

Online Political Harassment Targeting German and Swedish Trans Advocates: Does Platform Governance Make a Difference?

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Abstract

Online platforms are crucial for political activists worldwide, but platform affordances also enable harassment and silencing of marginalized groups. Platform regulations are one of the main ways to curb hateful attacks, and democratic states are increasingly adopting legislation that targets big tech companies, including their content moderation. Focusing on the polarized 2024 debates around new gender self-identification laws in Sweden and Germany, this study explores how trans advocates experience online political harassment, with particular attention to their exposure to and the impacts of such attacks, and whether national platform regulations, such as the German NetzDG, shape these experiences. Drawing on interviews with leading LGBTIQ+ advocates, the findings suggest that such regulations make little difference in practice. Advocates in both Sweden and Germany reported unprecedented levels of harassment on social media during the debates, with significant consequences for their mental health and continued political engagement. The impact was particularly severe for advocates with intersecting marginalized identities, who often lacked institutional support and were targeted personally for being trans. Respondents also noted increased attacks from trans-exclusionary feminists, underscoring the need for closer scrutiny of these actors in countries regarded as frontrunners in gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights protection.

Keywords

anti-gender politics; LGBTIQ+ rights; online political harassment; platform governance; social media platforms; trans activism

1. Introduction

Recent research has shown a global backlash against the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, inter, queer, and other gender and sexuality non-conforming (LGBTIQ+) individuals and a growing politicization of these rights across Western democracies (Ayoub & Page, 2020; Velasco, 2023). This includes countries that have been international pioneers in LGBTIQ+ rights protection, such as Sweden (Grahm & Holm, 2025) and Germany (Schotel & Mügge, 2024). At the same time, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok have become central venues for the political mobilization of marginalized groups. This is not least the case for groups with intersecting marginalized identities, including LGBTIQ+ activists, for whom online platforms have become indispensable tools for engaging in socialization and communication, both amongst each other and towards wider audiences. At the same time, research suggests that such online platforms are far from neutral, but highly gendered and racialized public arenas (see e.g., Salter, 2018; Sobieraj, 2018). In particular, it has been shown how online platforms provide fertile ground for attacks against marginalized groups, not least those within these groups that are politically active (e.g., Southern & Harmer, 2021; Stephenson et al., 2025). However, while previous research has started to explore the importance of online platforms for LGBTIQ+ activists (e.g., Oz et al., 2023; Schmitz et al., 2022), few studies have examined how they perceive one of the main downsides of online activism for marginalized groups, namely online political harassment. Therefore, this article specifically interrogates how trans advocates experience online political harassment and if they perceive that platform regulations are effective in curbing harassment.

Platform regulations are one of the main ways to curb hateful attacks against marginalized groups on online platforms. Previous platform regulations were mainly voluntary ones adopted by platforms themselves, such as Facebook's "Community Standards" or other types of codes of conduct. However, while such self-regulation by major social media platforms typically prohibits hateful attacks, it has consistently been shown that much of the hateful content is left unmoderated (e.g., Carlson & Rousselle, 2020; Duguay et al., 2020). The spread of hateful content on major social media platforms is moreover underpinned by the largely unchecked private authority of these platforms and their attention-seeking business model, driven mainly by advertising revenue (Duguay et al., 2020; Helberger, 2020). As a response to democratic and societal problems posed by platforms, an increasing number of democracies are adopting legislation that specifically targets the regulation of big tech companies, including content moderation (Gorwa, 2024).

Sweden and Germany present two national contexts that have differed greatly in their regulatory approaches. With the Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, hereafter NetzDG) that went into force on 1 January 2018, Germany was the first (democratic) state to adopt legislation that directly targets how social media platforms moderate hateful content (Gorwa, 2019). Sweden, on the other hand, has had no national legislation directly targeting the content moderation of such platforms. During the course of 2024, both Sweden and Germany witnessed polarized debates around new gender self-identification laws.

Through a total of 13 interviews with central LGBTIQ+ advocates involved in these debates in both contexts (7 in Sweden and 6 in Germany), we explore how they perceive online political harassment and its consequences for their political pursuits and personal well-being, and if their perceptions of harassment are affected by how platforms are governed. Specifically, we ask: How do trans advocates in Sweden and Germany experience online political harassment? To what extent do they perceive platform regulations as

effective in curbing such harassment? When exploring these phenomena, we thus focus on comparing trans advocates' *perceptions* of online political harassment and platform regulations within and across the two country contexts.

