

Between Trans Solidarity and Trans-Antagonism: Affective Contestations Around Germany's Self-Determination Act on TikTok

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Abstract

This article examines affective contestations surrounding Germany's Self-Determination Act—legislation that replaced pathologizing court-based gender recognition procedures with administrative self-declaration—on TikTok. Drawing on a mixed-methods design combining hashtag co-occurrence analysis with qualitative multimodal analysis, the study investigates which emotions become publicly visible, legitimized, and contested in struggles over gender recognition, and how they are (re)produced through different affective registers. The analysis is based on a dataset of 1,509 TikToks collected between May 2023 and November 2025 using the hashtags #sbgg and #selbstbestimmungsgesetz. The findings show that the debate is organized through competing affective-discursive formations. Trans-antagonistic formations construct the law as a threat to cis women, children, anti-trans speakers, and social order, attaching danger to trans women's bodily presence and legal recognition and imagining future harms. Trans-affirming creators mobilize care, solidarity, moderated anger, cautious relief, and structurally grounded fear to render visible the everyday burdens of legal misrecognition and the partial relief offered by administrative self-determination. Building on these findings, the article argues that platformized gender politics are organized through struggles over whose vulnerability becomes publicly legible, whose emotions appear credible, and whose recognition is made to feel either necessary or dangerous.

Keywords

affect and emotion; infrastructures of feeling; TikTok; trans-antagonism; trans solidarity

1. Introduction

The German Bundestag passed the *Selbstbestimmungsgesetz* ([SBGG] Act on Self-Determination; Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2024) on 12 April 2024, and it entered into force on 1 November 2024. Replacing the 1980 Transsexuals Act (*Transsexuellengesetz*), the legislation removed the costly court procedures and invasive psychological assessments that had long structured legal gender recognition in Germany and been criticized as degrading and discriminatory. By introducing administrative self-declaration, the law marks a shift from externally validated to self-determined gender recognition and aligns with broader human rights frameworks emphasizing dignity, privacy, and nondiscrimination (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The SBGG emerged from a prolonged, contested reform process and from sustained pressure by queer and trans advocacy groups, within a political climate increasingly shaped by anti-gender and anti-trans mobilizations across Europe and beyond (Holvikivi et al., 2024), in which trans rights have repeatedly become a site for negotiating conflicts over gender, feminism, sexuality, national identity, and liberal democracy. Within these debates, trans recognition is frequently construed as a threat to established social and gendered orders rather than an expansion of rights.

Much of this negotiation takes place on social media platforms, where struggles over meaning and legitimacy emerge through affective orientations that shape whose vulnerability becomes recognizable, whose emotions appear credible, and which forms of belonging become publicly imaginable. TikTok provides a particularly revealing site for examining these dynamics. Its short-form architecture, remix culture, and visibility logics privilege reproducible and emotionally legible communication, and the platform has become central both to trans self-representation, community-building, and political mobilization and to anti-trans harassment and antagonistic mobilization (DeVito, 2022; Paciente et al., 2026; Rochford & Palmer, 2022).

Against this background, this article examines the affective contestations surrounding the SBGG on TikTok. It asks two related questions:

RQ1: Which emotions gain visibility and relevance across communities, and how are they legitimized or delegitimized in struggles over gender recognition?

RQ2: How are emotions (re)produced through different affective registers, and how are these shaped by TikTok's affordances?

Empirically, the analysis draws on a dataset of 1,509 TikTok videos collected between May 2023 and November 2025 and combines hashtag co-occurrence analysis with qualitative multimodal analysis. This mixed-methods design enables movement between broader affective-discursive formations and their situated articulation in concrete media practices.

The article first situates the study within scholarship on affect, gender, and media before conceptualizing TikTok as an “infrastructure of feeling.” The empirical sections examine hashtag formations and affective registers, and the discussion reflects on what these contestations reveal about the affective organization of gender politics within platformized publics.

2. Theoretical Background: Affect, Media, and Trans/Gender Recognition

This study draws on queer-feminist affect theory, cultural studies, and social-relational approaches to affect and emotion (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Harding & Pribram, 2009). While we analytically distinguish between affect as a relational intensity emerging between bodies, and emotion as the socio-culturally articulated and named expression of affect, we understand both as historically and culturally constituted, and deeply intertwined (von Scheve, 2018; von Scheve & Slaby, 2019). From this perspective, affect does not reside within individual bodies but emerges through relational encounters. Crucially, as Ahmed (2014) emphasizes, these encounters are structured by power, rendering the circulation of affect uneven and politically fraught. This distinction guides our analysis by approaching emotional expressions on TikTok not as direct reflections of innate feelings residing in individual bodies, but as relational phenomena produced through interactions between users, platform affordances, and wider cultural norms.

