

cogitatio

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Volume 14

2026

Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2439

Edited by Stefan Wallaschek and Mareike Fenja Bauer

Media and Communication, 2026, Volume 14
Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070–129 Lisbon
Portugal

Design by Typografia®
http://www.typografia.pt/en/

Cover image: © Designed by Magnific

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Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 13427
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.13427

EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres

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Submitted: 5 October 2026 **Published:** 29 October 2026

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

Abstract

Research on gendered public spheres has examined how struggles over gender equality, recognition, and equal representation unfold across changing communication environments. These struggles involve competing actors and claims, including feminist and queer mobilization as well as anti-gender contestation, but they are also shaped by how and under what conditions actors become visible, remain less visible, or strategically manage their public exposure. This thematic issue conceptualizes gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility and brings together contributions that address three closely connected dimensions: the structural conditions that shape visibility; the situated agency through which actors navigate them; and the relational production of visibility across networks, publics, and national boundaries. Together, the contributions show that visibility is neither inherently empowering nor always the desired outcome, while invisibility cannot simply be equated with exclusion or political irrelevance. The thematic issue contributes to research on feminist and anti-gender mobilization, platformized and networked publics, strategic (in)visibility, and the relationship between visibility and influence in contemporary gendered public spheres.

Keywords

counterpublics; feminism; gendered public spheres; influence; invisibility; networked publics; visibility

1. Introduction

Public spheres are structured by the inequalities that partly determine whose voices are heard, whose experiences are recognized, and which issues receive attention. Feminist scholarship has long demonstrated that these inequalities are deeply gendered, observing that women and other marginalized groups have historically faced exclusion from public participation, recognition, and political representation (Benhabib,

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1995; Fraser, 1990; Mansbridge, 1999). At the same time, feminist movements and counterpublics have continuously challenged the dominant publics that generate and sustain such inequalities by creating alternative communicative spaces, articulating marginalized experiences and interests, and contesting established interpretations of gender and socio-political relations (Jackson et al., 2020; Jackson & Kreiss, 2023; Korolczuk, 2021).

Theoretical concepts such as affective publics (Lünenborg & Röttger-Rössler, 2023; Papacharissi, 2015) and performative publics (Foellmer et al., 2017) further challenge the idea of public discourse as fixed and rational, emphasizing the importance of emotions, affect, and personal narratives in the emergence of publics as well as their fluid and dynamic character. Contemporary gender-related struggles unfold under these ever-changing communication conditions. Increasingly fragmented, digitalized, and platformized, today's communication environments offer activists, political actors, and ordinary users a host of opportunities to participate in public communication, circumvent established gatekeepers, connect across geographical boundaries, and make marginalized experiences visible (Jackson et al., 2020; Scharff et al., 2016; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). And while feminist movements and marginalized communities have used digital spaces for mobilization, community building, and the articulation and circulation of counter-narratives (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Robards et al., 2021; Wallaschek et al., 2022), the same infrastructures have also enabled anti-feminist and anti-gender mobilization and facilitated the circulation of misogynistic and exclusionary claims, harassment, and opposition to gender equality (Bauer, 2024; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Tronina, 2024).

Building on these tensions, this thematic issue conceptualizes gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility. We claim that visibility is not inherently a desired or positive condition for individual or collective actors to exercise communicative power. Rather, its value and effects are highly contested and relational, depending on the actors involved and the conditions under which it is produced.

Scholars have emphasized that visibility is relational: it can provide recognition, create opportunities for mobilization, and expand actors' reach—even as it potentially exposes them to surveillance by private companies or the state, harassment or stigmatization by other platform users, and commodification (Brighenti, 2007; Thompson, 2005; Uldam, 2018). Invisibility, by contrast, is strongly connected to forms of exclusion, silencing, and marginalization, but it can also provide protection, enable communities to support group members outside the public, or simply form part of actors' strategic practices (Esposito & Semenzin, 2025; Lee, 2018; Stegeman et al., 2024). Hence, understanding gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility shifts attention away from simply asking "who" or "what" is visible towards examining the conditions, agency, power, and practices through which (in)visibility is produced and contested.

Building on this understanding, the eight contributions to this thematic issue examine contested regimes of (in)visibility in gendered public spheres from three interconnected perspectives. First, they address the structural conditions that shape who and what can become (in)visible, particularly within platformized, institutional, and gendered environments. Second, they highlight the situated agency of actors who navigate these conditions and develop practices to shape or limit their own public presence. Third, they emphasize that (in)visibility is relational rather than an individual attribute. Although not all three perspectives are present in every contribution, taken together they reveal the overlapping dimensions of gendered public spheres.

This thematic issue brings together articles on gendered public spheres across a range of national, cross-national, and local communication contexts, from journalism to online and offline activism, including feminist movements as well as anti-gender mobilization. The contributions also draw on a variety of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches including interviews, multimodal discourse analysis, and hashtag co-occurrence analysis.

2. (In)Visibility: Structural Conditions and Situated Agency

The first set of contributions deals with the interplay of structure and agency in these contested regimes of (in)visibility. Digital platforms are particularly relevant here because they organize attention through algorithms and affordances that select and amplify content and users and thereby co-produce specific regimes of (in)visibility (Bucher, 2012). Yet actors are not simply exposed to these conditions; they also develop social practices and strategies to deal with different conditions of (in)visibility, depending on their resources and capacities (Cotter, 2019).

Several contributions illustrate this tension between enabling and constraining conditions. Bănoiu and Wiesböck (2026) show how platform infrastructures govern queer visibility by simultaneously facilitating expression and community formation while also producing hypervisibility, erasure, and surveillance. In a similar fashion, Holm and Hunklinger (2026) demonstrate that the platforms on which trans advocates depend for political communication can expose them to severe harassment, with consequences for continued participation. These findings underline previous research which highlights that visibility can generate recognition and political opportunity while also increasing exposure to misogynistic resistance, intimidation, and silencing (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sobieraj, 2018). As Holm and Hunklinger (2026) also investigate the role of national platform regulations within experiences of online harassment, their contribution reveals practical insights into how regulations aiming to prevent online harassment and silencing fail to meet the needs of those being affected.

Other contributions to this thematic issue examine how actors negotiate conditions of (in)visibility. Cervi and Straub (2026) show how feminist activists on TikTok in two different national settings appropriate established beauty formats and platform vernaculars to make feminist critique visible within an attention economy structured by algorithmic and aesthetic conventions. Rather than operating outside platform logics, activists work through them and repurpose their gendered meanings. This resonates with research on digital feminist activism that emphasizes both the opportunities opened by platforms and the need to navigate their specific norms and risks (Caldeira, 2026; Mendes et al., 2019). Jansová, Urbániková, and Waschková Císařová (2026) extend this perspective beyond social media by showing how political journalists in the Czech Republic develop tactical practices to secure professional visibility and safeguard their careers within masculinized institutional structures. Their agency remains limited, however, because strategies that enable individual navigation in the workplace do not necessarily alter the underlying structures.

Kim, Pyun, and Kim (2026) further complicate the picture by challenging the assumption that political agency necessarily seeks greater visibility. Examining young feminist activism in South Korea, the contribution conceptualizes invisibility not merely as exclusion or as a stage that precedes public mobilization, but as a condition with political potential in its own right.

Taken together, these contributions show that (in)visibility is neither structurally predetermined nor fully under actors' control. Rather, it is shaped through situated encounters between unequal communicative and institutional conditions and the practices through which actors respond to them. This perspective shifts attention from visibility as a fixed and necessarily desirable outcome and toward the processes through which public presence, exposure, and conscious invisibility are continually negotiated.

3. Relational and Transnational (In)Visibility

Contested regimes of (in)visibility in gendered public spheres are also produced through publicly shared content, interactions, and exchange within and beyond political, cultural, or national boundaries. This is particularly evident in contemporary gender politics where both feminist and anti-gender mobilization increasingly operate through networked communication and transnational connections. Research on (anti-)gender politics has shown how actors across national contexts draw on shared frames and discursive repertoires while adapting them to specific political settings (Kaushik, 2026; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018; Righetti et al., 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2022).

Tronina (2026) develops this perspective by examining how such transnational similarity is translated into shared visibility. Through hashtag practices, anti-gender organizations across five European countries jointly sustain ideological narratives, activate campaigns, and connect anti-gender claims to broader public debates. In this sense, visibility is co-produced through networked communication while national variation continues to shape how frames are articulated and mobilized. Other contributions broaden this relational perspective beyond organizational networks. Ma (2026) examines how idealized femininity is produced and negotiated within affective networked publics on the Chinese platform Weibo. As Ma convincingly demonstrates, visibility emerges through the circulation of discourses that gain meaning through relatability and identification, creating a sense of belonging while also reproducing gendered forms of discipline. By contrast, Backes, Makhashvili, and Rojas (2026) demonstrate that visibility is constituted through affective contestation. In TikTok debates around Germany's Self-Determination Act, competing trans-affirming and trans-antagonistic formations struggle over whose vulnerability becomes publicly legible, which emotions appear credible, and whose recognition is presented as necessary or threatening. Visibility therefore concerns not only the public presence of actors but also the production of meanings, emotions, and claims to legitimacy in networked communication.

