

Moralized Trigger Loops of Gender Politics in Alternative Media Spheres

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Abstract

This article explores how gender politics become moralized focal points of conflict within increasingly fragmented, hybrid, and alternative media environments. Drawing on feminist media studies and scholarship on affective polarization, as well as Mau et al.’s notion of trigger points (2023), it introduces the concept of “moralized trigger loops”—repetitive, emotionally charged cycles in which gender-related questions are amplified across digital and alternative media spheres. While earlier research has positioned alternative media primarily as emancipatory counterpublics, recent work shows how new forms of alternative media are actively engaged in the (re)production of anti-feminist, reactionary, and moralized gender discourse. Yet little is known about how users of such outlets themselves negotiate gender issues, how moralization unfolds affectively in their everyday media practices, and how these dynamics evolve over time. Based on a longitudinal qualitative panel study with system-critical alternative media users ($n = 33$) over three years, this article investigates how gender politics emerge as moralized sites of contestation within diverse media repertoires including alternative media. It argues that such processes transform gender-related debates into enduring affective loops that sustain and reshape mediatized publics.

Keywords

affective polarization; alternative media; gender politics; moralization; trigger loops

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, gender politics have become central emotional and moral battlegrounds in public discourse. Debates around feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality repeatedly ignite moral contestation and affective polarization (Iñigo et al., 2024; Lomazzi & Soboleva, 2024; Reinhardt et al., 2023;

Rothermel, 2023; Volk, 2025). This article examines how such issues become moralized triggers within fragmented, hybrid, and polarized media environments (Chadwick, 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017), focusing on how users of alternative media interpret, reproduce, or resist these moralized narratives in their everyday media practices.

The study explores how gender politics are affectively and morally negotiated among users of alternative media ($n = 33$), a group often characterized by a system-critical stance (Puschmann et al., 2024; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023). Building on Mau et al. (2023), these negotiations are conceptualized as “moralized trigger loops”—recursive cycles of moralization that sustain and intensify affective polarization. By examining how these loops unfold within alternative media repertoires, the article contributes to feminist media and communication research by tracing how moral emotions such as anger, irritation, or resentment circulate and accumulate in fragmented affective media spheres (Kay, 2026; Papacharissi, 2014).

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that polarization in contemporary democracies is not merely ideological but deeply affective (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nordbrandt, 2023). Rather than rational disagreement, emotional identification and moral disapproval increasingly divide publics. Feminist and cultural scholars have argued that gender issues are particularly prone to affective polarization, as they intersect with moral and identity-based values (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026; García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Rothermel, 2020). Simultaneously, the media landscape has undergone processes of hybridization and fragmentation (Chadwick, 2017; Heikkilä et al., 2020), in which audiences navigate personalized repertoires shaped by algorithms, ideology, and emotion (Kant, 2020; Schwarzenegger, 2023; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2025; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2020).

Within this environment, alternative media occupy an ambivalent position. Once central to progressive counterpublics and feminist activism (Atton, 2002; Fuchs, 2010; Gunnarsson Payne, 2012), they now also host reactionary and anti-feminist actors. A “new type of alternative media” (Müller & Schulz, 2021) has emerged—one that includes manosphere forums, populist YouTube channels, and hybrid online spaces mobilizing affective publics around opposition to feminism and gender equality (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Kay, 2026; Reinhardt, 2022).

While prior research has mapped anti-feminist networks (Lomazzi & Soboleva, 2024; Reinhardt et al., 2023), explored affective polarization in digital contexts (Nordbrandt, 2023), and traced how gender discourse fuels illiberal and populist politics (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024), the audience perspective remains underexplored. Little is known about how alternative media users with system-critical orientations make sense of gender debates and how their emotional and moral negotiations evolve over time. Most existing studies focus on content or discourse analysis (e.g., García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023b; Reinhardt, 2022), without answering how users’ interpretive practices contribute to the persistence of moralized conflicts in hybrid media environments (Chadwick, 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

To address this gap, the study asks how alternative media users affectively and morally negotiate gender politics over time. The article therefore draws on a three-year longitudinal qualitative panel study (2022–2024) with 33 users of system-critical alternative media in German-speaking contexts. This diachronic design captures how moralization, affect, and meaning-making unfold as processes rather than as fixed attitudes. It allows tracing both continuity and transformation: how initial irritations around gendered

topics solidify, fade, or shift toward new moral concerns over time. By focusing on the temporal dynamics of affective polarization, the study conceptualizes “moralized trigger loops” as temporal structures, exploring the repetition and recalibration of moral emotions that perpetuate conflicts surrounding gender beyond specific events.