Our analysis shows how platform regulations such as the NetzDG seem to make little difference to activists on the ground. Trans advocates in both Sweden and Germany perceived that their activism related to the gender self-identification laws led to unprecedented levels of hate and harassment on social media, taking a severe mental toll for some activists. This led to some withdrawing from public discourse or limiting their engagement on certain platforms or with certain topics and opponents to protect themselves. The impact of harassment was particularly severe for advocates with intersecting marginalized identities that lacked institutional support and experienced more personal attacks since they identified as trans. Advocates noted that attacks increasingly came from trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), and that the platforms proved to be ineffective in managing the unprecedented wave of harassment in both contexts.

By focusing on trans advocates' experiences of online political harassment, this study enhances our understanding of how various political advocates deal with such harassment and its impact on the political mobilization of intersectionally marginalized groups. The study shows how online political harassment of intersectionally marginalized activists is a profound problem for democracy, and that more narrow national platform regulations, such as the NetzDG, with a focus on content moderation rather than on the structural aspects of how platforms operate, are perceived as ineffective in curbing online harassment. Democratic states are thus facing significant challenges when it comes to governing platforms in ways that hinder the silencing of some of society's most marginalized groups.

2. Online Harassment Targeting Political Advocates: Exposure, Impact, and Platform Regulations

The digitalization of political engagement has transformed social media into a central arena for activism, mobilization, and political visibility, while simultaneously exposing political advocates and particularly women and marginalized groups to heightened forms of online harassment (Bardall, 2013). Political advocates, including politicians and activists, today rely heavily on social media to mobilize supporters, disseminate information, and challenge dominant political narratives, which simultaneously increases their visibility and vulnerability to online harassment (Oz et al., 2023). In line with much of the previous literature on online political harassment, we understand the concept broadly to include criminal acts such as hate speech (where prohibited), death threats and threats of physical and sexual violence, as well as other types of uncivil attacks that seek to intimidate and silence political actors. This may include other types of threats, humiliating or derogatory personal attacks, stalking behavior, defamation, rumors, and assigning negative stereotypes (see e.g., Holm et al., 2024; Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020). For women and intersectionally marginalized advocates in particular, gendered and symbolic harassment functions as a mechanism of political exclusion that seeks to delegitimize their activism, police their participation, and ultimately deter sustained engagement in digital political spaces (Lewis et al., 2017). Such harassment is not incidental but structurally embedded in gendered power relations: Gender-motivated online hate functions as a form of patriarchal backlash against women's increasing political participation and authority (Biroli, 2016). Drawing on theories of gendered political violence, scholars argue that symbolic and semiotic harassment such as sexist language, demeaning representations, and coordinated trolling serves to discipline women's public

behavior and deter political engagement (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016). Research has consistently shown that female politicians to a larger extent are exposed to personal attacks, including sexual slurs and degrading talk, while heterosexual ethnic majority men rather receive abuse that targets their politics (see e.g., Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021; Gorrell et al., 2020). These dynamics are intensified in digital spaces, where anonymity and platform affordances facilitate the rapid spread of hateful discourse, contributing to polarization and exclusion (Ging & Siapera, 2018). Importantly, an intersectional perspective highlights that these dynamics are not only gendered but that women of color, working-class women, and non-elite activists face disproportionate exposure to such symbolic exclusion, underscoring how online harassment reproduces intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and class within contemporary political participation (Esposito & Breeze, 2022; Krook, 2020). While gender identity is an underexplored factor in research on online political harassment, it is well established that trans people are a group particularly exposed to different types of abuse, violence, and harassment online (as well as offline). It has been shown that such abuse and violence tend to intensify with increased visibility in the media and popular culture—a dynamic oftentimes denoted the paradox of trans visibility (Ciszek et al., 2023). Recent research on online political harassment of queer politicians moreover shows that they tend to face more personal and vitriolic attacks, increasing the risk of more severe impacts on their participation in politics (Stephenson et al., 2025).