Media are central to shaping these affective dynamics. Across both legacy and digital contexts, media do not merely transmit information but actively participate in organizing the circulation and attachment of emotions to social issues, bodies, and identities (Ruckenstein, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). In doing so, they contribute to the reproduction, and at times disruption, of gendered and racialized hierarchies (Hall, 2021). Public discourse is therefore always already structured by normative assumptions about who is perceived as emotional, excessive, or rational, reflecting and producing broader social power relations. Beyond representation, media also shape the conditions under which emotions become intelligible and legitimate. Hochschild's (1979) concept of "feeling rules" is particularly useful for understanding these dynamics, as it captures how social norms govern which emotions can be expressed, how they are articulated, by whom, and in what contexts. (Digital) media environments play a crucial role in articulating and reinforcing these rules by regulating the boundaries of acceptable public feeling (Lünenborg & Medeiros, 2023; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

At the same time, affect is not only regulatory but also productive. As queer, feminist, and decolonial critiques of deliberative public sphere theory have shown, affect and emotions are foundational to the formation of publics and counterpublics (Fraser, 1992; Squires, 2002; Warner, 2002). They enable the emergence of collective identities and can mobilize resistance, for instance through shared feelings of anger, solidarity, or care (Deer et al., 2021; Hemmings, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). Affect thus operates ambivalently: It can both stabilize existing hierarchies and open up spaces for contestation and transformation. We therefore examine how affective expressions can reproduce and intensify unequal relations of recognition and legitimacy, while also enabling emancipatory forms of identity formation, solidarity, and community-building.

Within feminist theory and activism, gender—particularly transgender and genderqueer identities—provides a particularly revealing case for examining these dynamics because struggles over gender recognition are often structured around competing claims to vulnerability, particularly revolving around whose vulnerability matters, whose experiences count as injury, whose fears are considered legitimate, and whose forms of belonging become publicly imaginable. In this sense, emotions such as vulnerability, anger, care, and solidarity are integral not only to making sense of gender but also to directly "affecting the materiality of the body and even its intelligibility" (Butler, 2025, p. 135). Trans-exclusionary feminist positions, for example, have been described as predominantly structured by resentment and a heightened sense of victimhood

exclusively ascribed to cis-womanhood (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022). As Wrisley (2025) argues, this orientation is rooted in a “wounded attachment” (Brown, 1995) to womanhood as an inherently victimized position, where being a woman is construed as a bounded and defensible category imagined to be threatened by trans inclusion and equated with being the legitimate and primary subject of misogynistic harm. Against this logic, Butler (2025, p. 146) argues that gender categories cannot be owned; rather, they are constituted through social norms and relations and remain open to transformation.

Simultaneously, a rich body of scholarship has examined the affective politics of trans lives, challenging reductive and binary frameworks that organize trans experience through a limited affective spectrum—most notably the opposition between dysphoria and euphoria—thereby individualizing and depoliticizing trans life (Malatino, 2022). Tenorio (2026) cautions against the growing fetishization of trans joy, arguing that narratives of happiness and affirmation risk displacing or neutralizing expressions of rage, pain, and ongoing injury. Against this bifurcated discourse, scholars foreground a wider range of ambivalent and often “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2005), including fatigue, exhaustion, numbness, envy, and rage, as constitutive of trans experience rather than deviations from it. Among these, rage occupies a central yet contested position: Building on Stryker’s (1994) foundational account of transgender rage as a response to conditions threatening trans survival, Malatino (2022) and Awkward-Rich (2022) emphasize its dual character as both an affective response to systemic exclusion and a potential resource for resistance and epistemic transformation. Yet rage is unevenly expressible, as its public articulation is frequently met with heightened scrutiny, pathologization, or punishment—particularly for trans and racialized women—leading to its modulation or suppression (Orgad & Gill, 2019). Joy and care, meanwhile, can sustain practices of survival and solidarity, while also functioning, as Tenorio (2026) suggests, as techniques of self-governance that discipline trans subjects into more acceptable affective forms. Malatino (2022, p. 58) argues that these seemingly negative affects can be read as expressions of collective care, together constituting what can be understood as a “trans affective commons,” where shared experiences of precarity, exhaustion, and care form the basis for collective endurance and the ongoing, non-linear transformation of exclusion into resistance. In line with these perspectives, we approach affective expressions inductively rather than assuming predefined emotion categories. Instead of treating emotions such as anger, joy, or care as stable oppositional registers, we examine how contingent affective orientations emerge, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within platformed struggles over transgender recognition.

As the following section outlines, these affective dynamics are further deeply structured and prefigured by the specific conditions of digital platforms, where infrastructural logics shape which feelings become visible, intelligible, and legitimate.

3. Literature Review: Affect, Visibility, and (Anti)Trans Discourses on TikTok

Building on the concept of “infrastructures of feeling” (Coleman, 2018; Makhashvili & Lünenborg, 2026), TikTok can be understood as a socio-technical environment where architecture, affordances, and users’ media practices co-organize how affect is produced, modulated, and made visible, without being deterministic. Content circulates widely insofar as it appears immediate and relatable, and/or bizarre or confusing (Abidin, 2020) within the platform’s algorithmically curated feeds. Through short-form video, socially creative features such as duets and stitches, and the reuse of sounds, memes, and audiovisual templates, communication is organized through affective resonance, repetition, and variation (Abidin, 2020;

Fischer et al., 2025; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Creators simultaneously navigate platform conventions, anticipated visibility, and engagement expectations under conditions of “circumscribed creativity” (Kaye et al., 2022). Visibility, in this sense, refers to the platform-conditioned process by which content and its affective and affecting orientations become algorithmically amplified and publicly legible, a condition that is neither neutral nor equally distributed across creators and communities.