Cervi and Straub (2026) point to a related process across distinct political contexts. Feminist activists in the Iranian #WomanLifeFreedom and Latin America #NiUnaMenos movements draw on shared platform vernaculars and visual repertoires despite substantial differences in political conditions and risk. Rather than implying a homogeneous transnational public sphere, Cervi and Straub argue that visibility can facilitate the circulation of recognizable practices that are then embedded in locally specific struggles and shaped by platform affordances, aesthetics, and gendered forms of politics. Across these contributions, public visibility is not only based on the actors' characteristics or the specific content of the message. Rather, the relational character of claims, identities, and emotions moves to the center stage of scholarly attention, revealing how these dynamics extend across national, socio-cultural, and political boundaries and contexts.

4. Conclusion

Taken together, the eight contributions conceptualize gendered public spheres as contested regimes of (in)visibility in which public presence, interactions, and exposure are shaped by structural conditions, situated practices, and relational communication. They show that visibility is neither an unambiguous resource nor necessarily the desired outcome of political and communicative action. Forms of relative invisibility may likewise sustain political capacities, support communities, or enable practices that remain outside of public attention. The issue therefore cautions against equating visibility with influence.

The contributions also show how actors' identities, emotions, and claims become recognizable in different ways, while the studied communication processes remain embedded in specific political, socio-cultural, and platform contexts. At the same time, several contributions demonstrate how visibility is produced across networks and national and political boundaries. Bringing these perspectives together, the thematic issue highlights the value of examining influence and (in)visibility as related but distinct dimensions of contested gendered public spheres.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere thanks to the journal and its editorial team for their support, and to the anonymous reviewers for their critical and constructive comments on the manuscripts of this thematic issue.

Funding

Stefan Wallaschek gratefully acknowledges funding from the Gerda Henkel Foundation in the research project Geschlechterpolitik und (Anti-)Gender-Diskurse—Zwischen Fortschritt und Regression (agendis) (AZ 03/TG/22).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (version 5.6) was used to revise the language and optimize the structure of the introduction. Nevertheless, responsibility for all content, arguments, and final text elements lies with the authors.

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Stefan Wallaschek was the co-principal-investigator of the research project Geschlechterpolitik und (Anti-)Gender Diskurse—Zwischen Fortschritt und Regression (agendis), funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, at the Europa-Universität Flensburg (Germany) from 2023 to 2026.



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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12936
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12936

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

The Governance of Queer Visibility in Platformized Public Spheres

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Submitted: 15 June 2026 **Accepted:** 12 August 2026 **Published:** 29 October 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

Abstract

Queer visibility in contemporary digital cultures is increasingly mediated by platformized public spheres, where it is both produced and governed through socio-technical infrastructures. While social media platforms provide important opportunities for queer users—including community formation, identity exploration, and circulation of counternarratives beyond traditional gatekeeping institutions—they simultaneously organize visibility in uneven ways. Platform infrastructures embed normative assumptions and capitalistic incentives that selectively amplify, suppress, or modulate queer expression through mechanisms of datafication, selection, and commodification. As a result, queer visibility is a structurally precarious condition marked by the simultaneous presence of hypervisibility, erasure, and surveillance. Bringing critical platform studies and social justice theory into dialogue, this conceptual article analyses how new regimes of queer visibility emerge and are shaped by platform mechanisms and considers their implications for representation, recognition, and redistribution. In doing so, it develops an analytical framework centered on three interlocking governance logics—quantification, normativity, and profitability—that organize visibility as a site of contestation and an object of control. Finally, the article introduces the concept of "platformized (in)visibilization" to describe the ambivalent role of platforms as both enabling and constraining environments for expression in contemporary digital cultures, affecting political legitimacy, social equality, and economic justice.

Keywords

LGBTQIA+; platformization; platformized public spheres; queer visibility; social justice; social media

1. Introduction

Queer visibility in public spheres has long been intertwined with struggles for social justice, serving as a means of recognition and a site of political contestation. Visibility—understood as a socially organized field

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of acknowledgement in which subjects become intelligible and consequential within public life (Brighenti, 2007)—is closely linked to the legitimation of marginalized identities. It provides opportunities for representation and identification among queer audiences, carrying the potential to shape ideological conceptions of naturalness and desirability, while simultaneously functioning as a safeguard against social erasure and political exclusion (Brighenti, 2007, 2010; Casper & Moore, 2009). Historically, queer lives were frequently omitted from public spheres and the media, a process referred to as "symbolic annihilation" (Gross, 1991), whereby non-appearance signaled and sustained marginal status. Yet, in current times, the conditions under which visibility is produced, circulated, and valued have changed profoundly with the rise of platformized publics. Digital platforms enable unprecedented forms of self-expression, community building, and activism while subjecting queer visibility to algorithmic governance, commercialization, and intensified surveillance (Brighenti, 2022). As public discourse increasingly unfolds within platform infrastructures, questions of who becomes visible, under what conditions, and with what political implications have become central to understanding contemporary struggles for queer legitimacy and social justice.

These digital reconfigurations are particularly evident on social media platforms which have become key sites for producing and negotiating the socio-technical processes of queer (in)visibilization. This development can be traced back to trans persons and HIV/AIDS activists being amongst the early adopters of online bulletin boards for their accessibility and anonymity, countering stigma, harassment, and exclusion from public discussions (Brewster & Ruberg, 2020; Wagner, 2024). Early accounts of cyberqueer spaces highlighted their association with pornography, censorship justified through "harm to children" rationales, and the commodification of access to "others of your kind" (Wakeford, 1997/2000, p. 410). While capitalist, patriarchal, and platform-mediated public spheres sustain these dynamics, they also open space for agency, representation, and resistance. Currently, in legislative contexts where queerness is prohibited, social media is framed as a crucial—if not the only—space that enable queer individuals to be visible, express themselves, and form communities (Ncube & Sibanda, 2024). Such platforms provide access to communicative resources and support, permit the emergence of counterpublics, and allow the circulation of counternarratives beyond traditional gatekeeping institutions (Dyer & Abidin, 2023). Thus, social media are central infrastructures for the societal dissemination and collaborative creation of alternative understandings of gender and sexuality, including narratives emphasizing gender self-determination, sexual fluidity, critiques of compulsory monogamy, as well as intersectional approaches to identity and inequality (Hammack & Manago, 2025). At the same time, however, enhanced queer visibility itself cannot be equated with progressive social change. While the public visibility of queerness is linked to processes of opinion formation concerning the salience, legitimacy, and perceived appropriateness of identities and behaviors, it may simultaneously produce increased exposure to violence in the form of scrutiny, ridicule, and marginalization (Brighenti, 2007, 2010, 2022). As key infrastructures of contemporary public spheres, platforms do not merely host public discourses but actively structure the creation, circulation, and exposure of it through algorithmic systems, economic incentives, and governance mechanisms.

Heteronormative bias is systematically embedded in digital platforms in both their design histories and contemporary governance cultures (Wajcman & Young, 2023). From their inception, platform architectures have been shaped by patriarchal assumptions about gender, sexuality, and social visibility, which become encoded in technical affordances, ranking systems, and policies. Thus, more than representing an "imperfect translation of an already inequitable reality" (Dyer & Abidin, 2023, p. 9), platforms produce new forms of injustice, operating as socio-technical environments that shape social interaction and mediate processes of

visibilization. Through platform policies, logics, and practices—such as automatic flagging of reclaimed language as "toxic" (Dias Oliva et al., 2021), "shadowbanning" (Rauchberg, 2022), or en masse account removals (Down, 2025)—social media infrastructures may intensify struggles over recognition and belonging of queer "users-citizens" (van Dijck, 2014). Consequently, visibility becomes a contested resource subject to strategic optimization, surveillance, and unequal distribution, simultaneously enabling and constraining queer expression and standing in platformized public spheres, and thereby being inherently of political relevance. As such, restrictions to the visibility of queer content on platforms reflect forms of biopolitical control, regulation, and erasure of sexuality and gender (Floegel, 2022).

While scholarship has generated important insights into both queer experiences on social media and the governance structures of digital platforms, the relationship between these two fields remains insufficiently theorized. So far, research has examined the visibility practices of queer users and content creators on social media, highlighting performances and expressions of gender and sexuality (Abidin, 2019), world-making (Ryan & Tileva, 2022), algorithmic imaginaries (Chartrand & Duguay, 2025), privacy and safety (Cho, 2018), identity development (Bates et al., 2020), or labor precarity (Stegeman et al., 2024). A further strand of research has elaborated on the implicit structures, logics, and platform mechanisms governing the creation and distribution of content from platforms in general (van Dijck et al., 2018), to social media as a field of study (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), to analyses of specific social media such as TikTok (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). What remains underexplored is how the governance logics of social media platforms—understood as expressions of power over the platform ecosystem through data collection, algorithms, interfaces, business models, and user agreements that shape social and economic interactions (van Dijck et al., 2018)—produce differential visibility regimes for queer users-citizens. This is becoming increasingly salient in sociopolitical terms as the infrastructures of social media platforms align more closely with reactionary political and cultural agendas.