Given the close relation between one's social position and exposure to online political harassment, it is thus not surprising that the impact of political harassment has also been shown as strongly related to one's gender and gender identity. Thus, while privileged groups in politics, such as heterosexual ethnic majority men, tend to normalize online political harassment as part of the "political game," it has a silencing effect on marginalized political groups, such as women and LGBTIQ+ people (Håkansson, 2024; Holm et al., 2024). Specifically, individuals from marginalized groups tend to be more psychologically affected, including heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Collignon & Rüdiger, 2020). They also consider leaving politics and decreasing their public visibility to a larger extent, for example by exiting online public venues or refraining from engaging with certain topics on social media (Mügge & Özvatan, 2025). Importantly, such effects can be seen also beyond the direct targets, when witnessing others from the same group being attacked (Håkansson, 2024; Holm et al., 2024). In the context of trans politics, TERF activism (Pearce et al., 2020) has both polarized and poisoned public debate. Scholars have linked this resurgence to broader right-wing mobilizations against "gender ideology"—a concept rooted in Catholic and far-right anti-feminist movements deployed across multiple national contexts to frame LGBTIQ+ rights as threats to traditional values (Kováts, 2018). Trans-exclusionary actors have further leveraged a "post-truth" epistemic environment to position their claims as suppressed truths silenced by progressive consensus (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). While gender-based online harassment usually has a clear gender bias, the emergence of TERF activists online suggests that women can be as violent online as men.

Research on the consequences of national platform regulations for the political advocacy of intersectionally marginalized groups has hitherto been scarce and mostly focused on the German NetzDG. This emerging literature has demonstrated mixed results. On the one hand, analyses of social media content have found that NetzDG decreased the level and intensity of hate speech in Germany (Durán et al., 2025). In addition, NetzDG forced large online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X to hire additional staff to work only on content moderation in Germany (Heldt, 2019), which indicates that considerable additional resources were deployed following its adoption. On the other hand, interviews with experts within German civil society organizations working with online hate speech reveal that most did not perceive that NetzDG had

any effect on the prevalence of hate speech online. It has therefore been argued that NetzDG's narrow focus on enforcing content moderation of (reported) illegal speech rather than targeting platform design or business models that encourage violent and offensive content to be posted and spread makes little difference to affected marginalized communities (Griffin, 2022).

Building on the insights from research on online political harassment targeting political advocates, this study focuses on how trans advocates in particular experience online political harassment. Specifically, we analyze how advocates with intersecting marginalized identities and different organizational positions perceived to be exposed to and impacted by online political harassment, and to what extent platform regulations are perceived to curb such harassment. We zoom in on the German and Swedish settings, since both can be described as frontrunners regarding LGBTIQ+ rights but have been characterized by very different approaches to national regulations targeting social media platforms.

3. The Swedish and German Contexts

Sweden has a history of being a world champion of LGBTIQ+ rights. In 1972, Sweden was the first country in the world to allow for individuals to change their judicial gender, and it was one of the first countries in Europe to allow for same-sex marriage in 2009 (ILGA World, 2024; RFSL, 2024). The charged debates around the new gender identity bill enacted by the Swedish Riksdag in April 2024, however, signaled an increased politicization and polarization around LGBTIQ+ rights in Sweden. Not only the conservative Christian Democrats and the radical right Sweden Democrats fiercely opposed the bill, but also large feminist organizations, such as the Swedish Women's Lobby as well as the leadership of the women's section of the Social Democrats (Grahn & Holm, 2025). Similar to Sweden, Germany has in general been a European frontrunner regarding LGBTIQ+ rights such as same sex partnership (2001) and second-parent adoption (2005), and was recently ranked as the 10th country in Europe regarding the protection of LGBTIQ+ rights (ILGA Europe, 2026; ILGA World, 2024). It was, however, not until the adoption of the "Transsexuellen-Gesetz" (Transsexuals Act) in 1980 that individuals were allowed to change their judicial gender. The new gender identity bill adopted by the German Bundestag in April 2024 was more far-reaching than its Swedish counterpart since it allows for full self-determination of one's gender identity. Also in Germany, the debates on the new gender identity bill during spring 2024 were contentious. Here, it was the radical right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Christian Democrats that mainly opposed the bill, while the central-left coalition government constituted by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Alliance 90/The Greens (Greens), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) supported it (Voss, 2024).

While the public debates on the new gender identity bills in both contexts can be described as heated and polarized, there are important differences between the two countries regarding their recent history of legislation targeting the content moderation of online platforms on the national level. Germany was the first democratic country in the world to adopt legislation on the national level that directly targeted how social media platforms like X, Facebook, and Instagram moderated their content (Gorwa, 2019). The German NetzDG came into force already in 2018 and stipulates that providers of social networks have to delete apparently unlawful content (in line with existing definitions of criminal offences under the German Penal Code) within 24 hours after a complaint has been filed, or the providers risk a regulatory fine up to 5 million euros. The law also requires the platforms to maintain an effective and transparent complaint system for reporting unlawful content (Schultz, 2018). On 17 February 2024, the European Union's Digital Services Act