By tracing these longitudinal negotiations, the article makes three key contributions. First, it brings a feminist perspective to debates on affective polarization, demonstrating how gender operates as a moral and emotional category that shapes societies that recognize and feel increasing levels of societal polarization (Mau et al., 2023). Second, it advances theoretical debates on the hybridization and moralization of media by revealing how alternative and mainstream outlets interact within complex repertoires to co-produce gendered moral conflicts. Third, it proposes the concept of “moralized trigger loops” as a heuristic for analyzing recursive affective dynamics that sustain polarization in digital publics over time. The following sections situate this argument within current scholarship on gender, affect, and media polarization, before outlining the theoretical framework and empirical findings. Together, they demonstrate how gender politics in fragmented media environments become enduring moralized conflicts that both reflect and reproduce affective logics.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender, Affect, and Polarization

Over the past decade, questions of gender, sexuality, and equality have become deeply intertwined with processes of affective polarization in democratic societies (Iñigo et al., 2024; Lomazzi & Soboleva, 2024; Reinhardt et al., 2023; Rothermel, 2023; Volk, 2025). Political polarization is no longer adequately explained by ideological disagreement or class conflict alone; it has acquired an emotional and moral texture that shapes how citizens perceive “us” and “them.” Affective polarization refers to this process of emotional differentiation and moralized hostility between groups (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nordbrandt, 2023). While early research treated affective polarization primarily as a by-product of partisan sorting, feminist and cultural theorists have highlighted that gender has become one of its most symbolically charged arenas, in which struggles over recognition, morality, and social order converge (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026; Butler, 2024; Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024; Finlayson, 2023).

Affective polarization manifests through moral emotions—anger, resentment, outrage—that circulate across networked publics and structure how individuals engage with political and social issues (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Rothermel, 2020). Feminist media scholars argue that gender debates are particularly vulnerable to such affective dynamics because they touch on intimate, identity-defining concerns about sexuality, reproduction, and care (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Kay, 2026).

Recent studies confirm that attitudes toward gender equality, feminism, and LGBTQIA+ rights now represent an independent ideological dimension of political conflict (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024). Anti-gender attitudes form a coherent belief system characterized by moral resentment and the perception that feminist progress constitutes an illegitimate intrusion into traditional social hierarchies. Such findings link gender polarization to what Norris and Inglehart (2019) describe as a “cultural backlash,” where perceived moral threats to identity mobilize defensive emotions and shape partisan affiliation.

2.2. Hybridized Media Environments and Affective Publics

Understanding affective polarization requires attention to the transformation of the media environment itself. Contemporary publics operate within what Chadwick (2017) conceptualizes as a hybrid media system, in which legacy journalism, social platforms, and alternative outlets can interact fluidly (Toivanen et al., 2021; Valaskivi & Robertson, 2022). Yet empirical developments suggest that such hybridization does not unfold uniformly. While some audiences indeed navigate across mainstream and alternative sources, others gravitate toward more internally coherent and ideologically bounded repertoires (Heikkilä et al., 2020). Rather than assuming fluid interactivity as a stable condition, the present study understands hybridization and fragmentation as coexisting tendencies within contemporary information ecologies.

In these environments, audiences assemble personalized repertoires that blend professional and amateur, mainstream and counter-hegemonic sources (Heikkilä et al., 2020). Yet, these repertoires are not only informational but normative and affective. Eldridge (2025), for example, distinguishes between peripheral antagonists and agonists of journalism in a fractured world: While antagonists blur the lines between politics and journalism to promote backlash, fragmentation, and grievances, agonistic actors may also challenge dominant narratives yet articulate more constructive political imaginaries. This distinction underscores ongoing tensions in how we conceptualize counterpublic formations and highlights that not all alternative or critical media practices follow the same logic of escalation.

The result is therefore not merely fragmentation but stratification—different groups access and trust distinct information ecosystems aligned with their values and emotions (Aharoni et al., 2024; Fletcher et al., 2025). Heikkilä et al. (2020), for example, demonstrate how media use in Finland became increasingly stratified between 2007 and 2018: Politically engaged, liberal citizens maintain wide repertoires spanning traditional and digital sources, while disengaged or conservative groups cluster around narrower repertoires and online networks. Importantly, both expansive and clustered repertoires can function as affective confirmation environments. What unites them is less their structural position within a hybrid system than their capacity to resonate with, and reinforce, pre-existing emotional and moral orientations.

This social stratification intersects with affective polarization, as selective exposure fosters emotionally homogeneous publics. Papacharissi (2014) describes such networked spaces as affective publics—collectivities organized through shared feeling rather than shared facts. In affective publics, emotion becomes a connective tissue: It structures participation, identity, and belonging. Within feminist media studies, this perspective reframes digital communication not as rational debate but as affective circulation (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Rothermel, 2020). Emotions travel through hashtags, memes, comment threads, and alternative media, creating transient communities of outrage or solidarity. As Nordbrandt (2023) notes, social media do not simply cause polarization; rather, polarized individuals use platforms to perform and reinforce emotional identifications. These dynamics provide fertile ground for the moralization of gender debates, where online visibility, affective intensity, and value alignment intertwine—conditions under which moralized trigger loops can emerge and stabilize.

2.3. From Emancipatory to Reactionary Alternative Media

The affective architectures of hybrid media systems are sustained and amplified by particular media actors and infrastructures. Among them, alternative media occupy a central role: They translate diffuse emotions circulating in networked publics into coherent narratives and moral positions. Yet, the meaning of “alternative” itself has shifted—what was once a label for emancipatory counterpublics has, in many contexts, become associated with reactionary and anti-feminist projects (Atton, 2002; Fuchs, 2010; Gunnarsson Payne, 2012). Such outlets embodied ideals of participatory democracy and cultural resistance. However, as digital infrastructures expanded, the label alternative has become politically ambiguous. Today, scholars observe the rise of reactionary and anti-feminist alternative media spheres that appropriate the participatory ethos of earlier counterpublics while advancing illiberal agendas (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2026; García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Reinhardt, 2022). Instead of labeling those aggressive, well-resourced formations as counterpublics, Jackson and Kreiss (2023) propose the notion of “defensive publics” to capture actors who frame themselves as marginalized while operating with substantial communicative power.