Against this backdrop, this article develops a theoretical understanding of how queer (in)visibility is shaped by governance logics of social media platforms. By bringing critical platform studies (van Dijck et al., 2018) and social justice theory (Fraser, 2009) into dialogue, it analyses how new regimes of visibility are emerging, established, and shaped by social media platform mechanisms operating in conjunction with hegemonic norms and business interests. It further examines how these regimes reconfigure the conditions under which queer visibility—understood as the visibility of individuals identifying with non-normative genders or sexualities—is granted, negotiated, and contested in platformized public spheres, and introduces the analytical framework of platformized (in)visibilization. In doing so, the article foregrounds how the political legitimacy of minoritized groups is structured within current configurations of platformized public spheres, particularly in relation to discursive power, social standing, and material opportunities. The article proceeds as follows. First, it examines platformized public spheres and the reconfiguration of queer visibility within contemporary socio-technical systems in relation to Fraser's framework of social justice. It then elaborates on how platforms govern queer visibility through three logics: quantification, normativity, and profitability. Finally, it concludes with a discussion, followed by directions for future research on platformized (in)visibilization.

2. Visibility and Social Justice in Platformized Public Spheres

Conceptualizing queer visibility in contemporary contexts requires engaging with theories of the public sphere and their entanglement with questions of social justice. Originally, the public sphere was understood

as one singular discursive arena for public opinion formation through deliberation, which was open to all citizens, and shaped by media systems and their infrastructures (Habermas, 1991). In this pre-digital understanding, visibility is primarily conceptualized as the publicity afforded to actors in legacy media, serving as a condition for public sphere deliberation and democratic legitimacy. Subsequent scholarship has reframed the public sphere not as singular but as a plurality of overlapping and unequal discursive arenas, in which what counts as "public" is shaped by persons belonging to dominant social classes, genders, and races (Fraser, 1990). Foregrounding the unequal conditions structuring visibility in public spheres (Fraser, 1997), this framework guides our understanding of queer visibility in current digital configurations and its implications for social justice. The visibility of queer persons is closely intertwined with questions of social justice, as public arenas and governance infrastructures co-produce competing narratives and framings that shape which issues are recognized as legitimate subjects of public deliberation and which responses are considered appropriate for policymaking (Durnová et al., 2016). On the one hand, public spheres enable the articulation of injustices, the problematization of unequal conditions, and the recognition of those affected, thereby potentially influencing democratic decision-making processes (Trenz, 2024). On the other hand, the voices and standings of minoritized groups within public spheres are themselves shaped by the extent to which principles of social justice are realized (Fraser, 2009). In this sense, queer visibility emerges from and simultaneously conditions the capacity of queer citizens to articulate claims in public deliberation and to contest the economic and cultural structures that underpin marginalization (Fraser, 2008; Trenz, 2024).

Within Fraser's (2008) framework, social justice comprises the interrelated dimensions of representation, recognition, and redistribution, all of which are fundamental to democratic participation and legitimacy. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing and complexly related to visibility—understood as the political condition of being seen and rendered intelligible within public communicative arenas. While shaped by queer (in)visibilization in multiple ways, they simultaneously structure it. First, queer visibility is closely associated with political representation, which governs legitimacy and the boundaries of deliberation within public spheres (Fraser, 2008). As such, visibility and framing may shape social judgments concerning whether queer individuals and issues are understood as politically relevant or as private and trivial matters. Second, visibility is closely tied to cultural recognition, theorized as status equality regardless of identity (Fraser, 2008). For queer individuals, both invisibility and "hypervisibility" (Gailey, 2014)—understood as exposure to disproportionate attention and intensified critical scrutiny—imply exclusionary othering processes and consequently misrecognition within heterosexist social structures, thereby contributing to the denial of equal standing in social life and interactions (Ahmed, 2014; Fraser, 1997). Finally, recognition is intertwined with material redistribution, as in capitalist patriarchal societies the interrelated dimensions of social justice jointly shape queer lives through the mutual reinforcement of cultural and economic inequalities, thereby compounding disadvantages associated with both class and social status (Fraser, 1997, 2008). This triad specifies the political stakes of queer visibility: legitimacy in political debates (representation), social standing (recognition), and access to resources (redistribution).

Bringing Fraser's understanding of public spheres and social justice into dialogue with scholarship engaging with the platformization of public spheres (Fischer & Jarren, 2024), this theoretical article analyses how new regimes of queer visibility emerge and are shaped by social media platform mechanisms and considers their implications for representation, recognition, and redistribution, as shown in Figure 1. Platformized public spheres differ from previous theoretical understandings in substantial ways, particularly with regard to agency and risks for queer persons. On the one hand, platform-mediated public spheres offer reduced

barriers to participation and facilitate the circulation of diverse narratives, collective identities, and eyewitness accounts (Wallaschek et al., 2024). Social media platforms can be described as carrying democratizing potential: they are accessible, low-cost, and highly effective in the large-scale dissemination of content, enabling users-citizens to produce and circulate their own representations, circumvent the centralized gatekeeping of legacy media, and address queer exclusion (Fischer & Jarren, 2024; Floegel, 2022). For queer individuals, these lowered barriers to participation create new opportunities for visibility in emergent discursive arenas, facilitating public self-expression, awareness-raising, and the formation of support networks and counterpublics (Edingo, 2021; Lee et al., 2018). Related to that, there is an increasing fragmentation of public spheres under platformization, enabling the formation of segmented digital publics organized around shared identities, characteristics, and affinities. These alternate discursive arenas allow queer individuals to articulate non-hegemonic identities, interests, and political positions, with potential implications for public opinion formation, institutional critique, and accountability (Edingo, 2021; Lee et al., 2018).

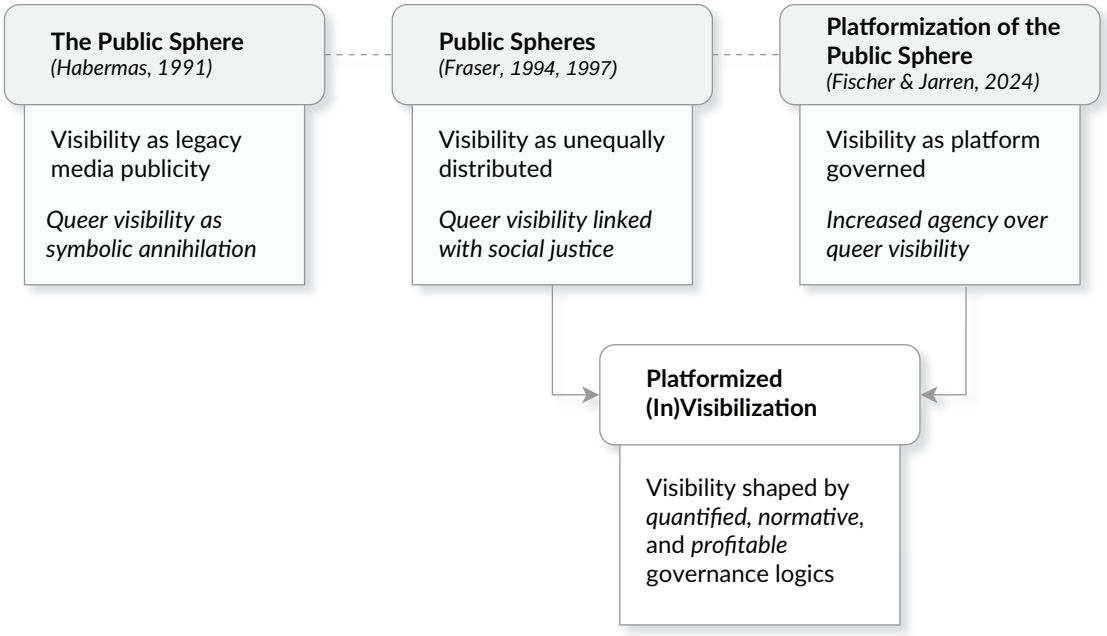


Figure 1. Theoretical strands of public spheres and their relation to queer visibility.

On the other hand, queer visibility has not simply expanded in platformized public spheres but was rather rendered contingent, given that dominant meanings of gender and sexuality emerge through an ongoing struggle over visibility between platform governance and users-citizens. Public communication within profit-oriented platform infrastructures embeds public spheres within capitalist logics, raising questions about the influence of commercial incentives on communicative autonomy and democratic deliberation (Habermas, 2022; van Dijck & Poell, 2015). As privately owned, profit-driven socio-technical ecosystems, social media platforms leverage their position as key infrastructures of contemporary public spheres to advance capital accumulation. This is reflected in marketing discourses that appeal to cosmopolitan ideals of democratization, as well as in the maintenance of a libertarian veneer in which notions of freedom and autonomy are foregrounded, whereas underlying governance processes remain largely opaque (Elkins, 2019; Obreja, 2026). Whilst corporate and algorithmic control is often obscured by democratic promises

within platformized public spheres (Obreja, 2026), platform governance logics nonetheless shape public deliberation and thereby influence conditions of social justice for queer users-citizens.

As central gatekeepers of public and political communication, platforms therefore require critical analysis through the lens of social justice, particularly in relation to queer users-citizens whose visibility and legitimacy are differentially affected by social media governance logics. Shifting from traditional conceptualizations of the public sphere to understandings in which visibility is unequally distributed and related to social justice, we critically examine how social media platforms configure the conditions under which visibility is produced, distributed, and contested. From this perspective, platforms establish and govern a complex dynamic grid upon which users-citizens are rendered (in)visible through specific sociotechnical logics, a process we understand as "platformized (in)visibilization."