These infrastructural conditions are particularly significant for trans-related content on TikTok, often discussed under the label “TransTok.” Research on digital trans cultures has long emphasized the importance of social media for self-representation, community-building, and the articulation of counter-narratives that challenge dominant understandings of gender and embodiment (Haimson et al., 2021; Horak, 2014; Raun, 2012). Studies on TikTok similarly describe the platform as a space in which trans creators share lived experiences, circulate knowledge, and create forms of visibility, belonging, and support, often in playful and entertaining ways (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023; Paciente et al., 2026; Rochford & Palmer, 2022). Yet this visibility is not simply granted through participation itself, but remains tied to platform-specific conditions and conventions as TikTok’s economy of visibility encourages creators to adapt their self-presentation to dominant platform affordances and trends. Rochford and Palmer (2022, pp. 84–87, emphasis in original), for example, find that TikTok “facilitates trans *content* but rarely trans *community*,” arguing that TikTok’s platform conventions discourage the kinds of sustained exchanges through which community and solidarity are often built, while amplifying content oriented toward cis audiences, controversy, and individual visibility, as well as affirmation, entertainment, and fun.

Next to the orientation toward these platform conventions, even within trans-affirming spaces, platform visibility may also remain tied to normative expectations concerning embodiment, discourse, and acceptable affective expression, often geared towards a culmination in happiness that marginalizes more ambivalent affective orientations (Haimson, 2020). Trans visibility is therefore shaped not only by whether trans creators can appear, but by how they are expected to feel, narrate, and embody themselves in order to become legible for broader publics. This is especially true for platforms like TikTok where user-generated content regularly reaches wider, yet unintended or non-aligned audiences. This increased visibility also exposes trans creators to intensified forms of scrutiny and harassment. As DeVito (2022) shows, transfeminine creators on TikTok often navigate an “algorithmic trap of visibility,” in which visibility simultaneously enables recognition while increasing vulnerability to hostile engagement. Scholars further argue that trans visibility on TikTok is structurally embedded within an environment that rewards controversy and antagonistic interactions as they generate engagement (Rochford & Palmer, 2022). Studies on anti-trans networks on TikTok demonstrate that such content is not marginal but structurally embedded, often benefiting from coordinated amplification and dense interaction networks (Leitner et al., 2025). Similarly, Zahn and Lünenborg (2026) show how Twitter (re-branded as X in July 2023) affordances facilitated the convergence of trans-exclusionary feminist and far-right actors around the SBGG, producing affective publics organized through fear, threat, anger, and resentment, a finding this article extends by examining how these formations are affectively organized at the level of concrete media practices.

These dynamics—the normative shaping of affective expression, the precariousness of platform visibility, the co-constitution of recognition and vulnerability—directly inform our analytical focus. Existing research has tended to examine either the enabling dimensions of trans visibility and community or the prevalence of antagonistic discourse, with less attention to how these are organized relationally through competing

affective-discursive formations within the same platform environment. This article addresses that gap by examining how distinct affective registers structure the SBGG debate across trans-affirming and trans-antagonistic communities.

4. Research Approach

The dataset was collected via TikTok's Research API using the hashtags #selbstbestimmungsgesetz and #sbgg, as preliminary exploration of the discourse indicated that hashtags functioned as central organizing devices through which creators positioned videos within broader public debates. We therefore treat hashtags as platform-specific affective-discursive markers that allow us to trace how meanings, emotions, and antagonisms circulate relationally across interconnected content while simultaneously marking issue affiliation.

The initial dataset comprised 2,316 videos and was subsequently restricted to the period between May 2023, when the draft bill was released, and November 2025, one year after the law entered into force. The dataset was further limited to videos originating from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. TikTok's Research API does not permit language-based filtering; location-based filtering was therefore used as a proxy to focus on German-speaking debates surrounding the SBGG and to exclude unrelated uses of the hashtags. The final corpus consisted of 1,509 TikTok videos. For each video, metadata were collected, including engagement metrics (views, likes, comments, shares), textual elements (captions, hashtags, and voice-to-text transcriptions), and audiovisual features such as music, effects, and video duration.

To examine both broader affective-discursive formations and their situated articulation within concrete media practices, the study employs a mixed-methods design combining hashtag co-occurrence analysis with qualitative multimodal analysis. Hashtag co-occurrence analysis enables access to macro-level patterns of affective alignment and antagonism by mapping which communities, themes, and emotions cluster together across the full corpus (RQ1). Qualitative multimodal analysis then enables access to the micro-level organization of affect by examining how these orientations are embodied, staged, discursively constructed, and shaped by affordances within specific videos (RQ2). Both methods are understood not as separate stages but as mutually informing perspectives on how affect circulates, becomes visible, and is publicly negotiated within platform environments.

As a first analytical step, we conducted hashtag co-occurrence analysis using the complete dataset. In technical terms, this method identifies hashtags that occur together within the same TikTok caption and visualizes their frequency of association as a network. We used Gephi's Louvain algorithm for modularity-based community detection to identify clusters of frequently co-occurring hashtags, which were analyzed as affective-discursive formations. The analysis examined which affects and emotions gain visibility, what discursive themes they are connected to, and whether patterns of affective alliances or antagonisms emerge within the #SBGG discourse.