For instance, García-Mingo and Díaz Fernández (2023b) describe the “Spanish manosphere” as a constellation of interlinked forums, YouTube channels, and Telegram groups where male victimhood and anti-feminist resentment are aestheticized through humor, irony, and “memetic wars.” Similarly, Reinhardt (2022) identifies “discourse coalitions” between radical-right actors and mainstream institutions in Germany, showing that anti-feminism operates as a common denominator that bridges populist counterpublics and conservative mainstream narratives. Banet-Weiser and Kay (2026) conceptualize this phenomenon as a “digital hall of mirrors” in which feminism and reactionary politics reflect and distort one another, producing recursive loops of outrage.

This transformation signifies a broader reconfiguration of what counts as “alternative.” Rather than existing outside power, reactionary alternative media actively participate in shaping cultural hegemony by rearticulating values of authenticity, free speech, and moral truth. They exploit platform logics—visibility, virality, algorithmic reward—to construct affective (counter-)publics centered on moralized anger and resentment (Kay, 2026; Papacharissi, 2014). These spaces not only disseminate anti-feminist content but also cultivate emotional infrastructures that sustain belonging through outrage. Consequently, the study of alternative media must account for both their historical emancipatory legacy and their current entanglement with digital illiberalism. Rather than resolving this debate normatively, the present study approaches alternative media from a bottom-up perspective, examining how participants themselves describe, justify, and morally position the (alternative) media spaces they inhabit. In doing so, the analysis foregrounds the affective and moral dynamics that structure these publics, irrespective of whether they are best described as counter-, defensive, or hybrid formations.

2.4. Gendered Moralization and the Affective Logics of Alternative Media

Across this evolving media landscape, gender issues serve as prime moral triggers. As Banet-Weiser and Kay (2026), as well as Banet-Weiser (2021), argue, digital platforms contribute to transforming feminism into a spectacle of mediated anger—one that is mirrored and inverted by reactionary actors who feed on feminist visibility to generate their own affective economies. This “mirror-world” dynamic creates recursive loops in which feminist and anti-feminist discourses amplify each other, producing what the authors term “vampire

anti-feminism”: a politics that parasitically drains the affective vitality of feminism while reinforcing patriarchal norms (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2026). Empirical research supports this theoretical claim. Iñigo et al. (2024) show how anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses circulate among Spanish teenagers through humor, irony, and fear of cancellation, normalizing gendered violence in everyday youth culture. Likewise, García-Mingo and Díaz Fernández (2023a, 2023b) reveal how online misogyny mobilizes affective repertoires of anger and victimhood that migrate from the manosphere into mainstream debates.

Due to their anti-establishment stance and system-critical framing (Holt, 2018; Müller & Schulz, 2021), alternative media are predestined to perpetuate these affective logics, which, however, are double-edged. They offer arenas for moral engagement and identity work, but they also have the potential to lock publics into repetitive cycles of emotional escalation. These cycles, sustained by algorithmic amplification and cultural fatigue, form the empirical and theoretical backdrop for this article’s concept of “moralized trigger loops”—recursive sequences in which moral emotions around gender issues are triggered, circulated, and re-triggered across interconnected media spheres.

3. Theoretical Argument: From Trigger Points to Moralized Trigger Loops

Public debates on gender have become neuralgic points where emotional, moral, and political tensions converge (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026; Butler, 2024; Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024). To understand how such controversies evolve and persist, this section builds upon Mau et al.’s (2023) concept of trigger points—those contentious aspects within broader societal issues that intensify debate due to their symbolic and emotional weight—and extends it to the notion of “moralized trigger loops.” While Mau et al. (2023) conceptualize trigger points as specific moments where consensus turns into dissensus, this section further argues that in fragmented and hybrid media environments, these triggers rarely remain isolated events. Instead, they are continually and strategically reactivated, circulated, and layered within digital publics, forming recursive affective processes that potentially sustain polarization. Gender, in particular, functions as a paradigmatic site for such dynamics.

3.1. From Trigger Points to Trigger Loops

Mau et al. (2023) developed trigger points as an analytical tool to explain both *why* and *where* consensus collapses into conflict. Their inductive typology distinguishes four typical kinds of trigger:

1. Unequal treatment, which evokes moral outrage over perceived injustices;
2. Violations of normality, where established social norms are perceived as being disrupted;
3. Fears of removing boundaries, reflecting anxieties over the erosion of traditional moral or social limits;
4. Behavioral impositions, referring to perceived restrictions on individual freedom.