3. Theorizing Platform Governance and the Politics of Queer (In)Visibilization

Investigating the governance logics of social media platforms is key to understanding emerging queer visibility regimes and more generally, processes of platformized (in)visibilization. A growing body of research highlights that the architectures of social media platforms shape societies through interlocking mechanisms that conjoin user practices, technical infrastructures, and commercial strategies, binding complementors such as advertisers and content creators (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Within this architecture, platforms enable, constrain, demand, encourage, sustain, intensify, and steer forms of behavior and social relations (Bauer, 2024; Wiesböck, Wang, et al., 2026). Part of this governance is the historical dominance of white, cisgender, heterosexual male actors in the tech industry, shaping not only organizational cultures but also the epistemic frameworks that guide developmental, architectural, and design decisions and data practices (Noble, 2018). Such concentration of power influences what is rendered visible within platform systems, embedding heteronormative and patriarchal biases into technical infrastructures, algorithms, and platform governance strategies (Chang, 2018), thereby marginalizing certain groups as outliers and perpetuating cycles of injustice (Wajcman & Young, 2023).

To theorize how queer visibility is conditioned by social media platforms and how this relates to social justice as well as equitable participation in public deliberation, van Dijck et al.'s (2018) account of datafication, selection, and commodification provides a productive analytical lens for understanding platform governance logics. As driving forces that steer social and economic interactions, we draw upon these mechanisms to unpack how power is redistributed and how public values are contested in the "platform society" (van Dijck et al., 2018). "Datafication" denotes the capturing, classifying, and organizing of online behavior, which supports personalization and targeted advertising, underpinning the two subsequent mechanisms (van Dijck, 2014). "Selection" curates content and governs its distribution and relevance by translating data traces into prioritization through algorithmic ranking and personalization (van Dijck et al., 2018). "Commodification" determines how visibility is valued and remunerated, employing attention as an intermediate currency between creators, users, and advertisers (van Dijck et al., 2018).

These mechanisms do not directly map onto, but can be read in relation to the social justice dimensions of representation, recognition, and redistribution in digital environments. We argue that these three platform mechanisms structurally condition queer (in)visibilization within platformized public spheres, shape political boundaries and the standing of users-citizens, thereby influencing the extent to which social justice is

enacted or constrained, as depicted in Figure 2. Building on this, we conceptualize three governance logics of social media platforms that shape queer (in)visibility in platformized public spheres: quantified, normative, and profitable visibilization, which jointly constitute the process of platformized (in)visibilization.

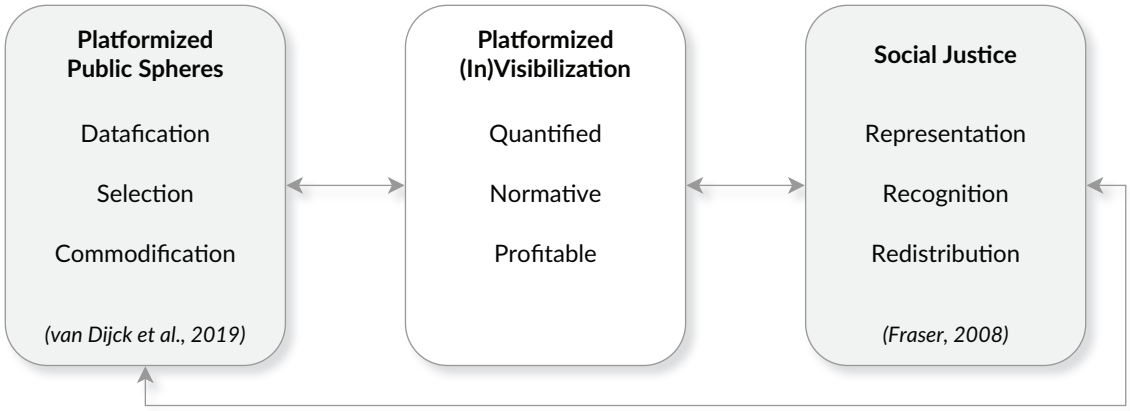


Figure 2. Platformized (in)visibilization in relation to platformized public spheres and social justice.

3.1. Quantified Visibilization: Identity Constraints Through Classification Practices

"Quantified visibilization" systematically disadvantages queer users-citizens through the reduction of complex identities to categories and binaries that flatten diversity and naturalize normative assumptions regarding gender and sexuality. As part of the platform mechanism of datafication, it operates through classification, enabling surveillance, prediction, and personalization.

Within this infrastructure, the process of classification is foundational for the enforcement of quantified visibilization. Through recording, counting, labeling, and categorizing platforms generate hierarchies of visibility that privilege legible, normatively stable identities while marginalizing those that exceed predefined categories. In this sense, classification does not merely sort individuals but actively stabilizes binaries such as "male/female" or "normal/deviant," thereby naturalizing existing social hierarchies (Saunders, 2025; Wajcman & Young, 2023). Inherent frictions exist in translating and scaling non-normative or fluid queer identities into data due to the shortcomings of demographic collection methods and vocabularies, for example, the lack of options for gender as a spectrum or self-reported (Weathington & Brubaker, 2023). Affordances and requirements of data fields reduce complexity and bind individuals to rigid conceptualizations of identities (Weathington & Brubaker, 2023), which are often treated as authoritative, and reinforce the visibility of privileged positionalities and cultures such as Western, white, masculine, bourgeois, heterosexual, and Christian (Zeffiro, 2019). Queerness is inherently opposed to and intentionally challenges classifications, resisting definitions, fixed groupings, and reductive categorizations that disadvantage queer users-citizens within visibilization regimes established on quantification principles (Saunders, 2025). One way in which quantified processes limit visibility is through automated content removal. For example, on Instagram, 90% of content removals are carried out before any user report is even submitted (Meta, n.d.). According to creators, these automated moderation systems discriminate against and routinely suppress queer content (Lightfoot, 2026).

Classification is extended through a continuous chain of surveillance, predictions, and personalization, with implications for behavioral modulation. Platform infrastructures not only collect large-scale behavioral data but also infer preferences, anticipate actions, and shape future conduct through algorithmic recommendation systems (Zuboff, 2019). Empirical evidence demonstrates that such systems can infer sensitive attributes, including sexual orientation, with high predictive accuracy (Kosinski et al., 2013). Simultaneously, they enable personalized identity-based marketing that reinforces hegemonial norms, as reflected in queer users-citizens' reports of being targeted with "homonormative" (Duggan, 2014) advertising (Sampson et al., 2023). This produces paradoxical visibility conditions for queer users-citizens: They are often statistically underrepresented within aggregated systems of classification which structure their visibility, yet simultaneously hypervisible within surveillance infrastructures that render their data actionable for commercial and political actors. At the same time, these mechanisms extend beyond prediction and surveillance into the shaping of subjectivity, as interactions with algorithmically curated environments or personalized feeds on social media inform self-understanding and influence self-making (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). Repeated exposure to normative identity scripts can thus intensify self-presentation and behavioral alignment with hegemonic standards (Saunders, 2025), particularly as content recommendations can be understood as accurate reflections of identity or an "algorithmized self" (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

Overall, quantified visibilization privileges normative forms of self-presentation, rendering queer individuals less visible by design, as their identities exceed predefined categories while simultaneously extracting and monetizing sensitive personal data in ways that sustain stereotypical and homonormative ideals of expression. Consequently, queer representation in platformized public spheres may be unevenly constrained and queer persons thereby delegitimized, which may influence the boundaries of inclusion and broader visions of social order (Saunders, 2025; Zeffiro, 2019).

3.2. Normative Visibilization: Silencing of Non-Conformity Through Moderation

Categories shaped by heteronormative biases further reinforce the governance logic of "normative visibilization," which relies on quantification and hierarchical ordering to privilege dominant groups. Informed by the platform mechanism of selection, it operates primarily through content moderation, which frequently targets queer content for visibility restrictions. In this sense, queer users-citizens are differentially disadvantaged, as their visibility is constrained by both heteronormative and homonormative regimes which construct dichotomies of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of expression.

Within this constellation, moderation acts as a key process of normative visibilization, enacted through the filtering, restriction, and deletion of content according to patriarchal and capitalist principles of platform corporations (Gillespie, 2018). Platform policies regarding sexual, explicit, and pornographic content routinely conflate queer expression with obscenity, affecting educational, artistic, and political speech (Monea, 2022). In practice, queer content is more frequently flagged, deprioritized, invisibilized, labelled as non-recommendable, or removed than content conforming to dominant forms of gender expression (Monea et al., 2024). Recent examples point to the restriction and removal of Meta accounts of more than 50 international organizations discussing queer, gender, and sexuality issues, despite non-explicit content (Down, 2025).

Queer users-citizens experience overt and covert constraints, including content or account removal and "shadowbanning," namely the practice of unnotified content invisibilization (Rauchberg, 2022). While platforms deny the practice, an analysis of TikTok guidelines reveals that moderation operates along three categories: allowed, not allowed, and "For You Feed ineligible," whereby content remains on the platform but is excluded from the personalized feed curated by the recommendation algorithm (Xu, 2026). Further documented cases include YouTube's "restricted mode" for filtering mature content which blocks non-explicit queer videos such as "8 Black LGBTQ+ Trailblazers Who Inspire Me" (Abidin, 2019). When queer content is framed as "adult" or "controversial," affective judgments are encouraged through emotional framings of risk and morality, fostering fear and othering while echoing long-standing discriminatory arguments against queer people such as "protecting the children" (Ahmed, 2014; Jones, 2011). Beyond invisibilization, this form of "one-size-fits-all" moderation associates queerness with "explicit" or "unsafe" labels, reinforcing reductions of queer subjects to sexuality and (re)producing marginalization and stereotypes of queer persons as dangerous others, promiscuous, and unfit for being visible in public (Monea et al., 2024; Nedvědová, 2026; Southerton et al., 2021).