The qualitative analysis focused on a purposively selected subsample of 190 videos with more than 100 comments. Rather than relying exclusively on platform-native visibility indicators such as views or likes, the sampling strategy prioritized comments as an indicator of affective and discursive intensity. We coded all 190 videos inductively and iteratively, developing and refining the analytical categories in ongoing exchange across the research team. The condensing and interpretive analysis was subsequently carried out in

continued dialogue between the authors. The analysis draws on the concept of affective registers, understood as “formal-aesthetic and content-related narrative elements aimed at physically and sensually moving viewers and evoking sensations of connection or separation with other bodies” (Töpper, 2021, p. 44, authors’ translation). Adapted for TikTok, the analysis focused on three interrelated dimensions: bodies (e.g., gesture, gaze, voice, movement); practices (e.g., editing, captions, stitches, sound reuse); and discourse (e.g., narratives of threat, care, legitimacy, or belonging). Recurring patterns were condensed into broader affective registers—those that appeared consistently across the sample and organized the affective orientation of individual videos. This identification is interpretive rather than based on frequency counts. Creator biographies were consulted where publicly available and relevant for contextualizing self-positioning and political identification, but were not systematically coded as a separate analytical dimension. Given the sensitivity of the topic and in line with feminist social media research ethics (franzke et al., 2020; Mendes et al., in press), particular care was taken to avoid reproducing content in ways that could expose or harm creators.

5. Findings

The findings move from broader affective-discursive formations within the #SBGG discourse to the situated affective registers through which the law becomes meaningful in concrete TikTok videos. The hashtag co-occurrence analysis first reconstructs how themes, emotions, and political orientations cluster relationally within the broader discourse surrounding the law. Building on this mapping, the qualitative analysis then examines how these orientations are embodied, mediated, and discursively organized through platform-specific media practices.

5.1. *Between Awareness, Solidarity, and Antagonism: Hashtag Clusters in #SBGG Discourse*

The hashtag network comprises 3,907 nodes (hashtags) and 116,033 edges (co-occurrences), indicating a large and highly interconnected discursive space. While the network exhibits characteristics of a “small-world structure” (Watts, 1999), reflected in a low average path length (2.04) and small diameter (3), the relatively low density (0.015) and high modularity score (0.57) point to a network that is simultaneously cohesive and internally differentiated. Hashtags are broadly interconnected yet they also form distinct clusters with 40 distinct communities that likely correspond to specific thematic constellations and patterns of affective alignment or contestation.

Two particularly large clusters emerge at the core of the network (Figure 1), while the remaining clusters are comparatively small. As the two largest clusters represent a polarized affective structure, we first discuss the trans-affirming clusters before turning to the trans-antagonistic formations. The largest cluster (pink) contains 45.79% of all nodes but only 23.21% of edges, resulting in a relatively low internal density (0.017). This suggests a broad but loosely interconnected thematic space rather than a one-topic community. Thematically, this cluster is primarily oriented toward educational, informational, and experiential content, focusing on the legal, medical, and social implications of the SBGG. Hashtags directly reference the law and its implementation, transition-related and embodied experiences (#ftm, #mtf, #mastectomy, #penoid), and a wide range of sexual and gender identity-related hashtags (#trans, #nonbinary, #gay) situate the discussion within broader LGBTQI+ contexts. The cluster also includes anti-right political positionings directed against the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD; #noAfD, #fckAfD, #antifa), alongside



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Closely connected to this community is a smaller but analytically significant trans-exclusionary feminist cluster (Figure 3). While comparatively limited in size (1.54% of nodes, 0.52% of edges), this cluster is notable for its proximity to far-right discursive themes and its strong reliance on affective narratives of harm, injury, and vulnerability to legitimize exclusionary feminist claims. Although many of its central hashtags initially appear to articulate broadly recognizable feminist concerns (#womensrights, #solidarity, #womenriseglobally), their relation to explicitly exclusionary hashtags, such as #selfIDharms, #radfem, and #radfemsafespace, reveals the conditional and exclusionary boundaries of this discourse. The cluster centers almost exclusively on the category of (cis) “women,” directly contesting the legitimacy of trans women’s inclusion in womanhood (#Woman?) and positioning trans identities as both external to this category and as threats to children (#savethechildren) and cisgender women (#womenspaces, #letwomenspeak). These claims are frequently articulated through hyperbolic or alarmist language (#dystopianreality, #Orwell), amplifying a sense of urgency, existential risk, and the perceived need for protected, ideologically homogeneous spaces. At the same time, the cluster mobilizes the language of feminist solidarity and collective belonging (#sisterhood, #womenempowerment, #womenofTikTok), while its predominance of English-language hashtags and non-German location markers suggests a transnational orientation toward broader global radical feminist networks, which corresponds to existing research on the cross-border circulation of anti-trans discourse (Holvikivi et al., 2024).