(DSA) became fully applicable, establishing a harmonized legal framework for digital services across the EU. It was, however, not until May 2024 that Germany amended its national legislation to align with the DSA, leading to the repeal of substantial portions of the NetzDG. In contrast to the German situation, Sweden has not had any legislation that directly targets the content moderation of large social media platforms until the DSA came into full effect in February 2024. In July 2024, Sweden had however still not given its Digital Service Coordinator (which is responsible for supervising, enforcing, and monitoring the DSA in each EU country) enough powers and competence to carry out its tasks (European Commission, 2024). Thus, while the DSA will lead to a more harmonized legal framework for digital services across the EU, the EU legislation was still not implemented in either setting during the heated debates that led up to the adoption of the new gender identity bills in April 2024.

4. Generating and Analyzing Interview Material

To understand how trans advocates experience online political harassment, and the role platform regulations may play, we conducted semi-structured interviews with central LGBTIQ+ advocates in the debates on the new gender identity laws in both contexts. To identify central advocates, we followed the debates closely on different social media platforms that were central for advocacy and activism, including X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. This involved following hashtags specific to the debates (such as #könsidentitetslag, #translag, and #transrättigheter in the Swedish context, and #selbstbestimmungsgesetz, #sbgg, #transgesetz, and #jazuselbstbestimmung in the German one) as well as debate-specific keywords (such as “translag,” “könslagen,” “könsidentitetslagen,” and “Könstillhörighetslagen” in the Swedish context, and “Selbstbestimmungsgesetz” in the German one). A few advocates were also identified through a snowball method, whereby we asked those interviewed to identify other central advocates that we might have overlooked. To interrogate how advocates with varying social as well as institutional positions perceived online harassment, we aimed for variation regarding their closeness to the trans issue (i.e., if they identified as trans or not) as well as their organizational backgrounds. This means that some interviewed advocates are employed by larger civil society organizations and others do voluntary work for smaller organizations; we also interviewed high-level politicians employed by political parties in each context. We interviewed a total of 13 (7 Swedish and 6 German) advocates for trans rights.

All semi-structured interviews started with the same set of questions regarding the advocates' perceptions of online political harassment and the impact of platform regulations. We asked to what extent they perceived this to be a problem, how this had changed over time and between different types of platforms, how it affected them professionally and personally, how they strategized to handle this, and who they perceived to be the main perpetrators. We also asked questions about whether and how platform regulations had an impact on their advocacy, including both governance by the platforms themselves and through national legislation. The interviews were conducted by the researchers between June 2024 and June 2025, both face-to-face and via Zoom. All interviews have been conducted orally in the national language in each context (Swedish/German) and lasted around 45–90 minutes. The interviews were translated by the authors. When referring to the individual interviews, we use ST to identify the Swedish participants and GT for the German participants. The recordings have been transcribed and then analyzed using NVivo and MAXQDA. We used thematic analysis to systematically identify relevant patterns of meaning (“themes”) in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were primarily identified deductively, drawing on the theory-informed analytical focus of the article. These included perceived exposure to and impact of

harassment, mitigation and moderation strategies, organizational support, and perceptions of perpetrators and current platform regulations. When analyzing politicians' or activists' online behavior and their perception of harassment on social media platforms, ethical considerations are crucial due to the sensitive nature of the data and the public role of the individuals involved (Hunklinger & Limacher, 2025). Informed consent has been obtained in recorded or written form from all interviewees. To protect the interviewees from unnecessary harm, we have pseudonymized the analyzed content, i.e., removed any information that could directly link the content to the research participants.

5. Trans Advocates' Experiences of Online Political Harassment

Despite the fact that Sweden and Germany have had very different approaches to the regulation of social media platforms, the advocates in both countries experienced online political harassment as a considerable problem for their political activism, and said that the problem has been increasing over time. The perceived impact of harassment, however, diverged among the advocates, and this appears to be related to the level of organizational support they received and their closeness to the trans issue (if they themselves identified as trans) rather than national-specific factors. This meant that those advocates who were most marginalized in both countries often were those who perceived the largest impact by online political harassment. No matter the context, the advocates generally did not express any trust in the platforms' own moderation of hateful content. Furthermore, the German advocates did not perceive national legislation, i.e., the NetzDG, as effective in enforcing such moderation. In their experience, harassment remained on the platforms despite repeated reports, and moderating their own account was a time-consuming task that took a mental toll. Most advocates had therefore given up on moderating and reporting abusive content.