These trigger types can also be observed in contemporary debates on gender and sexuality. For instance, right-wing mobilization against drag queen performances is often framed as a response to perceived boundary-pushing and violations of normality (Volk, 2025). However, in the current media landscape, trigger points do not simply appear and fade away. They are continuously revisited, reframed, and re-energized through digital communication. Algorithms favor emotional content; users repeatedly encounter similar narratives across platforms; and alternative media, as “polarization entrepreneurs” (Mau et al., 2023),

deliberately restage and amplify moral conflicts. Through their system-critical stance and anti-establishment framing (Holt, 2018; Müller & Schulz, 2021), alternative media reframe gender equality as moral overreach or ideological imposition, aligning, for instance, with Mau et al.'s categories of *violations of normality* and *behavioral impositions*. This alignment transforms gender politics into recurring “trigger material,” ready to be re-activated whenever outrage potential is needed. To capture this dynamic quality, the concept of *trigger loops* is proposed. Whereas trigger points describe moments of friction, trigger loops emphasize temporality and repetition—the looping of moral emotions, narratives, and media exposure that keeps conflict alive.

3.2. The Loop Machine Metaphor

To explicate this process, the *loop machine* metaphor is instructive. A loop station in music records short sound sequences and plays them back endlessly, allowing multiple tracks to be layered into complex sonic textures. Likewise, in mediatized communication, moral triggers are recorded, layered, and replayed across multiple platforms. Each repetition reinforces emotional intensity and adds new “tracks” of interpretation. (Alternative) media, social media influencers, but also audiences collectively function as loop machines capturing moralized fragments, overlaying them with fresh affect, and re-circulating them into public discourse. Like musicians layering loops, multiple triggers can also be combined to produce rich affective textures. This synthesis turns gender from a single contentious topic into an engine of polarization—a generator of moral energy that can be continuously replayed.

This metaphor illuminates the recursive and temporal nature of “moralized trigger loops.” A single event—say, a feminist campaign, a drag-queen performance, or a political statement on gender-neutral language—acts as an initial trigger. Alternative outlets/actors pick it up, framing it as moral deviation or proof of societal decline (e.g., Volk, 2025). Users respond emotionally, sharing and commenting, which algorithmically amplifies visibility. Mainstream media report on the controversy, further negotiating it as a politicized issue. The cycle may then return to alternative channels with renewed outrage, completing the loop. Over time, such loops potentially produce what Lee and Valenzuela (2024) describe as “self-righteous news circles,” where users gain confidence in their moral correctness regardless of factual accuracy and remain locked within recursive moral universes, reinforcing the perception that the opposing side is not only mistaken but *immoral*. Gender issues, precisely because they intersect with intimacy, identity, and bodily autonomy, become ideal material for such moralization.

4. Methodology

4.1. Qualitative Longitudinal Panel

The methodological framework of this study builds on a qualitative longitudinal panel study on users of alternative media conducted from 2022 to 2024 and comprising three survey rounds. The focus of this study is on how users of system-critical alternative media negotiate gender as a mediatized and moralized issue over time. This approach aligns with a broader epistemological tradition in communication and media studies that treats audiences as *meaning-makers* rather than passive recipients (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020; Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012). By centering on lived experience, the study connects feminist epistemology—particularly notions of *situated knowledge* and *mediated feeling*—with qualitative longitudinal research.

Qualitative longitudinal designs are particularly well suited to explore how affective and moral dynamics evolve rather than simply exist. As Schöppl et al. (2025) note, long-term qualitative engagement enables researchers to trace the continuity and transformation of participants' interpretations, attachments, and distancing processes. In contexts of affective polarization and mediatized moralization, this processual approach enables researchers to capture not only when individuals—and, in this specific scenario, users of alternative media—affectively negotiate gender as a neuralgic point of public discourse (Mau et al., 2023), but also how these emotions sediment and change over time. This epistemological stance treats affect not simply as data but as a constitutive part of meaning-making, echoing feminist media scholarship that sees emotion as an epistemic lens into power relations and identity work (Åhäll, 2018; Lagrange, 2025).

4.2. Panel and Sampling Strategy

The empirical basis of the study is a three-year qualitative longitudinal panel focusing on users of system-critical alternative media in German-speaking countries. The panel comprises 33 participants aged 20 to 52 (19 female, 14 male). While a growing body of research has examined alternative media users as well as predictors of alternative media use (Brems, 2024; de León et al., 2024; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023), it remains difficult to speak of “the typical alternative media user.” This is partly due to the heterogeneous nature of alternative media themselves and the varying conceptualizations employed across studies. Against this background, the aim of the present panel was not to construct a statistically representative sample. Instead, the recruitment strategy sought to reflect a spectrum of ideologically diverse and system-critical positions within alternative media use. Particular attention was paid to including participants with differing political orientations and varying engagements with alternative media outlets and platforms.

The relatively young age structure of the sample reflects the dominant recruitment strategies employed, especially snowball sampling and third-party referrals. Most participants were between 25 and 35 years old. The panel included 33 participants in the first survey round, 32 in the second round, and 27 in the third round. In terms of professional backgrounds and experiences, the sample displays considerable variation. The participants were a mix of students and full-time employees. The latter worked in tourism, journalism, design, mechanics, science, IT, and marketing. Overall, participants tended to have relatively high levels of formal education: At the start of the study, 15 of the 33 participants were studying for a university degree, while several others had already completed higher-level education.

