention to how platform affordances intersect with broader heteronormative and authoritarian structures to shape queer visibility and vulnerability on X.

5 Findings

5.1 Key Interview Findings

The five participants all described the platform as significant to their public visibility, community building, or political expression. Nima, a trans woman and queer activist, traced her activism to earlier experiences of gendered and sexual regulation in Iran and later to exile, artistic practice, public coming out, and advocacy shaped by personal loss and queer survival. Amira, a trans woman and queer activist, described social media as a primary channel for public activism, although she used X cautiously because of its hostile dynamics. Zeynab, a gender-fluid, bisexual queer rights activist, had a longer trajectory of student, feminist, and queer activism and used X to circulate queer educational content, connect with Persian-speaking queer communities, and participate in public debates. Asal, a queer feminist writer and journalist, described X as a space that initially enabled her to find queer communities and later became tied to visibility, political critique, and surveillance. Sasha, a trans woman and trans rights activist, used X to find other Iranian queer and trans people, share lived experiences, and build community before leaving the platform.

The themes that follow examine how experiences of platformized violence were shaped

by the interaction between platform affordances, visibility, and the broader heteronormative and authoritarian discourses that structure queer life in relation to Iran.

5.1.1 Algorithmic exposure

For all the participant activists, X was not simply a hostile space but was also a platform whose infrastructure actively amplifies vulnerability. Visibility, which is essential for queer community building, was repeatedly experienced as linked to exposure, fetishization, and collective harassment. Marston (2019) argued that queer people are more vulnerable to online hate compared to heterosexual and cisgender peers. According to the activists, this vulnerability is technologically mediated through the platform's algorithmic architecture. Sasha articulated this infrastructural dynamic most explicitly. For her, algorithmic amplification operated as a double-edged sword: "If this algorithm didn't exist, it wouldn't have helped me build community, but at the same time it exposed me to people who were not my audience and who came only to harass." She noted that after changes in platform governance, she increasingly felt exposed to random people who weren't her audience, emphasizing that algorithmic circulation had shifted from community building toward involuntary exposure. This perception aligns with research suggesting that X increasingly organizes visibility through algorithmically curated recommendation systems rather than solely through self-selected networks (Hardy, Salzano, and Pfister 2024). Under such conditions, content can travel beyond intended audiences, exposing users to forms of engagement that are neither anticipated nor welcomed. For queer activists, visibility therefore becomes difficult to control, simultaneously facilitating community formation and expanding opportunities for harassment.

Nima similarly linked platform architecture to vulnerability. Reflecting on harassment on X, she explained: "the structure of X is such that people who fall into minority positions in society are more exposed to violence." She also described a transformation over time, stating that "now the space is very far-right, there is an anti-trans atmosphere on X, and we are practically isolated, as if we are talking to ourselves." This sense of algorithmic erasure coexisted paradoxically with targeted hypervisibility. Nima described how each time she posted a photo of herself, "at least two or three accounts that publish trans porn would retweet it," and she found it "strange and frightening" that her self-presentation as a trans woman appeared to trigger algorithmic circulation toward fetishizing audiences.

Nima's account points to a distinction between visibility and recognition. Although platforms often frame visibility as empowering for marginalized communities, visibility does not necessarily translate into meaningful inclusion. Instead, her experiences suggest that algorithmic circulation can detach visibility from community and redirect it toward hostile or fetishizing publics. In this sense, exposure operates as a form of differential visibility, where trans bodies become highly visible but remain subject to objectification, scrutiny, and harassment.

Zeynab highlighted another infrastructural dimension. They explained that X allows users to see content from people they do not follow and from those followed by others, meaning that users are frequently exposed to content they “did not decide to follow,” which then generates conflict. They also explained how anonymity operates as a structural enabler: “X’s text-based format and ease of anonymous participation make it easier for people to allow themselves to attack others.” Empirical research supports this observation, demonstrating a positive correlation between anonymity and hate speech, particularly in cases targeting race and sexual orientation (Mondal, Silva, and Benevenuto 2017). While anonymity can protect queer users in hostile contexts, it simultaneously lowers the threshold for aggression. This observation resonates with research on the online disinhibition effect, which shows that individuals are more likely to engage in hostile or aggressive behavior when they perceive themselves as anonymous and insulated from social consequences (Yu and Riddle 2022). However, anonymity alone does not explain the forms of exposure the participants described. Recommendation systems, reposting practices, and cross-network circulation increase the likelihood that hostile encounters accumulate around particular individuals. In this sense, anonymity operates within a wider communicative environment that amplifies both visibility and vulnerability. X’s combination of pseudonymous participation and broad content circulation may therefore create conditions in which vulnerability and aggression are simultaneously intensified.