5.1. Similar Experiences of Exposure to Online Political Harassment

Several advocates pointed out that social media platforms are essential for community building and to reach out and find others. Advocates in both Sweden and Germany explained that "it is often the first time you meet other trans people in a similar situation" (ST5) and that "online platforms were my way into activism" (GT1). However, most interviewees in Sweden and Germany at the same time perceived online harassment as a great problem for their (online) advocacy, and that it had increased considerably over time. Thus, while the comparison builds on advocates' views about exposure to online political harassment rather than measuring actual levels of harassment, the interviewees in both contexts expressed a very similar perception of the problem. One German interviewee made clear that "it really has gotten worse over the past years, and the online space has become more hostile" (GT5). Another one stated that "I am an activist who is online and thus I have to deal with all of that [harassment]" (GT1). One of the Swedish advocates explained that "[the problem is] very big, I would say. You can't post anything without different types of troll accounts or hateful individuals contacting you" (ST1).

Several of the Swedish advocates perceived that the debates around the new gender identity bill during 2024 had meant significantly increased levels of harassment related to trans issues. They perceived the harassment to be massive in a way that they had not experienced in previous debates around other contentious issues (e.g., ST3, ST4, ST5). This surprised some of them since the new Swedish legislation is quite moderate (ST4). A few of the Swedish activists perceived it more as "business as usual" (ST2, ST7). It was however also clear that those who had experienced increased levels of harassment were the ones who had been very outspoken

on the issue in mainstream news media and/or had large social media accounts connected to their person rather than the organization they worked for. Several of the interviewees in Sweden saw a direct connection with how the harassment had reached new levels of intensity after they had published debate articles in mainstream media outlets during the spring:

This peaked around April, but I would say it was after my article in [a Swedish newspaper]...it was a 24-hour shift. There were things before that too, but not nearly as much. Through this article, I ended up on the radar of the right-wing extremists extremely clearly. (ST5)

As in the Swedish case, the period leading up to and during the introduction of the new self-identification law in Germany in 2024 resulted in greater visibility, and consequently exposure, for those campaigning for trans rights. “We were all of a sudden in the public’s eye,” one interviewee stated (GT3). During this time, hostility against some of the interviewees in Germany was especially high: “It was just so much,” one activist recalled (GT2). The paradox of trans visibility (Ciszek et al., 2023) was thus present in both contexts—the more visible in the debates, in particular mainstream media, the more abuse the advocates received online. An LGBTIQ+ advocate in Germany said that, after publicly sharing something that had happened in his personal life, he received a lot of hateful messages online: “I just wasn’t sure what to do to be publicly vocal and at the same time stop exposing my private life” (GT3). This blurring of the line between private life and activism on social media was identified as a central issue for LGBTIQ+ advocates in Germany (GT1, GT3). The interviewees perceived this harassment not only as a personal threat but as part of a wider discursive strategy to reassert normative gender binaries and undermine progressive legal reforms, such as the new gender identity bill (*Selbstbestimmungsgesetz*). “I think it is not only about the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* now, it is all part of a broader backlash in society,” stated one German interviewee (GT2).

Several interviewees in both contexts said that they had experienced an increase in harassment on X, particularly after the tech entrepreneur Elon Musk took over: “X is just a battleground” (GT6; see also ST1, ST5). This has led some advocates to withdraw from the platform, which used to be an important tool for their online activism (GT1). However, despite the increasing levels of harassment, several advocates in both contexts remained on the platform, as it was still considered an important space for community building and advocacy (see e.g., ST1, ST5, GT6). One German interviewee explained the continued importance of X: “It is still the platform that many journalists use and it is the easiest way to spread your own message” (GT6). Independently if they themselves were still on X, it was claimed that negative campaigns originating from X spilled over onto other platforms, since “all those online debates are connected” (GT2). Consequently, some of the interviewees in Germany stated that the public narrative on trans issues is increasingly shaped by hostile, and well-connected actors (GT3), reinforcing marginalization and distorting democratic representation.