Anticipating such sanctions, creators may engage in a variety of strategies that could potentially interfere with their intended forms of self-expression. For example, queer users-citizens may employ "algospeak" (Aleksic, 2026), a form of coded communication based on intentional misspellings or phonetic substitutions designed to evade algorithmic detection of key terms—for instance, "le dollar bean" derived from "Le$bian," or "WLW" as an abbreviation for "woman-loving-woman"—in order to maintain visibility within platformized public spheres. Widely used among queer persons, these linguistic repertoires can become stabilized at the community level and may persist long after the original terms are no longer systematically targeted by platform moderation (Griffin, 2024; Monea et al., 2024). Other types of queer expression that elude algorithmic invisibilization are those aligned with homonormative assimilative practices that do not challenge but conform to heteronormative institutions and social standards in order to achieve greater acceptance into dominant society, or in this case, increased visibility in platformized public spheres (Liu, 2015; Sandoval, 2000).

Studies further show that content depicting privileged bodies and relationships, such as hypermasculine gay men with lighter skin tones and homonormative coupling narratives, is more likely to be algorithmically promoted than content featuring Blackness, fatness, or gender non-conformity, despite comparable or higher engagement (Souza et al., 2025). Moreover, trans creators and content that critiques patriarchal structures—such as the dominance of heterosexual white men—are among the most removed from social media despite complying with platform guidelines (Haimson et al., 2021). Research on fandom platforms similarly indicates that restrictions do not affect all queer persons equally: trans, non-Western, and POC content is more politicized and prone to expulsion as "adult," "not safe for work" (NSFW), or "pornographic," resulting in the most marginalized queer user-citizens experiencing the most harm within and beyond digital spaces (Floegel, 2022). Other scholars emphasize that the visibility of queer content depends on the concealing of queer desire to construct an image of a "good" user-citizen (Southerton et al., 2021). Thus, while instrumental in increasing visibility within platformized public spheres, homonormative expression does not entail equal standing but may instead imply hypervisibilization which risks crystallizing a one-dimensional image of queer identity for mainstream audiences.

Taken together, normative visibilization refers to the restriction of divergent forms of queer expression and the undermining of critique through the ranking and moderation of content in accordance with both heteronormative and homonormative standards. Since ranking algorithms prioritize normative content, regardless of user choices or preferences (Souza et al., 2025), queer visibility and representation are bound to homonormative depictions, such as white, fit, and hypermasculine gay men, thereby reproducing the image of legitimate political subjects in line with hegemonial norms. Given that these governance logics apply to all users-citizens, including queer political content creators who take stances and occupy issue spaces on topics of gender and sexuality (Bauer, 2024), normative visibilization significantly structures queer discourse in platformized public spheres through invisibility and hypervisibility.

3.3. Profitable Visibilization: Commodification of Expression in Advertising Economies

Lastly, platforms reinforce hegemonic standards through "profitable visibilization," highlighting the dominance of capitalist imperatives within platform ecosystems. Informed by the platform mechanism of commodification, monetization aligns queer visibility with advertiser suitability through financial incentives, rendering it dependent on brand safety and commercial risk assessments. Building on quantified hierarchies produced through datafication and normative selection processes, platforms privilege brand-safe representations while penalizing non-conforming expressions and re-establish norms of "good" and "bad" queerness (Kopf, 2020). Under this logic, diverse creators are rendered invisible through the interlinked processes of recommendation and remuneration.

Within these dynamics, monetization functions as a key mechanism of profitable visibilization, intensifying the stakes of the algorithmic visibility economy to the detriment of queer creators by compounding losses in reach with economic disadvantage (Cotter, 2019; Stegeman et al., 2023). Positioning themselves as intermediaries between creators, audiences, and advertisers, platform companies shape the allocation of resources and power by aligning public communication with marketing goals (Stegeman et al., 2023; van Dijck et al., 2018). Demonetization is often linked to "non-recommendable" classifications and disproportionately affects queer users-citizens, whose content is more frequently labeled "unsafe" for advertisers than comparable content by non-queer persons. Empirical studies highlight that queer content creators disparately experience invisibilization, reduced discursive influence, metal health and well-being harms, alongside economic losses due to demonetization (Kingsley et al., 2022). Such classifications reinforce stereotypes of queerness as inherently explicit or dangerous, narrow the scope of articulable topics, and enhance the invisibilization of political debates, particularly regarding trans topics, queer struggles, and content that critiques dominant groups, as evidenced by reported cases (Haimson et al., 2021; Monea, 2022).

Since visibility is a prerequisite for remuneration, a recognizable template of "marketable queerness" is fostered and sustained (Stegeman et al., 2023), alongside "rainbow capitalism" (Chasin, 2000), foregrounding consumption, lifestyle, and spectacle while obscuring social, structural, and material inequalities (Hennessy, 1994, 2017; Liu, 2015). In a similar vein, queer creators are highly aware of the instrumental value of visibility, with empirical studies showing that drag live streamers adapt their performances of queerness to both monetization standards and followers' expectations (Persaud & Perks, 2022). Examples include carrying out "visibility labour" (Abidin, 2016), presenting queer experiences in commercially legible forms such as coming-out narratives, homonormative coupling and uncoupling stories, or partial identity disclosure

through innuendos or "queerbaiting" (Abidin, 2019). Further research suggests that the commercial logics of the content creation economy reward the disclosure of vulnerability as a marker of authenticity with increased visibility, while simultaneously incentivizing antagonism, potentially amplifying harms, particularly for marginalized groups (Duffy et al., 2024). Conversely, hypervisible queer creators may be "tokenized" (Kanter, 1977) and scrutinized as representative of the entire queer community (Gailey, 2014; Mercer, 1990).

As a consequence, commercialization is intrinsically linked to the depoliticization of queer culture, since queer expression is adapted to revenue-generating standards in order to achieve visibility and is thereby likely to be stripped of its radical political potential, equality concerns, and subversive elements (Wiesböck, Osipova, et al., 2026). Given that the queer premise of challenging cisgender and heteronormative narratives becomes increasingly untenable, the mainstreaming of queer culture familiarizes broader audiences with homonormative forms while simultaneously reducing space for non-conforming expression. In a manner analogous to normative visibilization, dominant modes of representation and practice are appropriated by audiences, thereby extending and stabilizing capitalist platform logics beyond digital contexts.

In sum, profitable visibilization ties recommendation to remuneration, rewarding market-aligned representations and disadvantaging non-conforming expression, ultimately marginalizing queer voices through both non-recommendation and demonetization. Since platforms implement (de)monetization according to normative judgments of desirability, the boundaries of platformized public spheres are increasingly shaped by profit logics and marketing objectives which may narrow the repertoire of topics available for public deliberation. Commodified depictions of queerness risk portraying it as a lifestyle choice, thereby negatively affecting its legitimacy and political standing (Raymond, 2003). Related inequalities in status and standing within platformized public spheres may be further reinforced by uneven capacities for self-commodification within heteronormative and homonormative systems. Jointly, reduced visibility and demonetization constrain the discursive power of creators addressing non-hegemonic topics and limit their access to social, political, and financial resources and opportunities. In interrelation with quantified and normative visibilization, this governance logic ties queer visibility to commercial viability, perpetuates stereotypes, and promotes a mainstreamed, marketable template of queerness, ultimately constraining the articulation of social justice claims in platformized public spheres.

4. Reconceptualizing (In)Visibility in Platformized Environments: Discussion and Conclusion

In contemporary public life, queer visibility is increasingly entangled with platform infrastructures, algorithmic systems, and corporate governance regimes. While social media platforms have expanded opportunities for queer self-representation and the formation of counterpublics, they are inseparable from mechanisms of datafication, automated classification, and commercial optimization that shape what can be seen, amplified, or rendered intelligible. This carries significant political implications, since queer visibility is understood as a condition for social justice, particularly in its dimensions of representation, recognition, and redistribution (Fraser, 2008). By shaping the boundaries of public deliberation, it influences which subjects are valued, included, and legitimized, thereby affecting discursive power, social standing, and material opportunities. Against this backdrop, this article systematically examines how queer (in)visibility is produced through platform governance.

We conceptualize three interlocking governance logics that affect queer users-citizens in differential ways. First, quantified visibilization renders identities and interactions legible through categories and metrics, extending from counting and labeling to prediction and behavioral modulation. For queer users-citizens, the same classificatory systems that enable discovery can also encode misrecognition, underrepresent non-normative identities, and expose users-citizens to profiling and targeting through homonormative advertising. Second, normative visibilization governs circulation by filtering, ranking, and enforcing policies that delineate what is seen, by whom, and under which conditions. By classifying queer content as sexually explicit, moderation practices both overtly and covertly reduce its visibility, while also incentivizing anticipatory self-censorship and promoting homonormative expressive scripts. Third, profitable visibilization links attention and revenue, selectively rewarding commercially compatible depictions while penalizing critical, activist, or non-normative content through demonetization and reduced reach, thereby reinforcing tokenization and the mainstreaming of marketable queerness. Together, these dynamics disadvantage non-normative expressions while amplifying culturally and commercially legible depictions, narrowing representational diversity and shaping who can convert visibility into recognition and material opportunities. As a whole, the three governance logics fall under the framework of "platformized (in)visibilization," which we propose to describe how opportunities for representation, recognition, and redistribution are mediated by platforms through algorithmic classification, moderation, and revenue alignment, under heteronormative and profit-oriented constraints.