Recruitment combined various online and offline methods, including outreach via alternative social media platforms, postings in relevant online groups, and the distribution of posters and flyers in public spaces. Snowball sampling and referrals from third parties proved most effective. All participants were informed about the study's aims and procedures, and all identifying information has been anonymized.

4.3. Methodological Triangulation

The study employs a methodological triangulation design to capture both routine and reflection in participants' media engagement. Three complementary methods were used during each round: *media diaries* invited participants to document their media activities over one week, also focusing on moments of emotional engagement, irritation, or resonance. Users were invited to fill in PDF documents and share which

offers they had used, when, and how, as well as the topics they had focused on and their thoughts about them. Participants could share links to online articles in the documents. They were also invited to share media content they had consumed directly via email, even between survey rounds, and to share their thoughts on it. This format allowed insights into the mundane rhythms of media use and how certain topics, such as gender, repeatedly emerged as affective triggers (Wagner et al., 2022). Furthermore, a *media repertoire sorting exercise* was integrated into the qualitative interviews to visualize participants' broader media ecosystems, mapping combinations of mainstream, alternative, and social media sources. These cards helped contextualize the diaries by identifying overlaps and gaps within individual repertoires, revealing where affective polarization might take root (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012). Finally, *guided qualitative interviews* offered a reflective space for participants to articulate how they perceive, evaluate, and emotionally process gender-related debates.

Due to the flexibility of the interview guidelines, there was an opportunity to address current socio-political developments in addition to stable questions on media use, trust in the media, and trust in political institutions. These developments included the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, gender neutrality in the German language, and the Israel–Palestine conflict, among others. Each round included follow-up questions linking back to earlier interviews (for instance, when users deliberately decided to reduce their media use, distanced themselves from certain outlets, etc.), enabling longitudinal comparison and self-reflection.

Across all three rounds, data collection was iterative. Adjustments to the interview protocol reflected emerging insights from earlier phases—a hallmark of qualitative longitudinal design (Schöppl et al., 2025). The first round of interviews took place in the summer and autumn of 2022. The second round was conducted in the summer and autumn of 2023, followed by the third round in the summer and autumn of 2024. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

4.4. Data Preparation and Analysis

The dataset—comprising approximately 145 hours of audio interview material, 92 media diaries, and 92 sets of repertoire cards—is part of a larger project on users and uses of alternative media and was analyzed using OpenQDA, an open-source software tailored for qualitative data management. Analysis followed a systematic strategy that integrated inductive and deductive category development (Mayring, 2014). This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the data, allowing themes to emerge naturally while applying established theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis. The analysis began with an open, close reading of the interview transcripts and media diaries, complemented by the media repertoire cards. This initial inductive step served to map participants' salient issue arenas and recurring “trigger material” in their accounts (e.g., gender, climate politics, perceived “wokeness” in journalism). In a subsequent deductive phase, these observations were systematically related to the study's theoretical framework by applying an initial coding scheme derived from the literature. This included, for example, Mau et al.'s (2023) four trigger types, as well as gender-related analytical categories (e.g., gendered stereotypes, gendered discrimination, and different strands of anti-feminist framing such as male-centered anti-feminism, family-centered anti-feminism, anti-genderism, or ethnicized anti-feminism).

Importantly, coding followed an iterative logic: When applying the deductive scheme to the material, categories were repeatedly refined, extended, and, where necessary, adjusted in response to the empirical

accounts. This interplay between deductive structuring and inductive refinement proved particularly productive in the longitudinal design, because participants introduced new topics and references over time that were not always anticipated in the interview guide. The coding process therefore remained open to emergent themes while maintaining a theoretically informed structure.

4.5. Methodological Reflections and Ethical Considerations

Working with politically sensitive topics and participants who often distrusted academia required striking a careful balance between maintaining distance and showing empathy. Reflexivity was crucial, so the interviews were conducted by two interviewers (e.g., a scientific employee and a student assistant) who could then reflect on them together immediately afterwards. This was particularly important for discussions on topics that are negotiated ambivalently in society. Recruitment and retention of *hard-to-reach groups* posed additional challenges (Schöppl & Schwarzenegger, 2025). Many participants were wary of perceived ideological bias in academia, necessitating transparent communication about the project's goals and ethical safeguards. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the study, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Maintaining participant engagement required flexibility—allowing asynchronous communication and adapting interview schedules to personal circumstances. The funding body also requested several ethical reflections as part of the application process.

5. Findings

Across the three rounds, gender repeatedly surfaced as a neuralgic zone within participants' media repertoires. Rather than appearing as an isolated controversy tied to a single event, gender functioned as a recurring condensation point through which broader concerns about social order, legitimacy, childhood, morality, institutional authority, and belonging were negotiated.

Building on the conceptual discussion of trigger points and temporality, the longitudinal material suggests that these recurring dynamics can be analytically reconstructed along four interrelated processes: *trigger activation*, *media circulation*, *affective resonance*, and *reinforcement through recursion*. These processes are theoretically informed but emerge inductively from the comparison of cases and rounds. They do not unfold in a fixed sequence; rather, they overlap, intensify, stabilize, or shift over time. Importantly, engagement with gender as a trigger was not confined to right-wing alternative media use. The panel reveals multiple pathways: right-wing counterbalancing, progressive activist engagement, reform-oriented Christian negotiation, spiritual reinterpretation, etc. What unites these trajectories is less ideological direction than the mediatized and recursive structure through which gender becomes moralized and repeatedly reactivated.