In both contexts, religious and conservative groups and parties, as well as different parts of the extreme right and TERF activists, were pointed out as usual perpetrators of online harassment against them. It was also perceived that individual young men who “do not believe in democracy, human rights, and the principles of the rule of law” were behind a lot of harassing comments (ST1). However, most activists in Sweden pointed out that TERFs are currently the most vocal opponents and perpetrators of online harassment against trans advocates (see e.g., ST1, ST2, ST5, ST6, ST7). Here, TERF actors were identified as being behind the initial wave of online harassment against trans advocates, before this became a more widespread problem (ST7). Similarly, in the German case, advocates reported that transphobic narratives were rapidly disseminated by

far-right actors and TERFs, as well as occasionally by mainstream commentators. Once again, TERFs were seen as increasingly vocal opponents of trans rights. As one German advocate explained: “I really feel that the TERF movement has grown and gained power in the past years” (GT2). The attacks frequently frame trans activism as an ideological threat to social cohesion, often invoking “freedom of speech,” “child protection,” or “protection of women’s rights” to mask discriminatory intent. Tactics include doxxing, misgendering, accusation of mental illness, coordinated reporting of accounts, and the circulation of dehumanizing memes and conspiracy theories (ST5, GT1, GT2, GT4).

Moreover, it was claimed that the harassment often was organized by larger social media accounts that mobilized their followers and directed them towards certain content posted by the organizations working for trans rights. As a Swedish advocate explained: “There are very rarely one or two unpleasant or hateful comments, but it’s like all or nothing” (ST1). In the German context, there were some activities from political parties that both supported and opposed the self-identification law, which created exposure to harassment. Thus, political parties in Germany influence both the intensity and the framing of the discourse surrounding trans activism—either by amplifying hostility, offering selective protection, or failing to confront the issue altogether.

Regarding exposure to harassment, there were both similarities and differences across the two countries. Importantly, trans activists in both contexts perceived online harassment as a serious and growing problem for their advocacy, noting that it intensified as trans rights became more visible during the heated debates over the new gender identity bills in spring 2024. They also identified specific platforms, particularly X, as central to these harassment dynamics, and observed that attacks increasingly originated from TERF groups.

5.2. Diverging Impacts of Harassment Related to Individual and Organizational Factors

A major impact of online harassment against trans activists is that it affects the possibility to advocate for trans rights in several ways. This is partly due to the fact that the harassment is so public, most often in the form of comments on public social media accounts, which makes people less interested in joining the organizations working with trans issues (ST1). It was also perceived as a time-consuming task to handle online attacks, and that this probably was well known and used as a strategy by opponents:

There are a lot of working hours that are spent dealing with that kind of stuff, instead of moving the fight for rights forward. And I also think that it is a deliberate strategy from our opponents to distract us with harassment campaigns and obscenities, so that we don’t have time and energy to spend on making the world a better place. (ST1)

Persistent harassment from various sources significantly impacts the visibility of trans activists, creating an environment of fear and self-censorship. In both contexts, interviewees reported psychological harm and mental health impact due to the online harassment they received. As a result, many advocates retreated from public discourse or limited their engagement to protect themselves, resulting in a diminished presence of trans voices in political debates. “I now think twice sometimes before posting,” a German interviewee stated (GT3). Consequently, some of the interviewees in Germany claimed that the public narrative on trans issues instead becomes increasingly shaped by hostile or misinformed actors (GT2, GT3), reinforcing marginalization and distorting democratic representation, or as one interviewee stated: “Opinions just count

more than facts” (GT3). Also among the Swedish activists, some had significantly cut down on or stopped engaging in debates on social media on trans issues, since it was too draining to be “out there” (ST7), or exited certain platforms, like X, which in general was perceived as the most problematic platform. Others had become very careful about engaging in certain topics that usually attracted a lot of hateful comments, such as trans care for young people and the (so-called) conflict between feminists and trans persons. They were also in general careful with how they expressed themselves on social media “since anything could be taken out of its context” and what they shared about themselves publicly (ST1, ST5). Larger organizations in Sweden avoided posting on trans issues on Fridays since otherwise they “would not have any weekends off” (ST1, ST2). Besides avoiding certain platforms, topics, and times, several advocates in both contexts avoided going into debates with specific opponents. This particularly concerned entering debates with TERFs. To go into debates with these actors was seen as extra difficult since it not only could lead to public harassment from these feminists’ followers on social media but also to more informal repercussions in other contexts and forums outside the platform itself.

Many of the Swedish advocates reported that the harassment often contained personal attacks against them as transpersons, or hateful attacks against transpersons in general (e.g., ST3, ST4, ST5, ST6). There was however a clear difference among the advocates concerning how these types of attacks impacted them. Among the advocates that identified as trans, this type of content was perceived as very difficult to handle since it was a direct attack against them and their personal identity. These activists reported that such attacks took a severe mental toll (ST4, ST5). On the other hand, activists who were very engaged in advocating for trans rights but did not identify as trans themselves reported that they received much fewer personal attacks and were less affected by the more general attacks against trans persons (e.g., ST1, ST3, ST6, ST7). The impact of harassment was thus related to closeness to the trans issue and to what extent it was identified as personal attacks.