For queer users-citizens, governance logics of social media platforms carry considerable implications because they operate through at least two intertwined layers of normative constraints. The first is heteronormative: Platform rules, automated moderation systems, and advertiser-friendly policies often encode assumptions about binary gender and "acceptable" forms of sexuality, leading to the suppression, downranking, or contextual restriction of queer expression, especially when it is sexual, political, or non-conforming. The second is homonormative: Even when queer visibility is granted, it is frequently filtered through dominant, platform-legible representations of queerness that privilege depoliticized, assimilationist, and stereotypically "acceptable" identities, while marginalizing queer expressions that are racialized, trans, gender-nonconforming, sex-positive, or otherwise deviate from traditional norms of respectability. These two layers produce a form of "stereotyping within stereotyping" in which queer users-citizens are not only subjected to broader heteronormative erasure but are also differentially rendered visible according to internal hierarchies of legibility and desirability within queerness itself. As a result, platform governance does not simply regulate the degree of queer visibility but actively structures its quality, stratification, and political intelligibility.

Taken together, quantified, normative, and profitable governance logics produce visibility regimes that (re)shape social justice concerns for queer individuals in platformized public spheres. With regard to representation, platform logics narrow what is deemed legitimate for circulation, redraw the boundaries of public debate, and privilege depictions that fit algorithmic legibility and brand-safety frames, thereby reducing the range of identities and issues rendered politically relevant and worthy of public attention. For recognition, status equality is conditioned by heteronormative standards further reinforced through homonormative templates, as moderation and ranking practices signal which forms of queerness are acceptable and which are treated as risky, explicit, or out of place, thereby normalizing misrecognition of queer users-citizens. These conditions extend to material redistribution, where attention is linked to monetization and advertiser suitability, resulting in less visibility for non-conforming creators, as well as

fewer resources and discursive power. Taken together, platformized (in)visibilization ties the legitimacy of claims, the standing of speakers, and access to remuneration to socio-technical and commercial criteria that queer users-citizens meet unevenly, constraining the capacity to articulate and advance demands for social justice.

Building on this, social media generally falls short of constituting a public sphere in a democratic sense, despite its apparent resemblance in terms of openness to participation in public communication. Access to visibility and influence is systematically uneven, as communicative prominence is shaped by algorithmic ranking systems, engagement logics, and commercial imperatives. Moreover, as privately owned infrastructures, platforms regulate the conditions of discourse through opaque and mutable governance regimes that remain largely outside democratic accountability and scholarly investigation. This also constitutes a limitation of the present article, as the analysis of social media governance logics relies primarily on secondary accounts. As a result, inequalities in communicative power are not only reproduced but potentially amplified, shaping which issues gain societal relevance and which remain peripheral. At the same time, the privatized governance of communication infrastructures shifts fundamental decisions about speech, visibility, and amplification away from democratic institutions toward corporate actors, raising questions about accountability and public oversight. Collectively, these developments contribute to a fragmented and stratified public communication environment, in which the conditions for shared understanding and coordinated collective action are weakened and the boundaries of legitimate public discourse are increasingly shaped indirectly by market logics rather than democratic deliberation.

For future research, transparency regarding algorithmic structures and biases that shape visibility in platformized publics would be of crucial relevance. Such transparency would also be essential for public policy, an arena where the invisibilization of minoritized groups on social media is insufficiently considered, despite its democratic implications. Democratic interventions could include ensuring more inclusive queer representation in training data for AI models and maintaining human oversight (GLAAD, 2026). To address quantified visibilization, it would be beneficial to incorporate options for gender as a spectrum or allow users-citizens to self-report their gender (Weathington & Brubaker, 2023), while normative visibilization could be countered by increasing the customizability of platforms and profiles to allow greater freedom of (self-)presentation (Brough et al., 2020). Further interventions could reduce the influence of popularity metrics and develop algorithms that privilege “positive” content, as suggested by underrepresented youth (Brough et al., 2020), thereby mitigating concerns surrounding profitable visibilization. In addition to structural regulation, the agency of citizens and civil society should not be underestimated. Examples comprise algorithmic resistance practices such as hijacking hashtags and content indexing to fight discrimination of minoritized groups (Velkova & Kaun, 2021), backlash against unwanted features leading to their removal (Instagram, 2026), or drag as a form of hypervisible performance of queerness that circumvents identity disclosure, disrupts platformized heteronormative binaries, and challenges technological presumptions of individuals as coherent, consistent, and quantifiable (Kornstein, 2019).

Looking ahead, the political relevance of platformized (in)visibilization is likely to intensify due to the growing alignment and mutual infrastructural dependence between social media platforms and reactionary and right-wing ideologies. This includes their inscription into algorithmic systems, reconfiguring visibility regimes in ways that may further restrict the expressive and political affordances available to queer users-citizens. Importantly, such developments raise concerns that queer individuals may be increasingly exposed to

intensified forms of discrimination, targeting, and surveillance. In addition, emerging conditions of platformed communication characterized by personalized distribution and synthetic media are expected to intensify epistemic uncertainty and can expose queer persons to heightened risks of misrepresentation, harassment, and the political delegitimization of queer visibility. Based on these developments, the implications of unequal visibility regimes are increasingly pressing. Future research should therefore extend analyses of platformized (in)visibilization beyond queer persons and social media platforms to examine how visibility, justice, and resistance are negotiated across diverse marginalized user-citizens and digital environments.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the support of the Institute for Advanced Studies for publishing this article as open access. We would like to thank Anna Durnová, Světlana Nedvědová, Pauline Reitzer, and Nuoyi Wang for providing useful comments that significantly improved this article. We would also like to thank the editors and the three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

For this research proposal, artificial intelligence was used as a supportive tool, specifically for English language proofreading and stylistic refinement. The tools used were Consensus AI and Academic AI from ACOnet, the Austrian National Research and Education Network (NREN), provided by the University of Vienna. The use was limited to formal corrections aimed at improving grammar, syntax, and idiomatic accuracy.

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12798
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12798

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

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

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Submitted: 13 May 2026 **Accepted:** 20 July 2026 **Published:** 15 September 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

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; LGBTQI+ rights; online political harassment; platform governance; social media platforms; trans activism

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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 (Grahn & 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 & Rüdig, 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 describes 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.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the participants of the Gender and Politics group at the Swedish Political Science Conference (SWEPSA) in Umeå, Sweden, 2024, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2021-06736) and by Marcus och Amalia Wallenbergs minnesfond (grant number 2023.0046). Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Uppsala University and Cogitatio Press.

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

ChatGPT (based on GPT-5.5) was used to assist with language editing of parts of the manuscript.

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12710
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12710

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Makeup Activism on TikTok: Beauty as Political and Visibility Work Under Platformization

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Submitted: 1 May 2026 **Accepted:** 13 July 2026 **Published:** 10 September 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

Abstract

Social media platforms increasingly shape how activism emerges and operates. Within these attention economies, visibility is a crucial but unevenly distributed resource, structured both by platform infrastructures and gendered power relations. This article examines how feminist actors negotiate these conditions on TikTok by mobilizing beauty practices—specifically makeup—as platform-specific resources for political expression. Focusing on two distinct cases, the Iranian #WomanLifeFreedom movement and the Latin American #NiUnaMenos protests against feminicides, the study analyzes 200 TikTok videos through comparative multimodal discourse analysis. Despite major differences in political context and risk, activists across both cases converge in their use of shared visibility strategies: They adapt TikTok's dominant beauty formats, including makeup tutorials, transformation videos, and facial inscription, to embed feminist critique within familiar, algorithmically favored genres. By repurposing practices traditionally associated with beautification and commodification, creators transform makeup into a visual repertoire of resistance. Conceptualized here as makeup activism, these practices allow feminist content to circulate through high-visibility platform vernaculars. The article argues that visibility on TikTok is not simply a matter of exposure, but a strategic and contested resource shaped by the interaction of platform infrastructures, aesthetic conventions, and gendered politics. In doing so, it contributes to feminist media studies by moving beyond a focus on representation and providing empirical evidence on how feminist actors strategically negotiate gendered regimes of visibility across platformed public spheres that span diverse national and transnational settings.

Keywords

activism; beauty culture; digital feminism; feminist media studies; platformed visibility; political communication; TikTok

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1. Introduction

Beauty has long occupied an uneasy position within feminist politics. In particular, makeup has been theorized simultaneously as a disciplinary tool of control (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991), meaning that society, and the beauty industry, dictate how women should look and behave, a site of commodification (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007), and a medium of resistance (Kennedy, 2016; White, 2018).