Amira described X as uniquely conducive to collective harassment. She characterized it as “extremely brutal, full of accusations, and insults,” and argued that X functions as a space of “collective bullying,” where users operate in bands or coordinated clusters. Even when she did not maintain an active presence on X, her Instagram videos and photos were reposted there, exposing her to death threats, dismemberment fantasies, and rape threats. For Amira, the issue was not simply individual hatred but the way the platform allowed “bands” to mobilize against targets, creating a dynamic in which one group attacks while another remains silent, thus reinforcing isolation.

Amira’s experience further complicates accounts of platformed harassment that focus exclusively on user activity within a single platform. Her visibility on X was not produced through participation on the platform itself but through the circulation of content originating elsewhere. Vulnerability is shaped not only by platform-specific interactions but also by the interconnected infrastructures through which content moves across digital environments. Harassment exceeds the boundaries of any one platform, following this activist across networked spaces and extending the reach of hostile publics beyond their original site of formation.

Asal emphasized the traceability embedded in platform design, describing how “even what I deleted after a few hours appeared later as screenshots during interrogation.” Drawing on her experience of being questioned by Iranian security authorities following her public criticism of the death sentence imposed on Navid Afkari and, earlier, the

presidential election of Ebrahim Raisi, she explained how, during interrogation, Iranian regime authorities presented screenshots of everything she had liked, mentioned, replied to, and even deleted after a few hours. According to her, the platform felt designed to “leave a trail so they can see your patterns,” describing it as “food for stalking.” As a result, she withdrew from visible engagement entirely, stating that she became someone who “doesn’t like anything, doesn’t tweet, doesn’t promote anyone.” Here, platform architecture, state surveillance, and reputational coercion transform digital traces into instruments of pressure and forced outing. Research suggests that the perceived permanence of online content shapes how users understand anonymity, accountability, and risk (Yu and Riddle 2022). In Asal’s case, screenshots, archived interactions, and deleted content remained available long after their original publication, extending the lifespan of digital traces and amplifying their potential use in both interpersonal harassment and state surveillance.

Participants’ accounts further suggest that exposure to harassment, traceability, and cross-platform circulation shaped not only how they experienced X but also how they participated within and beyond the platform.

5.1.2 Patterned queerphobic violence

A second recurring theme across all five interviews was the patterned, repetitive, and highly gendered nature of the violence directed at queer activists. For Nima, misgendering on X was systematic. She noted that whenever one of her tweets gained visibility, “several different accounts, the same accounts that cyberbully, suddenly come under it and write ‘bro, don’t be sad’ or ‘bro, it will pass,’ and they ‘sympathize’ while misgendering you.” Sasha stated, “They tried to attack my appearance, my weight, saying I don’t look feminine.” Even when users misunderstood her identity and assumed she was a trans man, the hostility remained transphobic.

Amira described daily exposure to “threats of killing, dismemberment, and rape,” as well as constant body-shaming, comments about her teeth, her stomach, her breasts, and whether she looked like a woman or a man. One phrase she repeatedly received was that she was “a strange creature,” and she noted how this language has historical resonance in medicalized and fascistic discourses that framed queer bodies as abnormal or subhuman.

Zeynab’s experience further illustrates the patterned nature of these attacks. They described repeated focus on appearance, noting that “the emphasis was often that my appearance didn’t fit into their binary expectations.” They explained that rape-themed insults often centered on desirability and ugliness, with attackers claiming that queer women were “so ugly no one would even want to rape them,” or framing sexual violence as humiliation rather than threat. Additionally, Zeynab described how their bisexual identity and gender-fluid coming-out were repeatedly ignored or overwritten, even within queer spaces, as people insisted on labeling them as a lesbian or simply as a woman.

Asal's account reveals another dimension of this patterned degradation. Although Asal received explicit threats of acid attacks against herself and her family, she emphasized that sustained body-shaming was "much more painful" than direct threats. She described the experience as if attackers had "seen the parts you tried to retouch so others wouldn't notice." In one harassment wave, her entire appearance was framed "like a virus that should be erased from the earth." For Asal, this was directly connected to her queer visibility.