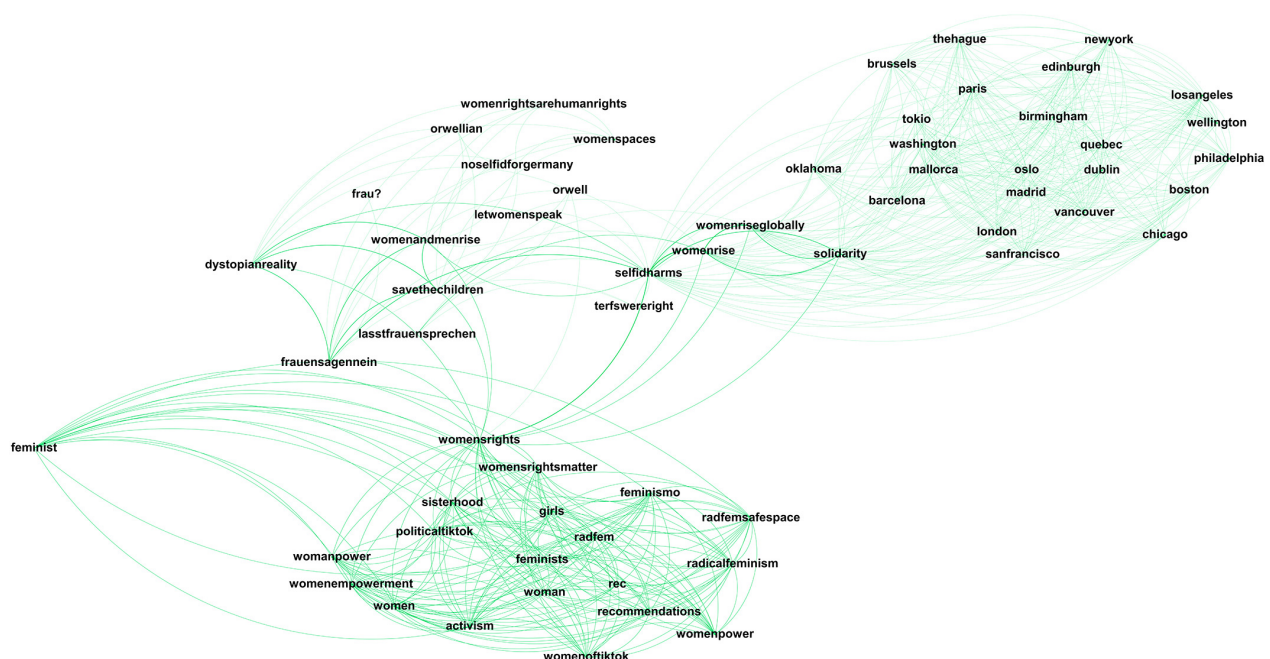


Figure 3. Trans-exclusionary feminist hashtag cluster.

These findings point to a partially polarized affective-discursive network structure, with the two largest communities representing opposing views on the SBGG. However, this antagonism is not symmetrical. Trans-affirming formations are primarily oriented toward informational, experiential, and community- and solidarity-oriented content, while largely refraining from engaging with or responding to opposing views. In contrast, trans-antagonistic formations engage explicitly with the hashtag in order to advance antagonistic interpretations of the issue. We use “trans-antagonism” as an umbrella term encompassing both far-right and trans-exclusionary feminist formations (Cram, 2024). While these actors differ in their broader

political orientations, our findings align with previous research demonstrating their discursive and affective convergence around opposition to trans inclusion (e.g., Zahn & Lünenborg, 2026). In this sense, transgender operates as an “affective bridge” (Dietze, 2019, p. 17), connecting otherwise distinct political actors through shared orientations toward perceived threats and claims to vulnerability. The following two sections build on these network-level patterns by examining how these affective formations are articulated and negotiated in individual TikTok videos through qualitative multimodal analysis of a subsample.

5.2. Between Fear, Ridicule, and Resentment: Trans-Antagonistic Affective Registers

Of the 190 videos within the subsample, 110 were trans-affirming and 43 trans-antagonistic; the remaining 37 were journalistic or news-format contributions that could not be assigned to either orientation. Continuing from the preceding discussion of trans-antagonistic hashtag formations, we first examine how these affective registers are articulated audiovisually before turning to trans-affirming videos.

Fear constitutes the dominant affective register across trans-antagonistic content surrounding the SBGG, produced by far-right politicians, trans-exclusionary feminists, and anti-gender actors across the political spectrum. Rather than discussing the law as an administrative reform, videos repeatedly translate it into scenarios of danger, invasion, and social disorder in which cis women, children, and anti-trans speakers appear as vulnerable collectives requiring protection. The staging of this fear is consistently multimodal: One of AfD’s politicians, for example, appears framed by German flags and campaign posters in what appears to be his office, speaking over a pop song, and declares the SBGG the “abolition of women’s rights,” warning women attending sauna days to “look left and right” and claiming that “men” will exploit women’s quotas. The juxtaposition of nationalist iconography (signaling national belonging), upbeat music (signaling lightness and fun), and speech (signaling alarm and danger) produces an affective register that renders the threat simultaneously urgent and culturally legible: The upbeat sound makes the threat feel casual and widely shared, while the flags anchor it in a defense of the nation, so that alarm arrives already wrapped in familiarity. Where racist discourse enters, as when the same politician equates trans inclusion with “illegal mass immigration,” it converges with trans-antagonism through a shared logic of imagined social decay.

Most central to this register is what we term “spatialization”: the construction of “women’s spaces” such as toilets, changing rooms, shelters, saunas, or prisons as formerly secure environments now threatened by trans inclusion. Trans women are rarely addressed as women or rights-bearing subjects but instead are deadnamed, misgendered, and pejoratively described as “biological men,” “men in dresses,” or “women with a penis,” refusing recognition altogether. Videos construe visible bodies and genitals as unquestionable truth while construing legal gender recognition as fiction or ideological delusion. One video opens with the statement “Breaking news: Men are now allowed in women’s toilets. No joke. The government has just passed the Self-Determination Act,” thereby converting legal recognition into spatial invasion within its first seconds. Similar videos combine images of widely known trans women, parliamentary clips, dramatic music, and textual overlays such as “no more protection for women because of a minority” to warn of women losing “protection,” “security,” or “intimacy.” The affective charge here does not derive from any single element but from their layering: the recognizable face supplies a target, the parliamentary clip supplies apparent evidence, the music supplies dread, and the textual overlay or caption supplies the interpretive frame. Across the material, trans women’s bodily presence and proximity become constructed as dangerous regardless of actual behavior or evidence of harm.