5.1. Trigger Activation: Gender as a Recurring Moral Fault Line

Trigger activation refers to those moments in which specific events, policies, representations, or institutional practices are experienced as morally salient. Across rounds, such activation often followed identifiable public stimuli, yet what counted as a trigger depended on participants' normative orientations.

In several trajectories, schools and childhood socialization functioned as early sites of activation. For example, Altin (39, mechanic) framed schools in round 1 (2022) as institutions that prematurely exposed children to

debates about sexuality and identity. While distancing himself from explicit hostility, he argued that schools should not “orient” children regarding whether they should find homosexuality normal, emphasizing parental authority and moral autonomy. By round 2 (2023), this concern resurfaced in a more explicitly mediated form. Rather than focusing on schools alone, he described LGBTQIA+ debates as heavily promoted through media, suggesting that public discourse portrayed broad agreement that he did not encounter in everyday conversations. The normative concern remained stable, but the locus of activation shifted.

Legislative developments similarly intensified activation. Otto (21, student in the humanities and social sciences) articulated early skepticism toward feminist politics in round 1 (2022), which became more specific in round 2 (2023) through narratives of male disadvantage and was reactivated in round 3 (2024) following the enactment of the German Self-Determination Act, which allows trans, intersex, and non-binary people to change their legal gender marker and first name(s) through a declaration at the registry office (Federal Ministry of Justice, n.d.). He described contemporary gender debates as continuous “goalpost moving,” suggesting that normative boundaries were repeatedly expanded. Here, trigger activation aligns with Mau et al.’s (2023) categories of boundary removal and perceived unequal treatment.

Other activations moved in a different normative direction. In Maria’s case (24, student in gender and politics), the trigger did not concern moral overreach but perceived exclusion and marginalization. In round 2 (2023), she criticized that queer perspectives received insufficient space in mainstream media and were often inadequately represented. In round 3 (2024), hostile comment sections reacting to a bisexual bachelorette served as renewed activation points. She described being “shocked” that such exclusionary sentiments were still publicly voiced. Here, the trigger concerns unequal recognition and backlash rather than boundary erosion. Similarly, in Astrid’s trajectory (24, teacher trainee), the trigger centered on the exclusion of queer perspectives within the Catholic Church. In round 2 (2023), she framed gender debates as a necessary site of institutional reform, criticizing the Church’s lack of inclusivity while interpreting public discussions on inclusive language as part of a broader responsibility to foster recognition.

Trigger activation also emerged within spiritual reinterpretations. Alexandra (22, jewelry designer), who in round 2 (2023) described herself as part of a spiritual “witch” circle, articulated gender less as a political controversy than as a question of energetic balance. She emphasized that all individuals contain both “male and female energy,” framing gender as a cosmological principle rather than a partisan conflict. In round 3 (2024), this perspective resurfaced in connection with climate-related flooding, which she interpreted symbolically as “female” water energy communicating imbalance. In this trajectory, activation did not arise from legislative change or media controversy but from symbolic events integrated into an existing spiritual worldview. Gender thus became a recurring interpretive resource embedded in cosmology rather than ideology. Across the panel, gender repeatedly operated as a moral fault line. Once articulated, these triggers remained available for renewed activation when new stimuli emerged.

5.2. Media Circulation: Layering Meaning Across Heterogeneous Repertoires

If trigger activation concerns what becomes morally salient, media circulation refers to how these stimuli are framed, amplified, and layered within different media constellations. The panel demonstrates that alternative media use was ideologically heterogeneous and embedded in diverse repertoires.

One recurring pattern involved counterbalancing practices. Participants such as Otto and Jacqueline (35, natural scientist) consulted right-wing alternative outlets alongside mainstream journalism to challenge what they perceived as dominant narratives. In these repertoires, gender debates were reframed as ideological imposition or moral overreach. In contrast, Maria relied on feminist magazines and activist bottom-up media to address what she perceived as insufficient and inadequate representation in mainstream outlets. Here, “alternative media” did not correspond to system-oppositional outlets in the sense described by Müller and Schulz (2021), nor to defensive publics as conceptualized by Jackson and Kreiss (2023). Rather, alternative media were mobilized in a more traditional emancipatory sense, as platforms for marginalized voices and feminist counterpublic articulation.

A similar configuration appeared in Astrid’s case, where reform-oriented religious podcasts advocating for an inclusive and queer-friendly Catholic Church played an important role. These media did not position themselves against democratic institutions or journalism but functioned as emancipatory platforms within religious discourse. At the same time, Astrid did not reject mainstream journalism. Although she noted that mainstream outlets often used gender-inclusive language more consistently than other social actors, she interpreted this not as exaggeration but as a necessary normative impulse. In her repertoire, mainstream and alternative media were not oppositional but complementary in advancing inclusive reform. This constellation underscores the importance of a repertoire perspective: Alternative media engagement does not uniformly imply anti-feminist or anti-systemic orientations but may also reinforce progressive and reformist commitments.