5.1.3 Platform policies and the Musk-era shift

A third major theme concerns activists' perception that X's political and governance shifts, especially under Elon Musk, have intensified anti-queer hostility. For instance, the removal of protections for transgender individuals from X's hateful conduct policy in April 2023 signaled a narrowing of moderation safeguards, potentially increasing the visibility and circulation of transphobic content on the platform (Duffy 2023). Studies show that post-acquisition X became a platform where hateful posts and engagement with those posts, including homophobic, transphobic, and racist content, circulated more visibly (Hickey et al. 2025). According to Marzouk (2025), "Musk turned Twitter/X into an authoritarian context: a space with centralized, undefined power, no accountability, and rising hate speech."

Across interviews, Musk was explicitly named as part of a structural turning point in how the platform functions, moderates, and amplifies content. Nima framed the contemporary X environment as operating "in the backyard of Elon Musk." For her, the platform had become more openly hostile, more ideologically rigid, and less responsive to trans voices. Amira stated that "the last person who was supposed to bring us freedom was Elon Musk," connecting this statement to a broader sense that the platform had moved toward polarization and intensified hostility. For both, Musk's leadership represented a collapse of the earlier promise of social media as a space for marginalized voices.

Sasha provided the most detailed and governance-focused account of the Musk-era shift. She explained that "after Elon Musk became head of X...my experience was that I was exposed more to random people who were not my audience and who brought hate." She emphasized that this exposure was linked to structural changes. She argued that "X content moderation became transphobic from a certain point onward," explaining that earlier moderation practices sometimes recognized attacks on trans identity as harassment and removed such content, but after leadership and policy changes, this shifted. She described how "even the word 'cisgender' was considered harassment, and our tweets would be removed, or we would be banned for using it," interpreting this as a profound reversal in platform norms. In her words, the CEO "personally tried to damage trans safety," and she experienced this not only as a policy change but as a signal that the platform no longer regarded trans users as deserving of protection.

5.1.4 X governance failures

All the activists received dismissive or automated responses from X after reporting hateful content. Nima explained that after reporting explicit rape threats and other forms of violent harassment, she repeatedly received emails stating that the reported content “did not violate our guidelines.” When asked whether she believed X had been successful in managing hate against queer users, she said: “No. I think it actually fuels this violence and has no intention of stopping it, especially now.” She explicitly connected this failure to ownership and ideology, stating that the reason is that “the one who owns it is far-right,” showing that moderation weakness cannot be separated from political orientation.

Zeynab described reporting accounts that had written explicit threats such as “we will find you, cut you into pieces, and kill you,” only to receive the response that this content did not breach platform rules. They also explained how certain abusive accounts were temporarily suspended but repeatedly returned under new usernames, turning moderation into “a game.” Zeynab also offered a structural explanation for this failure. They argued that creating a safe space has “never been the priority; the priority has been increasing engagement to generate more revenue.”

Sasha explained how earlier moderation policies at least sometimes recognized insults against trans identity as harassment and removed them. She further described how queerphobic users developed “workarounds” to bypass moderation, including placing LGBTQ+ or trans flags in their bios to avoid automated detection, demonstrating adaptive evasion strategies within a weak enforcement system. Sasha noted that before policy changes, collective reporting sometimes resulted in account suspensions, but after the CEO transition, even when “many users reported the same account,” bans became rare. Ultimately, she said that the CEO’s approach “made me feel like this was no longer my place,” directly linking moderation failure to her decision to leave the platform. This experience reflects research showing that content moderation practices can significantly shape queer users’ sense of safety and belonging, particularly when enforcement failures signal that their identities and harms are not prioritized within platform governance structures (Haimson et al. 2021; Are and Briggs 2023).

5.1.5 Online hate and broader gender-sexuality discourse

The activists situated the hate they encountered on X within broader social and political discourses about gender and sexuality in Iran. For them, online hostility did not emerge in isolation; it reflected and extended long-standing regimes of heteronormative governance shaped by state policy, religious authority, and cultural norms.