Children function as a second figure through which fear is organized, and here vulnerability is construed temporally rather than spatially. Videos collapse legal recognition, medical transition, hormones, surgery, and detransition into one irreversible trajectory threatening children's futures and bodily integrity. In one video, an AfD politician holds up a pink baby outfit and sarcastically asks: "I gave birth to a boy, but I would like to have a girl. How absurd is that?" The prop visually condenses childhood into smallness, softness, and defenselessness. The affective force of the video depends on the tension between this visual register and the sarcastic spoken delivery: The softness of the object is held against the sharpness of the claim, so that the child becomes at once a figure of tender vulnerability and a political argument. The assertion that parents may change a child's gender "like a piece of clothing" anchors outrage in this figure, and the creator extends it by contrasting the AfD's defense of "family and future" with the "old parties" and "haters of Germany" who supposedly destroy the integrity of children. Other creators circulate screenshots of detransition narratives accompanied by the claim that "exactly what we warned about has happened," calling for the criminalization of medical interventions involving minors and using isolated cases as evidence that legal recognition inevitably leads to bodily harm. Distinctions between legal and medical transition disappear within these narratives, allowing the law itself to become associated with irreversible injury.

Ridicule forms a second major register and works together with fear rather than replacing it. Videos stage exaggerated scenarios in which creators sarcastically claim they will change gender markers to evade military service, enter women's shelters, exploit quotas, or avoid legal punishment. They announce plans to become "a man who feels like a woman," state they were "born rich in a poor body," or that they will change not only gender but also age to claim retirement benefits, mocking gender self-determination through comparisons to fraudulent identity claims. These formats present trans recognition as inherently ridiculous, detached from "common sense," and open to limitless abuse by design. TikTok's short-form format, meme cultures, and remix affordances intensify these dynamics by turning anti-trans hostility into entertaining and sharable content. This becomes particularly visible in edits that transform trans political speech into noise. One clip cuts from Green Party politician Tessa Ganserer's calm critique of the law's shortcomings to an emotional sports press-conference outburst shouting "this is all blah blah blah," captioned "leave our children alone!" By splicing Ganserer's words into an alien affective context, the clip renders her argument affectively unintelligible, replacing political speech with noise. The ridicule operates entirely at the level of form, since nothing in the argument is addressed and everything in the montage works to make the argument itself appear impossible.

Resentment finally connects these narratives of fear and ridicule to broader anti-government politics. Parliamentary speeches, news clips, and commentary are reformatted into TikToks through overlays, cuts, and dramatic audio that construe anti-trans actors as truth-tellers opposing ideological elites, claiming that criticism of the SBGG is censored or that ordinary citizens are silenced while trans rights are enforced. This produces a double victimhood: Cis women and children appear physically endangered while anti-trans speakers present themselves as politically persecuted. Fear, ridicule, and resentment thus operate as mutually reinforcing registers through which trans recognition is constructed as evidence of social decline, political irrationality, and institutional betrayal. Sahra Wagenknecht, a left-conservative politician known for trans-exclusionary feminist positions, condenses this logic in a video that circulates as an unedited excerpt of her Bundestag speech. Its affective force derives not from TikTok-native reworking but from the parliamentary scene itself. Speaking against loud heckling, applause, and boos audible throughout, she mocks the law as a "great gain in freedom" that "millions of citizens" have supposedly awaited, contrasts it

with the government's restrictions on domestic heating systems and car engines, and concludes that gender has been turned "from a biological fact into a question of emotional disposition." The audible disruption around her does affective work that no overlay could supply: The heckling stages the chamber as a site of contested truth, and her continuing to speak through it performs the very posture the register depends on, that of the truth-teller who persists against an obstructing majority. Her closing line, that the law is "simply absurd, were it not so dangerous," captures the logic of the register as a whole, since ridicule and fear do not contradict one another but together construct trans recognition as ideological irrationality imposed by the state.

5.3. Between Care, Fear, Anger, Relief, and Humor: Trans-Affirming Affective Registers

Care constitutes the dominant affective register across trans-affirming TikTok content surrounding the SBGG. Rather than discussing the law as an abstract political issue, creators translate it into experiences of bureaucracy, waiting periods, appointments, and everyday misrecognition. Many videos adopt explanatory formats in which creators calmly guide viewers through administrative procedures for changing names and gender markers, or respond to misinformation. Here, information-sharing becomes a form of affective labor aimed at reducing uncertainty and supporting trans, inter, and non-binary audiences navigating complex legal information and hostile public discourse. The visual style of these videos is often restrained, built from stable frontal recordings, subtitles, direct address, and minimal editing. This restraint is itself an affective signal as the steady gaze and unhurried gestures function as markers of trustworthiness and care, and they distinguish this content from the emotionally condensed and visually fragmented formats that dominate trans-antagonistic videos.

This care-oriented register also shapes responses to trans-antagonistic claims. Rather than escalating confrontation, creators contextualize or correct misinformation. One creator, responding to claims that the SBGG would allow men to access women's spaces, addresses the camera directly and unhurriedly, letting the argument rest on measured delivery rather than affective intensification: Perpetrators of sexual violence do not require legal gender recognition to commit harm. The redirection toward structural gendered violence, "trans and non-binary people aren't the problem. Men and the structures protecting sexually abusive behavior are the problem," is carried by the same calm frontal address that characterizes the register, so that composure becomes the counter to antagonistic alarm. The platform's collaborative formats extend this work. A stitch responding to claims that people could strategically exploit the law adopts the original video's beard filter and aesthetic style, retaining its visual grammar while redirecting its charge toward explanation. This formal mimicry is itself an affective strategy, since inhabiting the antagonist's aesthetic signals familiarity with the platform's vernacular while refusing its affective logic. One creator here recalls the humiliating psychiatric assessments, lengthy court procedures, and financial burdens of the former Transsexuals Act, insisting that misinformation has "real consequences for real people."