This ambivalence has become particularly pronounced in platform-mediated environments, where beauty circulates as one of the most visible and profitable forms of content (Abidin, 2016; Liu, 2023). On TikTok, beauty is not only culturally prominent but infrastructurally privileged. Beauty-related products dominate the platform's commercial ecosystem, accounting for over 80% of sales within TikTok Shop shortly after its launch (Nielsen IQ, 2023), while makeup- and beauty-related videos consistently outperform other categories in terms of engagement and circulation (Liu, 2023). These dynamics are reinforced by recommendation systems that amplify content capable of sustaining attention, producing feedback loops in which visibility generates further visibility. Formats such as makeup tutorials and "get ready with me" (GRWM) routines are therefore not only widespread but systematically advantaged within TikTok's attention economy.

At the same time, TikTok has become a key site of contentious expression (J. Lee & Abidin, 2023), where political discourse unfolds under conditions of algorithmic curation (Baumann et al., 2026; Bonini & Treré, 2024). Within this platform environment, visibility is neither neutral nor equally distributed but is continuously shaped by recommendation systems, opaque moderation, and governance practices (Abidin, 2020). As a result, activism depends not only on what is communicated but also on how political claims are formatted, performed, and adapted to the platform's vernaculars and visibility regimes.

Despite growing scholarship on digital feminism (Clark-Parsons, 2022; Vachhani, 2024), beauty cultures (Foster & Baker, 2022; Liu, 2023), and TikTok activism (Cervi, 2026; J. Lee & Abidin, 2023), the strategic appropriation of platform-native beauty formats for feminist political communication remains underexplored. This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing "makeup activism" as the strategic appropriation of platform-native beauty formats to articulate feminist claims and negotiate visibility on TikTok.

To explore how these practices operate across different political contexts, we focus on TikTok videos related to two feminist movements: the Latin American Ni Una Menos movement (#NiUnaMenos) and the Iranian Woman, Life, Freedom protests (#WomanLifeFreedom, #MahsaAmini).

The Ni Una Menos movement emerged in Argentina in 2015 in response to rising feminicides and rapidly developed into a transnational feminist movement that spread throughout Ibero-America and inspired mobilizations worldwide. Initially organized through mass street protest, the movement subsequently expanded its digital repertoire, with TikTok becoming an important space for communication and mobilization following the platform's rapid growth after the Covid-19 pandemic (Bedrosian, 2022).

Woman, Life, Freedom emerged in Iran in September 2022 following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini and constitutes a movement resisting the country's authoritarian regime and its systematic oppression of women. Although both movements have achieved global visibility on TikTok, they operate under markedly different

political and communicative conditions. Whereas Ni Una Menos incorporated TikTok into an already established transnational movement, the visibility of Woman, Life, Freedom has been shaped from the outset by internet censorship, state surveillance, and restrictions on access to social media platforms in Iran (Alimardani & Alterman, 2022).

In this article, feminism is understood as a heterogeneous field of struggles against gendered oppression whose goals, repertoires, and political meanings are shaped by their specific socio-political contexts (Mohanty, 2003). This perspective allows us to examine how platform-native forms of feminist communication are locally articulated while also identifying communicative practices that emerge across different political contexts through a shared platform infrastructure.

Despite their different political and communicative conditions, both movements reveal a shared communicative logic: Creators adapt platform-native beauty formats to stage critique, represent violence, and negotiate visibility within TikTok's attention economy. We argue that these similarities are not coincidental but reflect the operation of a shared platform environment in which movements observe, appropriate, and rework communicative practices while adapting them to local political conditions.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it advances research on digital activism by shifting the analytical focus from participation to visibility, showing how activism on TikTok is shaped by the need to align political expression with platform-native forms. Second, it contributes to feminist media studies by demonstrating how makeup operates as a platform-mediated communicative resource for articulating feminist critique, complicating binary understandings of beauty as either empowerment or commodification. Third, it contributes to scholarship on platform governance by showing how structurally privileged beauty formats function as tactical infrastructures of visibility, enabling the circulation of contentious political expression across algorithmically curated environments and diverse geopolitical contexts.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Negotiating Visibility: Affordances, Imitation Publics, and TikTok Activism

TikTok has become a paradigmatic site for contemporary digital activism (J. Lee & Abidin, 2023). On the platform, the articulation and circulation of contentious expression are inseparable from platform-specific regimes of visibility: Rather than functioning as a neutral channel of dissemination, TikTok actively structures the conditions under which content can be seen, circulated, or suppressed (Gerbaudo, 2026; Sianturi, 2026) through its algorithmic recommendation system and its opaque, multi-layered regime of moderation (Baumann et al., 2026; Kaye et al., 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Visibility, in this sense, is not an outcome that follows expression but a prior condition that organizes its possibility.

This visibility regime is concretely enacted through the "for you" feed, where content is continuously selected, ranked, and circulated according to its capacity to capture and sustain attention (Kaye et al., 2022; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Rather than reflecting pre-existing audiences or stable communities, the feed assembles dynamic clusters of visibility by grouping users around shared patterns of engagement, aesthetic styles, sounds, and affective intensities. What becomes visible is therefore less a function of authorship or claim-making than of alignment with metrics of retention, interaction, and repeatability (Cervi, 2023; Gerbaudo, 2026).

Attention operates here as a sorting mechanism that privileges forms of expression already compatible with platform logics, since within this attention-driven environment, participation is structured through imitation. As Zulli and Zulli (2022) argue, TikTok gives rise to imitation publics, in which content circulates through the iterative uptake and modulation of recognizable formats. Templates (lip-syncs, transitions, storytelling conventions, or vernacular genres such as Duets or POVs) provide a shared vernacular grammar through which expression becomes legible. Visibility is thus predicated on formal recognizability: Content must first align with established formats in order to be processed and circulated within the feed.

For activist communication, this infrastructural logic introduces a dual constraint: Political expression must, first, be articulated through platform-native templates in order to enter circuits of visibility. At the same time, such expression remains subject to an opaque platform policing (Baumann et al., 2026; Sianturi, 2026) that regulates the visibility of content, particularly of those materials which are considered sensitive or explicitly political (Aprilia, 2025).

Empirical research illustrates how activists respond to these conditions by embedding political meaning within recognizable formats: Studies of #freepalestine (Cervi & Divon, 2023; Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022) show how political narratives are rearticulated through stylized performances aligned with platform conventions; Subramanian (2020) discloses how Bahujan girls mobilize TikTok's aesthetic repertoires to articulate caste critique; J. J. Lee and Lee (2023) show how participants in #StopAsianHate embed personal narratives within platform-native formats; and Lünenborg and Backes (2025) highlight how shared performative registers facilitate the transnational circulation of feminist campaigns such as #mybodymychoice. At the same time, research on algorithmic filtering and platform governance shows that such practices often involve indirect language (Aprilia, 2025; Ungless et al., 2025), aesthetic camouflage (Cervi & Marín-Lladó, 2022), and the appropriation and/or hijacking of high-visibility hashtags to navigate moderation systems (Treré & Kaun, 2021; Zeng & Kaye, 2022).

Activism on TikTok consequently emerges as a practice of adaptation under constraint, in which political meaning is embedded within formats that are both recognizable to the algorithm and less susceptible to moderation. Creators adjust not only what they say, but how they say it, translating contentious issues into aesthetic, narrative, and affective registers that negotiate both visibility and permissibility. These strategies are not merely reactive but anticipatory, oriented toward opaque systems of classification in which visibility depends on how content is rendered legible (or undetectable) by algorithms.

2.2. Feminism and Makeup: A Contentious Relationship

Feminist scholarship has long conceptualized makeup as an ambivalent practice. While beauty has been theorized as a technology of gendered regulation that reproduces normative ideals of femininity (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991), it has also been understood as a practice of agency (Riley & Scharff, 2013) and resistance through which dominant norms can be strategically negotiated and contested (White, 2018). Rather than resolving this tension, contemporary scholarship increasingly approaches makeup as a contested cultural practice whose political meanings are contingent upon the social and media contexts in which it is performed (Stein, 2023).

This debate has acquired renewed significance within digital feminism. Social media platforms have fostered forms of "visual net feminism" (Kohout, 2019), in which political expression increasingly unfolds through images, short-form video, and embodied aesthetic performances. Within these environments, hyper-feminine and "girly" aesthetics function as recognizable platform vernaculars that can simultaneously align with platform logics and challenge conventional expectations of feminist politics (Kohout, 2019). At the same time, these practices remain embedded within platform economies, influencer cultures, and the commercialization of visibility, where empowerment is frequently articulated through self-branding and market participation (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007).

Yet reducing digital beauty practices to neoliberal visibility alone overlooks their broader communicative and political capacities. On TikTok, makeup increasingly functions as a platform-native communicative practice through which creators articulate political claims, contest dominant representations, and render marginalized identities visible. Feroza Aziz's viral TikTok, which embedded criticism of the persecution of Uyghur Muslims within a makeup tutorial, illustrates how familiar beauty formats can be repurposed for political expression (Cervi, 2026). Likewise, studies of queer creators and racialized communities demonstrate how aesthetic performance and self-representation mobilize makeup to challenge normative constructions of gender, race, and sexuality on social media (Foster & Baker, 2022; Stein, 2023; White, 2018).