Moreover, in both contexts there was a relatively strong relationship between identifying as trans and the amount of institutional or organizational support the advocates received. Those working within larger civil society organizations or political parties, in which trans rights are one of many issues they are working with, did more often not identify as trans themselves. These advocates were to a larger extent employed and had more organizational support. This could include help with moderation of content and blocking of users, but also mental support. In the German case, advocates who had a political position or a party affiliation got support from the political parties. As one interviewee stated: “The party support was really important for me” (GT6). Another one mentioned guidebooks and online support provided by the party (GT5). This suggests that access to institutional and structural support plays a key role. In contrast, the advocates who identified as trans often worked within organizations focusing on trans issues only, which meant engagement in smaller organizations on a voluntary basis. Thus, those who were most psychologically affected by online harassment due to the personal level of the attacks were also those who had least institutional or organizational support to mitigate the impact of these attacks.

These findings align with research showing that intersectionally marginalized groups of politicians face higher levels of identity-based personal harassment while also having the fewest resources at their disposal to cope with it (e.g., Mügge & Özvatan, 2025). Our results also add to these findings, suggesting that the level of institutional support that advocates receive may be directly related to their social vulnerability, as this can influence the organization they choose for their advocacy work.

5.3. Similar Perceptions of the Ineffectiveness of Platform Rules and Regulation

Most of the advocates did not systematically moderate their social media accounts, and this was clearly related to the amount of organizational support received. Both German and Swedish advocates perceived moderation as a very time-consuming task, not least because most of them had to handle it themselves. One of the Swedish advocates explained that “I just can’t bring myself to tackle that and I just haven’t had the time. That’s probably mostly it, actually. That I just haven’t felt like I had the energy to do it” (ST3), or as one of the German advocates put it: “I only post now and I do not read any comments anymore” (GT5). The advocates claimed that they would rather spend this time on actual activism and that moderation could even increase the problem of harassment, “because we notice that if we delete comments, they add 10 new ones and then it doesn’t matter, because then we end up having to spend all our working time moderating comment sections” (ST1). It was also evident that moderation of hateful comments took a severe mental toll, and it was therefore avoided. One German advocate explained that “of course it takes a toll on you if you read that you are fat and ugly for the 100th time” (GT2). Some of the advocates had the resources to outsource dealing with those issues to staff at their organization. Hence, the possibility to moderate and thereby possibly avoid the mental toll that was related to moderation was only available to those working within larger organizations with more resources. Similarly, few of the Swedish activists used the possibility to systematically block problematic accounts/users. One Swedish activist said that she was blocking all accounts that were harassing her, but many others perceived this strategy as useless and that it even could lead to increased harassment since the persons behind these accounts could just create new accounts and start again, but even more intensely:

If you block them, they create new accounts and then they harass you and ask 25 times a day why we blocked them. It becomes difficult to handle in a way that makes people stop commenting without becoming so angry that they decide to start a new account. (ST1)

In the German case, however, blocking was seen as a useful tool by most interviewees. One of the advocates explained that they “try to keep my Instagram as clean as possible” (GT4).

As few activists systematically moderated their accounts due to a lack of resources and the negative psychological impact of doing so, the role of social media platforms in addressing harassment becomes crucial. While most major platforms, such as X, Instagram, and Facebook, formally prohibit hate speech and targeted harassment, these regulations were perceived as being very unreliably enforced. Trans advocates in Germany frequently stated that abusive content remains visible despite repeated reports to the platforms, while their own accounts are sometimes penalized for defending themselves or speaking out (GT1, GT2, GT3). As one interviewee explained: “I have the experience that even though there are rules and I can start a process of reporting, the processes mostly lead nowhere” (GT1). Hence, the German activists did not have much faith in the regulation policies and activities of the platforms, despite the larger pressure on platforms to moderate hateful content from the German NetzDG. One of the advocates interviewed stated that “those laws can be helpful when you deal with one or two comments, but they are useless once you are in a shitstorm. The volume of posts and comments is just too much” (GT1). Other interviewees explained: “I do report in some cases, but I am not sure if it really makes a difference” (GT6); “Sometimes I block, sometimes I don’t. It does not change anything. I really think a lot of the hate speech also comes from bots” (GT2). While there was an awareness of NetzDG, the lack of implementation of the law was seen as a major