Alexandra drew on spiritual and indigenous sources that reframed gender outside conventional partisan antagonism. These sources functioned as epistemic alternatives to mainstream political discourse, emphasizing harmony, balance, and symbolic interpretation rather than conflict. In her repertoire, media did not primarily circulate outrage but offered cosmological narratives through which gender could be integrated into broader spiritual meaning-making. Alternative media engagement here did not produce counter-hegemonic confrontation but provided interpretive tools for re-symbolizing social tensions.

Platform-centered configurations also shaped circulation dynamics. Across rounds 1 (2022) and 2 (2023), YouTube occupied a central position in Altin’s media repertoire. He referred to narratives encountered there when describing LGBTQIA+ activism as “radically active” and strongly supported by media. While his underlying concern about childhood remained stable, YouTube functioned as a site where such concerns were repeatedly encountered, narrated, and reinforced. While the media repertoires of Otto, Astrid, and Altin remained relatively stable across rounds, Jacqueline and Maria described (alternative) media as becoming less central over time, alongside emerging patterns of news avoidance and fatigue. Across these constellations, media circulation acted as a moral framing infrastructure. Gender-related stimuli were layered with interpretive meaning and rendered reusable across heterogeneous media environments.

5.3. Affective Resonance: Embedding Gender in Moral Worldviews

If media circulation structures interpretation, affective resonance concerns how individuals emotionally engage with these framings. Across ideological positions, gender-related stimuli were rarely processed in a detached manner.

A recurring pattern involved frustration or discomfort regarding perceived boundary shifts. Otto expressed irritation about normative expansion, while Jacqueline described unease with thematic dominance. In contrast, Maria in round 3 (2024) articulated shock and indignation when encountering hostile comment cultures. Stephan-Ludwig (52, lecturer and media professional), in round 2 (2023), characterized certain developments as “overshooting the mark,” reflecting a reflexive but affectively engaged stance.

Resonance could also take non-antagonistic forms. Alexandra emphasized emotional self-regulation and spiritual balance:

But again, it's a personal thing, whether I let myself be triggered by someone calling me he or she. So, if you are at peace with yourself and have healed your emotional wounds, then you don't really care whether someone calls you one thing or another, because you know who you are. (round 2, 2023)

Across trajectories, affective responses personalized the trigger. Gender debates became intertwined with broader concerns about fairness, autonomy, institutional authority, childhood protection, spiritual integrity, or moral responsibility. Importantly, resonance was not always escalating; in some trajectories, emotional engagement cooled into fatigue or reflexive distancing, without fully dissolving the issue's availability for later reactivation.

5.4. Reinforcement and Recursion: From Reappearance to Layered Loops

Reinforcement and recursion refer to the ways in which earlier activations reappear, accumulate layers, and stabilize over time. The longitudinal comparison reveals that gender-related triggers were integrated into evolving narrative structures. In several cases, initial irritation became more specified across rounds. Otto's skepticism in round 1 (2022) was elaborated in round 2 (2023) and reactivated in round 3 (2024) through legislative change. Altin's trajectory across rounds 1 (2022) and 2 (2023) shows a similar pattern: Concerns about childhood remained stable while mediated activism became a renewed source of activation.

Other trajectories reveal recursive stabilization rather than escalation. Maria's critique resurfaced when backlash became visible. Astrid's concern about exclusion within the Church remained a stable reference point across discussions of reform. Alexandra's spiritual articulation in round 2 (2023) reappeared in round 3 (2024) in connection with climate symbolism, demonstrating a different form of recursion. Rather than intensifying antagonism, earlier interpretations were reactivated and extended into new symbolic domains. In her case, looping did not consolidate political grievance but stabilized a spiritual framework through which gender remained meaningful across contexts.

A reflexive dimension also became visible in Stephan-Ludwig's repeated observation that gender is strategically escalated by right-wing alternative media. Here, recursion operates at a second-order level: Not only are triggers reactivated, but awareness of their restaging becomes itself part of the moral narrative.

Across these heterogeneous pathways, moralized trigger loops do not uniformly produce escalation. Over time, affective attention may cool down, be displaced by other issues, or fade into fatigue and distancing, while the underlying interpretive frame remains available and can be reactivated when new stimuli render it salient again. Yet in each case, the trigger becomes embedded as a replayable moral script—available for

renewed mobilization when new events occur. The longitudinal panel thus demonstrates how moralized trigger loops emerge across diverse ideological constellations and media environments, operating through activation, circulation, affective embedding, and recursive layering over time.

6. Discussion

This study set out to explore how gender becomes a moralized focal point of conflict in alternative media environments, not merely as a topic of debate but as a recurring affective formation. Drawing on a three-year qualitative longitudinal panel study of system-critical alternative media users ($n = 33$), it examined how individual negotiations of gender evolve over time within hybrid and fragmented media repertoires (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The findings demonstrate that what initially appears as irritation toward media saturation, moral overreach, or misrepresentation does not simply dissipate. Instead, such irritations are reactivated, reframed, and layered over time, forming what this study conceptualizes as “moralized trigger loops.” These loops describe recursive dynamics in which emotional, moral, and epistemic tensions are replayed and re-anchored under new conditions.