Fear also appears within trans-affirming content, though tied to concrete experiences of discrimination and historical consciousness. Creators express anxiety about renewed repeal debates, increasing anti-trans mobilization, and proposals to register trans people through state databases. Several videos reference histories of queer persecution in Germany, warning that "we already had this once." Others describe feeling "really scared" about the political climate while asking viewers to share information, support petitions, or contact politicians. In one video, a creator accompanied by sad music and a visibly strained expression

criticizes the repeated use of “child protection” to justify abolishing the SBGG. Here, the sound and facial expression do argumentative work as the sadness does not perform helplessness but marks the emotional cost of having to refute, repeatedly, an argument that instrumentalizes children against the very group it claims to protect. The creator argues that children are protected by being allowed to explore identity, receive information, and access support, not by being denied reversible legal recognition. Although these videos use direct address, urgency, and emotional appeals similar to antagonistic content, fear here functions differently, since it mobilizes solidarity and collective vigilance against renewed marginalization rather than justifying exclusion.

Anger forms a third register but usually appears in moderated and diagnostic forms rather than explosive outrage. Much of it responds to the repeated displacement of vulnerability in anti-trans discourse, particularly when women’s safety or child protection are mobilized against trans rights. In one stitch video, a creator rejects claims that men could exploit the law to gain institutional advantages. The stitch format is used as an affective device as the antagonistic claim is placed on screen and then answered by the creator reading directly from the legislation, so that the act of reading, slow and verifiable, is staged against the speculative alarm of the original. This performance of factuality carries the anger, which is expressed through the labor of having to correct people “who have absolutely nothing to do with this law” yet continuously invent new arguments against it. Similar response-to-comment videos redirect attention toward domestic violence, sexual assault, or patriarchal structures that anti-trans actors ignore while claiming to defend women and children, and some propose concrete measures such as reporting structures at festivals, prevention programs in schools, or stronger penalties for harassment. Anger here functions as critique rather than escalation, exposing selective concern, political contradiction, and the unequal distribution of public empathy.

Next to the anger, humor operates as another counter-register through which creators expose the implausibility of anti-trans narratives. Through role-play, irony, lip-syncs, and exaggerated dialogues, creators mock claims that people will casually change gender for personal advantage or that restroom signs prevent violence. One video sarcastically suggests that sexual predators were apparently only stopped by the “W” sign on toilet doors, and the spoken claim is accompanied by a deadpan facial expression that performs the absurdity rather than explaining it. In a lip-sync video, a creator uses a trending audio clip, “Let’s be honest, what kind of blazing hemp plantation did you have to walk past to come up with that?” while a text overlay names the specific AfD and the Christian Democratic Union of Germany argument being mocked. The sound supplies the affective orientation of exasperated disbelief, the overlay supplies the political target, and the lip-sync performance fuses them into a single gesture that is at once recognizable as platform vernacular and legible as critique. Unlike trans-antagonistic ridicule, humor here is directed upward toward political contradiction and moral panic rather than toward trans people themselves.

Relief and joy constitute a fifth register, though these emotions rarely appear uncomplicated or triumphant. Creators describe relief at finally being able to change documents, avoid deadnaming, or receive legal recognition without invasive procedures. One creator states, “Honestly, it’s just such a relief,” while explaining excitement about having the correct name and gender marker on official documents. Yet this joy appears as a fragile and partial easing of accumulated harm rather than as resolution or closure. A carousel post makes this ambivalence structurally visible, since the format enforces a sequence: The viewer moves through excitement, frustration, fear, anger, and pride as consecutive slides, captioned “thought there would

only be joy that I'd feel, but that's the reality." The affect is not only named but enacted through the progression, and the form mirrors the non-linearity of the experience it describes. More openly celebratory videos remain situated within vulnerability. Creators smile, kiss, cry, run through rooms with trans flags, or lip-sync to "war is over." The crying alongside the smiling, the domestic interior rather than the public stage, register soft joy as something provisional, held close rather than performed outward. Lip-syncing to a culturally recognized anthem of collective relief transforms a private moment into a shared affective register, a platform-specific practice through which individual experience becomes legible as community feeling. Legal recognition becomes visible as ordinary life becoming slightly more livable: a shared appointment, an official name, a document that no longer wounds. One creator addresses cis viewers directly, noting that for them nothing changes—"today is Thursday"—before concluding that the reform "makes things significantly better for some of us, but worse for no one."