Sasha articulated this connection most explicitly. She argued that Iranian gender and sexuality policy does more than stigmatize queer lives; it creates a moral permission structure that makes harassment feel justified. When queer identities are criminalized or medicalized, she explained, “it gives queerphobia legal legitimacy,” because queer people

are positioned as “criminals,” or “sick.” This dual framing, criminal and pathological, produces a discursive environment where hate appears rationalized. Therefore, according to her, online hate is not a deviation from official discourse but an extension of it.

Nima approached this continuity through the lens of socialization. She stated that hate speech on X reflects how gender and sexuality are produced through Iranian educational and cultural systems: “we are products of our society,” shaped in schools by “suppression” and “terrible attitudes about gender.” In this framing, online aggression is the reproduction of deeply embedded norms learned through institutional structures. Amira’s experience further illustrates how state-inflected disciplining logics circulate in everyday digital interaction. She described comments such as, “If you don’t want people to attack you, go get surgery,” often coming from individuals who insult her first and then prescribe medical transition as “the solution.” This rhetoric mirrors state medical-legal regulation by presenting bodily modification as the precondition for safety and recognition.

Asal highlighted how these broader discourses intensify once queer identity becomes publicly visible. She explained that after coming out, she could not deny that it “activated a homophobia” that had previously been latent. People who were already hostile became louder and more openly aggressive, as if queer visibility provided an additional discursive resource. It gave their hostility, in her words, greater “audacity.” This framing matters because it shows that hate speech is not simply spontaneous anger; it is an available repertoire, socially learned, politically mobilizable, and culturally legible that can be “activated” when queerness becomes nameable in public.

5.2 Performing Queerphobic Violence on X: A Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis

The interview findings revealed that participants experienced X as a space where visibility became a source of vulnerability. They described exposure to harassment, identity invalidation, self-censorship, and withdrawal from public participation. The tweet corpus allows these experiences to be examined at the level of discourse. Rather than treating participants’ accounts and the tweets they received as separate forms of evidence, the two datasets are read against one another. Read together, they demonstrate that participants’ experiences were not the product of isolated hostile encounters but emerged through recurring and patterned forms of discourse that sought to regulate gender, sexuality, visibility, and political legitimacy. The following analysis examines these discursive patterns and the technocultural conditions through which they were produced, circulated, and sustained on X.

This section applies CTDA to 59 Persian-language tweets targeting three Iranian queer activists (a trans woman, a lesbian woman, and a bisexual non-binary activist). CTDA requires examining digital discourse across three interlocking dimensions: discourse (what is said), cultural ideology (the beliefs embedded within it), and technocultural

structure (how platform affordances shape and amplify meaning). A two-stage coding process was conducted. First, tweets were grouped according to their dominant discursive function. Second, recurring sub-patterns within each cluster were identified. The analysis reveals four interlocking patterns of queerphobic hate speech: (1) identity denial and gender policing; (2) intimidation and coercive silencing; (3) ridicule and appearance-based degradation; and (4) sexuality as political disqualification. These patterns do not operate independently but recurrently overlap, converging to restrict queer activists' recognizability, credibility, and safety on the platform.

5.2.1 Identity denial and gender policing

A dominant pattern in the corpus was the discursive denial of gender identity. Identity denial operated through three recurring strategies: (1) biological essentialism, (2) interrogative destabilization, and (3) psychiatric pathologization. Tweets repeatedly deployed essentialist claims that reduce gender to biological determinism and invalidate transition. Examples include statements such as: "No man becomes a woman with makeup and women's clothes," "Male or female?" and "You will never become a woman." The repeated interrogative form ("male or female?") functions not as a genuine question but as a destabilizing tactic, positioning trans identity as incoherent and fraudulent. This insistence on a "knowable" binary resonates with the Islamic Republic's broader investment in legible, governable gender categories, where gender is socially and administratively policed as a foundation of moral order (Najmabadi 2014). These utterances function as misgendering speech acts. As Judith Butler (1997, 2004) argues, naming is performative: to deny someone's gender is not merely descriptive but constitutive; it attempts to produce a social reality in which that identity is illegitimate. The repetition across the corpus demonstrates how identity denial becomes routinized.

Several tweets further pathologize gender variance, describing queer or trans identities as mental illness and asserting that "if the world were in order, you would all be hospitalized." This psychiatric framing mobilizes a medicalized regime of classification reminiscent of Michel Foucault's analysis of how sexuality has historically been governed through discourses of pathology (Foucault 1978). In this dataset, medicalization functions as a justification for exclusion and queer identity is constructed as a disorder. This is especially resonant in Iran, where sexuality and gender nonconformity have long been routed through medico-legal logics: some trans lives become "legible" only through medical certification and legal recognition, while other queer identities remain criminalized or rendered unintelligible (Najmabadi 2014).