By extending Mau et al.’s (2023) concept of trigger points toward moralized trigger loops, this article contributes an analytical lens that foregrounds temporality and repetition. Whereas trigger points describe moments in which consensus turns into dissensus, trigger loops capture how these moments are medially circulated, affectively embedded, and recursively stabilized. Recursion, however, should not be read as a purely cumulative build-up. Loops may also include phases of cooling, saturation, or displacement, in which moral attention temporarily subsides or is overwritten by other issues, while the underlying interpretive frame remains available for renewed activation. Only by revisiting participants across rounds could it be traced how gender-related concerns were not replaced but layered onto new stimuli, whether legislative changes, comment cultures, religious debates, or platform-centered narratives. In this sense, gender operates less as a discrete policy issue than as a moral metanarrative, a diagnostic framework through which broader anxieties over normality, boundaries, authenticity, and authority are negotiated.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that moralized trigger loops are not confined to right-wing alternative media use. While in some trajectories, such as Otto’s, gender debates reinforced perceptions of marginalization or behavioral imposition through engagement with right-wing alternative outlets, other pathways unfolded within spiritual, progressive, or Christian reformist contexts. These heterogeneous trajectories illustrate that polarization cannot be reduced to opposing ideological camps. Rather, it unfolds as divergent affective economies, distinct ways of converting discomfort, shock, or perceived injustice into meaningful moral narratives.

Alternative media play a pivotal role in this process. Acting as “polarization entrepreneurs” (Mau et al., 2023), they weave together grievances, amplify emotional salience, and provide interpretive templates through which triggers become reusable “trigger material.” In this respect, the findings resonate with Hepp’s (2020) notion of deep mediatization. Emotions are not merely expressed through media but structured by recurring patterns of mediated circulation. Gender becomes a looped resource, repeatedly available for mobilization, reactivation, and moral reaffirmation. This recursive embedding helps explain why certain gendered controversies persist irrespective of policy outcomes. They function as durable affective repertoires rather than solvable disputes.

From a feminist communication perspective, these findings illuminate both the risks and the ambivalences of contemporary media ecologies. On the one hand, moralized trigger loops can entrench affective polarization by stabilizing narratives of crisis and moral decline, thereby inhibiting dialogic engagement. On the other hand, they reveal underlying desires for coherence, recognition, and belonging, even within reactionary or system-critical frames. Attending to these affective undercurrents enables feminist scholarship to move beyond denunciation toward diagnosis. It becomes possible to understand not only what positions individuals adopt regarding gender, but how these positions are emotionally sustained and temporally reproduced in everyday sense-making practices.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample is comparatively young and highly educated, a consequence of recruitment challenges and reliance on snowball sampling and third-party contacts. The low response rate and the anti-system stance of some alternative media users may have limited participation, particularly among more radical actors. Moreover, conducting repeated interviews online (e.g., via video calls) likely facilitated participation for some but may also have posed barriers for others, including older users, and may have affected rapport and depth when discussing sensitive issues. Second, the category of “alternative media user” remains conceptually fluid and context-dependent. Rather than imposing a fixed definition, the study adopted a bottom-up approach; however, “alternative media” is relational and may vary across socio-political and geographic contexts. The findings therefore reflect a German-speaking media environment and should be interpreted with this contextual specificity in mind. Third, longitudinal qualitative research raises particular ethical and relational challenges. Repeated long interviews can foster trust and relational closeness, which is analytically valuable but also requires careful reflexivity and ethical vigilance. These broader methodological and ethical issues are discussed in more detail in separate methodological reflections emerging from this research context.

At the same time, the exploratory and iterative character of the longitudinal and bottom-up research design constitutes its central contribution. By foregrounding recursion, layering, and temporal persistence, moralized trigger loops offer a way of conceptualizing polarization not merely as ideological distance but as an affectively structured and medially sustained process. The longitudinal design was indispensable in revealing how triggers sediment into durable moral repertoires or, alternatively, fade into disengagement. Therefore, trigger loops should be understood as an analytical heuristic, rather than a finalized theory. They provide a framework that invites further empirical testing, theoretical refinement, and methodological innovation.

Finally, the moralization of gender observed here reflects a broader cultural condition. In societies marked by information abundance and epistemic fragmentation (Bartsch et al., 2024; Neuberger et al., 2023), feeling right increasingly substitutes for being right. Moralized trigger loops may thus function both as a symptom and as a structure of contemporary hyperpolitics (Mau et al., 2023), transforming fleeting emotional reactions into durable moral worlds. Yet even within these recursive dynamics lies ambivalence. Repetition can harden divisions, but it may also invite reflection and recognition. Understanding these loops, rather than dismissing them, is therefore essential for grasping how moral meaning is produced, sustained, and potentially transformed in mediatized societies. Ultimately, the temporal perspective also speaks to a broader “so what.” If trigger points mark moments of friction, longitudinal research can illuminate what happens after activation: where escalation occurs, where loops stabilize, and where disengagement or reorientation become possible. This matters not only analytically but also societally, because identifying such turning points may help locate potential interventions.

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The author declares no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

Due to privacy concerns, the interview data are not publicly available.

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