6. Discussion and Outlook

Our findings show that the SBGG debate on TikTok emerges as an affective contestation over legitimacy, vulnerability, and recognition, in which trans-affirming and trans-antagonistic formations construct fundamentally different affective realities around the law, whom it concerns, and the futures it enables or threatens. Combining hashtag co-occurrence analysis with qualitative multimodal analysis allows us to illuminate both broader affective-discursive formations and their situated articulation through concrete media practices. At the level of hashtag networks, trans-affirming clusters primarily foregrounded care, solidarity, informational support, and pride, while expressions of rage or fear appeared comparatively marginal and direct engagement with antagonistic actors remained limited. The qualitative analysis complicates and deepens these patterns by revealing a considerably more ambivalent affective landscape within trans-affirming communities, characterized not only by care, support, moderated anger, and fragile forms of relief and joy, but also by exhaustion, uncertainty, and ongoing concern surrounding social, medical, and legal recognition. These insights reflect and empirically substantiate trans perspectives on affect theory, highlighting a broader affective spectrum beyond the opposition of euphoria versus dysphoria and showing that so-called ugly feelings cannot be overcome simply through legal recognition, even though recognition remains a crucial part of broader struggles. Such affects nevertheless engender forms of relation between trans subjects that render difficult conditions more endurable (Malatino, 2022, p. 9).

The trans-antagonistic formations show most clearly how the two methods complement one another. At the level of hashtag co-occurrences, dense alignments emerge between far-right and trans-exclusionary feminist formations, centering on narratives of protecting women and children and embedding the SBGG within broader imaginaries of social decline, threatened social order, and endangered womanhood. While such alliances have been observed before (Zahn & Lünenborg, 2026), our material shows how they are affectively produced through recurring media practices: dramatic overlays, edited political speeches, sarcastic monologues, and exaggerated threat scenarios condense complex political claims into immediate, affectively intense content organized around fear, resentment, and protectionism. Hashtag networks reveal the broader affective-discursive alignments; qualitative analysis captures how they are enacted and negotiated in situated media practices.

Conceptually, these findings suggest that TikTok operates as a specific "infrastructure of feeling" (Makhashvili & Lünenborg, 2026) that emerges relationally between the platform's affordances and user

practices and shapes the circulation, amplification, and modulation of affect. Rather than producing a singular communicative logic, TikTok's memetic architecture (Zulli & Zulli, 2022) enables different actors to strategically mobilize visibility through distinct affective orientations and registers. While trans-antagonistic actors frequently employ affective registers that are highly compatible with platformed circulation, including outrage, ridicule, and intensity, trans-affirming creators repurpose the same affordances toward education, care, and community-building under conditions of contested visibility. At the same time, affective intensity does not automatically translate into visibility: The hashtag analysis shows that trans-affirming formations achieved substantial visibility and connectivity through alternative orientations centered on education, informational support, and care. This orientation suggests a shift in how visibility is organized within trans communities. Rather than primarily addressing the cis-gaze, seeking engagement through controversy or entertainment, or catering to platform-wide virality, much of the material appears to be oriented toward creating affective spaces of belonging, mutual intelligibility, and community-building. This qualifies Rochford and Palmer's (2022) claim that TikTok facilitates trans content but rarely trans community, since the care-oriented and solidary practices we observe show community-building taking place through, rather than against, the platform's affordances. In this sense, educational content can be understood as solidarity as lived and practiced, expressed through inclusive information, care-oriented communication, and the circulation of transition-related knowledge, potentially engendering what Malatino (2022, p. 58) conceptualizes as a "trans affective commons."

At the same time, these findings cannot be understood independently from conditions of anticipatory hostility and algorithmic marginalization. As previously discussed, trans-antagonistic and trans-affirming formations are relationally co-constituted within a shared affective digital environment (DeVito, 2022; Rochford & Palmer, 2022). Educational tones, moderated anger, and careful responses to trans-antagonistic positions can also be seen as adaptive negotiations within an economy of visibility in which trans creators anticipate ridicule, backlash, and harassment and may face constraints on expressing rage. While trans-antagonistic videos circulate fear, resentment, ridicule, and outrage with comparatively little pressure toward moderation, more disruptive trans affects frequently appear moderated. Rage is clearly present throughout the audiovisual material, but rarely appears in unmoderated form. Instead, it is redirected into modes of expression compatible with platform and wider cultural expectations of not snapping, in Ahmed's (2017) terms. Bringing trans affect theory into dialogue with communication studies approaches to platforms as infrastructures of feeling therefore helps illuminate how affective registers are not only expressed but differentially enabled, constrained, and made legible through platform-specific visibility logics.

On the other hand, our study contributes to the research on trans-antagonistic affect (Cram, 2024; Wrisley, 2025), and how it travels across different ideological groups and binds them, if only temporarily. Our analysis shows that trans-antagonistic affect combines multiple affective registers, including fear, ridicule, and resentment. Fear produces the need for protection; ridicule renders trans recognition absurd or detached from "common sense"; and resentment connects the SBGG to broader anti-government imaginaries. Together, these affects stabilize a formation in which trans recognition appears as a threat to social order, biological certainty, and collective security. The affective force of these videos lies in a selective redistribution of vulnerability: Harm is detached from trans people as marginalized subjects and reassigned to cis women, children, and anti-trans speakers, allowing exclusionary practices to appear as forms of care and protection.

As a single case study of TikTok discourse surrounding the SBGG, this analysis cannot capture the full diversity of trans-related affective practices across platforms, communities, and political contexts. It nevertheless demonstrates the importance of bringing trans affect theory into closer dialogue with platform-centered communication research. Examining public discourse around trans recognition on social media requires attention to the infrastructural as well as socio-cultural and affective conditions under which particular affective-discursive formations become intelligible, legitimate, and sustainable. Affect is therefore central to how recognition, exclusion, and social belonging are publicly negotiated in digital environments.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to ethical and privacy considerations, the data supporting this study are not publicly available. The nature of the metadata makes it possible to identify individuals, and as such, access to the data is restricted to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

LLMs Disclosure

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