5.2.2 Intimidation and coercive silencing

A second theme involved direct intimidation. The corpus includes explicit threats of violence such as "We'll kill you painfully," harm to family members, and suicide-baiting: "Why don't you kill yourself?" Other tweets deployed coercive sexual aggression as domination talk, positioning the target as someone to be violated or punished. These

threats illustrate what Gelber (2019) describes as the consequential dimension of hate speech: beyond insult, they generate environments that inhibit participation. The presence of suicide-baiting is particularly significant, as it shifts from hostility to explicit encouragement of self-harm, escalating the severity of the speech acts.

The speech acts can raise the perceived cost of remaining visible. In Iranian gender regimes, coercion around sexuality is not merely interpersonal; it is historically embedded within state projects of moral regulation that frame “sexual deviance” as punishable, shameful, and socially contaminating (Afary 2009). Within such a framework, threats of violence appear as attempts to symbolically restore moral order.

From a technocultural perspective, hashtagging intensifies harm. The hashtag operates as an indexing device that binds threats to the activist’s searchable name, transforming individual utterances into a persistent archive of hostility. Threats written under #ActivistName accumulate within the indexed stream, renewing exposure and extending temporal reach. Platform searchability converts episodic abuse into permanent harm. Within an Iranian sociopolitical landscape, this persistence matters as the platform’s archival logic amplifies the stakes of shame and exposure as culturally and politically entrenched harms.

5.2.3 Ridicule and appearance-based degradation

A substantial portion of the tweets relied on ridicule rather than explicit threats. This was especially so in the subset targeting the lesbian activist, where the tweets constructed her as laughable, incompetent, or absurd. For instance: “This idiot—we have memories of her here that we’ve laughed at a thousand times,” or “Asal Abbassian went to meet Macron, saying she left Iran because of journalism and being homosexual? At least warn us beforehand so those of us who saw your journalism don’t die laughing!” These tweets transformed the activist into a comedic spectacle.

Appearance-based degradation is also prevalent. Tweets asked, “Why are they so ugly?” or suggested that their photos are offensive. Sara Ahmed (2014) notes that disgust marks bodies as contaminating and out of place. In this corpus, ugliness scripts function to exclude queer bodies from the imagined normative public. This disgusted framing is also tied to Iranian gender morality regimes that treat non-normative embodiment as public impropriety.

Appearance policing is gendered. For the trans activists, it is tied to legibility; for the bisexual activist, it is tied to sexual deviance; for the lesbian activist, it is tied to ridicule and dismissal. In each case, embodiment becomes grounds for political invalidation. The body is mobilized as political evidence, and aesthetic deviation is reframed as ideological deviance.

5.2.4 Sexuality as political disqualification

A distinct pattern in the tweets targeting the bisexual activist was the fusion of sexual stigma with nationalist accusation. Here, sexuality was mobilized as evidence of political treachery. Sexual identity was reframed as geopolitical betrayal. This framing aligns with scholarship on Iranian sexual politics, showing how “proper” sexuality is repeatedly tied to national authenticity, while non-normative sexualities are cast as Western contamination or moral invasion (Afary 2009; Tahani-Bidmeshki 2018). (Afary 2009). Puar (2007) argues that nationalism often depends on sexual normativity to define proper citizenship. This corpus exemplifies that dynamic: the activist’s sexual identity is framed as proof that their political claims are inherently suspect. Queerness is positioned as incompatible with the moral and territorial boundaries of the nation, echoing post-revolutionary gender policies that fuse morality, citizenship, and national purity.

This pattern demonstrates how queerphobic hate speech extends beyond moral condemnation into political exclusion. The activist is not only immoral; they are un-Iranian. The tweets enacted what might be understood as heteronationalist gatekeeping: political speech is rendered legitimate only when delivered from within a recognizable, normatively gendered and sexually “proper” citizen-subject.

6 Discussion

This paper set out to examine how hate speech directed at Iranian queer activists on X operated as a structural extension of authoritarian gender governance within a platform architecture organized around circulation, engagement, and legality. Situating the tweets and interviews within post-revolutionary Iranian gender and sexual regimes revealed that online hostility does not emerge in a vacuum.