problem. As one German advocate explained: “Overall, the police are more aware of this issue and take it more seriously. However, it remains a problem that transphobia is often not recognized by the police or the prosecution” (GT1). Similarly, none of the advocates in Sweden perceived that the platforms removed any of the harassment they received or blocked any problematic users. Rather, this was something they had to deal with on their own. Several of the Swedish advocates claimed that even if they did report comments using the platforms’ reporting systems, this content was still not removed by the platforms (ST1, ST5). Therefore, they did not put any energy into reporting hateful comments to the platforms, not least since they then also had to sit and read through these comments. One of the Swedish interviewees had however had his own Facebook account (which he used for advocacy) removed by Meta during spring 2024, but he never got any explanation of why it was removed (ST6).

These results suggest that, despite being adopted specifically to enforce the moderation of hate speech on online platforms, German advocates perceived the NetzDG as having very little effect on curbing online attacks against them. Thus, both Swedish and German advocates expressed low levels of trust in the usefulness of reporting hateful content to platforms. Many had also stopped moderating such content on their own accounts due to a lack of resources and the emotional strain involved.

6. Concluding Discussion

Organizations and individuals advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights are currently facing increasing levels of resistance and opposition from various actors around the globe (Ayoub & Page, 2020; Velasco, 2023). In this study, we have explored how the most central LGBTIQ+ advocates for trans rights in Sweden and Germany are navigating increasingly hostile advocacy environments, with a particular focus on online platforms. While both countries can be described as frontrunners regarding LGBTIQ+ rights, they have had very different approaches to the regulation of social media platforms. Specifically, we ask: How do trans advocates in Sweden and Germany experience online political harassment? To what extent do they perceive platform regulations as effective in curbing such harassment?

Our interviews with the most central trans advocates in both contexts demonstrate that even national platform regulations that specifically target the moderation of hateful content on social media platforms, such as the German NetzDG, appear to make little difference to activists on the ground. We find that advocates in both contexts perceived online political harassment as a great problem for their political activism and that the heated debates around the new gender identity bills in 2024 had led to unprecedented levels of hate and harassment. They also perceived that the social media platforms were ineffective in their handling of harassment, with little to no moderation of hateful content, and that it was useless to report such content. These findings support the claim that platform regulations such as NetzDG offer little help to affected marginalized communities (Griffin, 2022). In line with previous research on political harassment against intersectionally marginalized groups (see e.g., Dhrodia, 2018; Mügge & Özvatan, 2025; Stambolieva, 2017; Stephenson et al., 2025), those advocates that could be described as most marginalized in terms of their (close) relation to the trans issue as well as their (lack of) organizational support, were clearly the group that reported the most personal and hateful attacks as well as the most severe consequences. The latter included increased mental health burdens and heightened risk of self-censorship or early withdrawal from political life. These results also nuance claims about intersectional marginalization and digital vulnerability by suggesting that there can be large differences within groups of intersectionally marginalized advocates.

The study thus shows how perceptions about inefficient platform regulations, inconsistent platform moderation, and insufficient institutional support further exacerbate the vulnerability of trans activists, who often find themselves forced to choose between public engagement and personal safety. By silencing some of society's most marginalized groups, online political harassment poses a serious threat to democracy and democratic practices. Democratic governments therefore need to take action that moves beyond the narrow focus on content moderation and targets structural aspects of platforms that perpetuate online political harassment, such as their algorithms and business models.

Finally, the study points to the necessity to know more about the strategies and motivations of those behind online political harassment to understand and counteract its dynamics. It was notable that trans advocates in both Sweden and Germany claimed that online attacks against them came increasingly from TERFs. Hence, the most frequent perpetrators of online harassment reported in these cases were not only the usual suspects in the literature on anti-gender campaigns such as autocratic regimes, conservative and/or religious groups, and far-right actors (see e.g., Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). In the Swedish case, TERFs were even pointed out as currently the most vocal opponents to trans rights. However, there is little research on these types of activists. It is therefore of great importance for future research to further examine TERFs and their role in "gender critical" or "anti-gender" activism and movements in contexts that historically have had a strong tradition of gender equal politics and can be described as frontrunners regarding LGBTQI+ rights. Future research should also build on our findings on intersectional marginalization and digital vulnerability by examining a broader range of advocates across different political and regional contexts to assess the extent to which the patterns identified here are shared beyond the interviewees included in this study.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

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