Across both interviews and tweet analysis, queerphobic violence appeared as patterned enforcement. Misgendering functioned as boundary maintenance. Within the Iranian context, such boundary enforcement draws authority from a regime that has historically positioned gender nonconformity and non-normative sexuality as threats to the social body, problems to be corrected or expelled. The online harassment experienced by queer activists revealed an effort to strip activists of gender recognition and, by extension, civic legitimacy. These discursive moves echo heteronormative and cisnormative frameworks that repress queerness by naturalizing binary gender and casting deviation as disorder (Doody 2019, cited in Mkhize, Nunlall, and Gopal 2020).

Threats within the corpus further mobilized hyper-masculine sexualized language characteristic of Persian insult vernacular, where sexual aggression operates as a rhetorical performance of dominance. Such speech acts feminize, degrade, or subordinate the target while reasserting heteropatriarchal hierarchy. The convergence of misgendering with accusations of sexual deviance demonstrated how denial of womanhood is paired

with moral panic, producing a dangerous combination that forecloses normal inclusion into society.

Yet while these discourses are culturally legible within Iranian heteronormative regimes, their intensity on X cannot be understood without considering the platform infrastructure. Across interviews, X emerged as a sociotechnical system that converts queer visibility into vulnerability. Algorithmic amplification, cross-network exposure, anonymity affordances, and persistent searchability collectively transform activism into a high-risk practice. Under communicative capitalism (Dean 2019), communication is valorized not for deliberative exchange, but for its capacity to circulate affect. Fear, disgust, and outrage become highly circulable commodities. Within this dynamic, queer bodies function as sites of affective investment; they provoke reaction, and reaction drives engagement. The platform's architecture and, further, the entire business model that the platform operates in privilege circulation over protection. Infrastructural platform violence occurs when design neglects or insufficiently protects vulnerable users (Morales et al. 2025). Our findings illustrate precisely such neglect. This dynamic may actually be perfectly suited to policing Iranian gender and sexuality norms, since it would have the effect of amplifying and reinforcing the authoritarian state dynamics already in place, even if freedom of speech on the surface seems to contradict Iranian practices regarding queer subjectivities.

Governance shifts under Elon Musk further contextualized these dynamics. The activists repeatedly described changes in moderation thresholds, altered algorithmic exposure, and narrowing protections for trans users. Musk's framing of "free speech" as speech matching the law, combined with the removal of policies prohibiting targeted misgendering and deadnaming (Weatherbed and Roth 2023), redefined what counts as actionable harm. Musk is known for making transphobic comments (Bauer 2023). And as the owner of X, he takes an interest in what communities thrive there. Under communicative capitalism, he also benefits from the outrage that his decisions inspire when he spreads transphobic discourse on his platform in myriad ways, such as labeling the word cisgender as hate speech while ignoring actual hate speech. Furthermore, simplistic invocations of free speech risk perpetuating queerphobia by conflating legality with legitimacy (Gillespie 2018). While content moderation is undeniably complex (Gillespie 2018), the experiences of queer activists suggested that enforcement gaps disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Moderation is not neutral and is shaped by political and economic priorities (Crawford and Gillespie 2016). When rape threats are deemed non-violent, when repeat offenders reappear under new accounts, and when reporting is not protective, governance failure signals to attackers that consequences are unlikely. The absence of archived tweets from two participants is analytically significant in this regard. Both described leaving the platform in response to sustained harassment and perceived governance failures. Their inability or unwillingness to retrieve abusive content reflects digital exhaustion and strategic withdrawal. Here we might consider Hirschman's (1970) exit-voice loyalty framework as challenged by the logics of communicative capital-

ism. In Hirschman's framework, if the perceived quality of a product or service declines, consumers either withdraw from the organization and their product or service, which is called "exit," or they voice dissatisfaction, which is called "voice." Consumer loyalty to the brand or organization mediates which action consumers take. Within the boundaries of communicative capitalism, however, all utterances are contributions, and meaning is unimportant. This means that exit is the only option to voice dissatisfaction with the direction that X has taken since Musk's takeover. Any other choice becomes a circulating text that even if negative, earns X and Musk more attention and thus more value in the marketplace. Loyalty no longer mediates the decision to leave or stay on a platform. We need to challenge assumptions of whether freedom to harass is actually real freedom of speech in these cases, because queer activists can get censored on X for using the word cisgender, but people spreading hate and death threats are allowed to act with impunity.

Dean (2024) shows that in an economy where work and play are increasingly tethered to, and make money for, online platforms, politics has been merged with economics. In this neofeudalist economy, the economic gains by a wealthy few platform owners, like Musk, allow them to both shape and benefit from global politics. Regarding 2SLGBTQIA+ rights and equality, Musk is not a defender of free speech at all but is actually aligned with the regressive politics of the Iranian government. This stance works out well for him economically because it supports toxic speech. On the other side, anyone that relies on platforms like X to reach the broader community, whether for work under platform capitalism, or for activism, remains tethered to these platforms, and is forced to serve their own role in the accumulation of Musk's considerable wealth (Dean 2024). X is a tool of capitalist accumulation, and as such, it can never be a truly viable option for organizing against the powerful, whether they be the Iranian state, or Musk himself. Our findings position X as both a mirror and an amplifier of violence. The platform does not invent queerphobic discourse; it scales it up. Offline structures of law, schooling, authoritarian gender politics, and nationalist morality are translated into online strategies of delegitimizing and silencing queer people.

Our study contributes to the existing scholarship on platformized violence by demonstrating that digital harms in authoritarian contexts cannot be reduced to moderation failures alone. They must be understood as the outcome of platform affordances, systems of visibility, and governance practices interacting with pre-existing regimes of gendered repression. In contexts where queer identity is criminalized or pathologized, legally permissible speech combined with engagement-driven amplification redistributes vulnerability rather than freedom.

Beyond the Iranian context, these findings have implications for platform governance and trust and safety practice. The study suggests that harms experienced by marginalized users cannot be understood solely through the presence or absence of individual pieces of hateful content. Rather, vulnerability is shaped by the interaction between platform

affordances, systems of visibility, and local sociopolitical contexts. Participants' experiences demonstrate how recommendation systems, searchability, reposting practices, and the persistence of digital traces can amplify the effects of harassment even when abusive content does not explicitly violate platform policies. For platform operators and trust and safety professionals, this points to the need to evaluate harms not only against the content of individual posts but also against the visibility, circulation, and discoverability that platforms facilitate, particularly for communities already exposed to legal, social, or political forms of marginalization.

The findings also highlight the limitations of universal approaches to content moderation. Much existing platform governance infrastructure is designed around English-language contexts and often treats harmful content as detached from the cultural and political environments in which it circulates. The case of Iranian queer activists illustrates how online harassment may draw its force from local histories of gender regulation, criminalization, and political exclusion. Effective governance therefore requires greater attention to linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical specificity, particularly in contexts where online hostility intersects with broader structures of state power and social marginalization.

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's scope and methodological design. Drawing on five interviews and a corpus of 59 tweets, the study does not seek to measure the prevalence of queerphobic discourse on Persian X or to make generalizable claims about the experiences of all Iranian queer activists. Rather, the goal is to examine how platformized violence is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by a group of activists whose public visibility made them frequent targets of online hostility. The analytical value of the study lies not in the size of the dataset but in its ability to illuminate the mechanisms through which queerphobic hostility is experienced, interpreted, and enacted at the intersection of platform affordances and authoritarian gender regimes.

Future research should extend this analysis comparatively across other authoritarian regimes to examine how local gender ideologies interact with platform architectures. Further work is also needed on multilingual moderation blind spots, algorithmic auditing in non-English contexts, and the long-term psychological and civic consequences of digital withdrawal among marginalized activists. Additionally, examining how diasporic publics mediate between homeland authoritarian discourses and global platform infrastructures would deepen understanding of transnational digital harms.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the research and the potential risks associated with further circulation of the materials. The interview transcripts contain confidential and sensitive information, while the tweet corpus consists of abusive content specifically targeting the activists who participated in the study. Public release of these data could expose participants to additional privacy, safety, or harassment risks. In accordance with the ethical and confidentiality procedures approved for this research, the interview transcripts and tweet corpus cannot be shared publicly or made available upon request.

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Ethical Standards

This study received ethics approval from the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board. All participants provided informed consent before participation.

Keywords

Hate speech; platformized violence; queerphobia; X (formerly Twitter).