2.3. Analytical Framework

Building on the preceding discussion, we conceptualize TikTok makeup activism as a platform-native practice constituted through the ongoing negotiation of affordances within imitation publics under conditions of contested visibility. To examine this practice, we propose a three-layered analytical framework comprising three interrelated aspects of activist communication on TikTok: the adaptation of political communication to platform-native vernaculars, the articulation of feminist claims through beauty practices as communicative resources, and the strategic negotiation of visibility within algorithmically governed environments. These layers are analytically distinct yet mutually constitutive.

The first layer, "platform adaptation," examines how creators appropriate recognizable TikTok formats as communicative resources. Rather than functioning as neutral containers, platform-native formats such as #makeupwithme, transformation videos, or "GRWM" routines structure participation by establishing recognizable conventions of visual performance, narration, temporality, and audience engagement. They therefore shape not only how content is presented, but also how it becomes intelligible within TikTok's vernacular culture.

The second layer, "political articulation," examines how feminist claims are expressed through these adapted formats. Rather than treating political meaning as external to aesthetic performance, this dimension focuses on how spoken narration, visual symbolism, textual inscription, embodied performance, and affective expression work together to articulate contentious issues within communicative forms that are not conventionally understood as political.

The third layer, "visibility work," examines how creators position their videos for circulation within TikTok's recommendation and moderation systems. This includes strategies such as combining activist and beauty hashtags and/or modulating the explicitness of political expression in order to maximize visibility

while reducing the risk of suppression. Visibility work therefore captures the strategic calibration between recognizability, ambiguity, and amplification through which creators negotiate algorithmically governed environments.

Taken together, the three layers conceptualize TikTok activism as a relational process in which creators continuously negotiate how political meaning is formatted, articulated, and circulated within a platform whose visibility is structured by both algorithmic recommendation and platform governance. Rather than representing sequential stages, the framework captures complementary dimensions of the same communicative practice, explaining how makeup becomes a platform-native resource for feminist activism.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study employs multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin, 2013) to examine how political meaning is constructed and circulated within TikTok videos that combine makeup practices with commentary on social and political issues. Multimodal critical discourse analysis is particularly suited to analyzing how meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes rather than through isolated communicative elements. Accordingly, each video was examined as a multimodal communicative event, considering the interplay between visual performance (e.g., makeup application, gestures, facial expression, and transitions), spoken discourse (voice-over or direct address), written text (captions, on-screen overlays, and facial inscriptions), audio (music, reused sounds, and lip-syncing), and platform-specific elements. Rather than analyzing these modalities separately, the study focuses on how they work together to construct feminist meanings and negotiate visibility within TikTok's recommendation and moderation systems.

3.2. Dataset Construction

The dataset consists of 200 TikTok videos selected from two previously developed corpora on feminist activism: one focusing on #NiUnaMenos and the other on #WomanLifeFreedom. Both corpora were originally constructed through the systematic collection of publicly available TikTok videos (for a detailed description, see Appendix A in the Supplementary File).

For the purposes of this study, we applied a second-stage filtering procedure, retaining only videos in which beauty practices constituted a central communicative format. Videos were included when they (a) employed beauty-related hashtags (e.g., #makeupwithme, #beauty, #GRWM) and/or (b) incorporated recognizable beauty formats such as makeup tutorials, transformation videos, or "GRWM" routines.

This filtering procedure resulted in a subsample of politically oriented videos that explicitly integrate beauty practices, allowing us to isolate a specific communicative configuration: political discourse embedded within high-visibility, platform-native beauty genres. The final sample size (N = 200) was determined through qualitative saturation, as no substantially new patterns emerged during the iterative analysis (for a detailed description, see Appendix A).

3.3. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the individual TikTok video, treated as a multimodal communicative artifact. Each video is analyzed as a composite of interacting elements, including visual performance (such as makeup application, gestures, and facial expression), spoken narration or voice-over, on-screen text (captions and overlays), hashtags and metadata, and audio elements such as music or reused sounds. This approach enables a holistic analysis of how meaning is distributed across modalities rather than located in any single component.

3.4. Analytical Procedure

The analysis combined deductive and inductive interpretation. Deductively, the three analytical layers developed from the theoretical framework—platform adaptation, political articulation, and visibility work—structured the analysis. Rather than functioning as mutually exclusive categories, these layers provided complementary analytical perspectives through which every video was examined. Inductively, descriptive subcodes were developed within each layer to capture recurring multimodal patterns across the corpus. A detailed description of the analytical framework, coding dimensions, and inductively developed subcodes is provided in Appendix B.

The analysis was interpretative and informed by feminist visual methodologies, which emphasize the situated nature of knowledge production and the construction of meaning across visual and discursive modalities (Özkula et al., 2024). Following an iterative comparative procedure, both authors repeatedly reviewed all videos, examining how visual performance, narration, on-screen text, sound, and platform-specific features interacted to produce political meaning. Coding categories were continuously refined through systematic comparison and discussion until interpretative consistency was achieved.

Rather than emphasizing the frequency of individual features, the analysis focused on recurring multimodal configurations across videos. Particular attention was paid to how platform-native formats, feminist claims, and visibility strategies co-occurred and interacted, thereby shaping the articulation and circulation of contentious expression on TikTok.

3.5. Limitations and Reflexivity

The dataset reflects content made visible through TikTok's interface and is therefore shaped by platform recommendation systems and hashtag-based retrieval. As such, it captures patterns of circulated rather than total content and may reflect underlying algorithmic biases in what becomes observable and analyzable.

In line with the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020), the study adopts a precautionary approach to identifiability. Although all data were publicly accessible at the time of collection, no screenshots, usernames, or facial images are reproduced, as their inclusion would increase the traceability of individuals—particularly in the context of politically sensitive content.

4. Results

In this section, we present the three main formats that we identified in the comparative analysis of our datasets: (a) makeup tutorials as Trojan horses for political meaning, (b) makeup transitions to dramatize (and make sense of) violence, and (c) the face as canvas for political messages. As our analysis shows, these practices do not function in isolation but often intersect in complex ways.

4.1. Makeup Tutorials as Trojan Horses for Political Meaning

The videos in this dataset closely adhere to the #makeupwithme format, which constitutes a recognizable platform-native genre in which creators document their daily makeup routines while addressing the audience in an informal, conversational manner. Typically structured around close-up shots of the face, these videos combine aesthetic practice with direct address, often accompanied by music or voiceover.

Across the dataset, this format is adapted in two similar but distinct ways. In the Ni Una Menos case, the format is anchored in a standardized discursive template. Creators perform their makeup routine using two main audio tracks—"si un día de estos me matan" (if one day they kill me) or "si mañana no regreso" (if I don't return tomorrow)—poetic monologues anticipating the conditions under which feminicide would be socially justified, referencing institutional limitations and enumerating familiar victim-blaming narratives. The soundtracks structure the communicative act, producing consistency across videos while allowing variation in visual performance.

By contrast, in the videos relating to the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, the same format is more frequently adapted through individual narration. While maintaining the visual conventions of makeup tutorials—foundation application, concealer, eyelash curling—creators introduce voice-over or direct speech to articulate critique. For instance, one creator denounces how the Iranian regime controls "how women dress, speak, think and protest," while another frames makeup itself as resistance, stating: "Did you know makeup is a form of political resistance in Iran?" and recounting how women in Tehran use it to assert autonomy in a context where it is regulated and policed. This contrast highlights two complementary modes of adaptation: a collective, standardized mode, structured through a shared soundtrack; and an individualized, narrative mode, based on personal explanation and contextualization.

Within both configurations, the makeup tutorial format performs political work by embedding critique within an aesthetic routine. Rather than presenting contentious expression through explicitly political genres, creators integrate it into everyday practices associated with beauty and self-presentation. In the Ni Una Menos videos, this embedding operates through the juxtaposition of repetitive, visually familiar gestures with the severity of the soundtrack's content, producing a layered communicative structure in which aesthetic normalcy coexists with discursive disruption. In the Woman, Life, Freedom videos, political work is performed through personal narration and explanation, transforming the routine into a space for contextualizing repression and reframing everyday practices—such as wearing makeup—as acts of resistance. In both cases, the format is not a neutral container but an active structuring device that shapes how contentious expression is articulated and received, enabling activism to operate through vernacularized, platform-native forms.

From a visibility work perspective, these videos constitute paradigmatic examples of algorithmic resistance (Treré & Bonini, 2024). By embedding critique within highly recognizable and platform-familiar formats, creators engage in algorithmic evasion, presenting contentious expression in forms unlikely to be immediately classified as political (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). At the same time, creators perform algorithmic hijacking (Treré & Bonini, 2024), appropriating unrelated high-visibility hashtags—such as #makeuptutorial, #makeupartist, #women, or #beauty—and their associated metadata to redirect attention toward gender violence and state repression. Positioning the content within lifestyle and beauty categories rather than activist discourse allows activists to reach a greater public, namely all users interested in beauty, while reducing the likelihood of moderation, downranking, or exclusion from recommendation flows. Through this combined strategy, contentious expression becomes both circulable and less detectable within TikTok's contested visibility regime.

Makeup tutorials such as these illustrate how networked feminist actors strategically appropriate and repurpose the visual repertoires of popular culture to articulate critique. Functioning much like a Trojan horse, contentious expression is embedded within familiar beauty content and thus introduced into the viewer's attention under the guise of entertainment. The unexpected shift from tutorial to critique not only amplifies the disruptive effect but also enhances circulation by sustaining viewer engagement. As Alice Ophelia observes, the appeal of such content lies in its capacity to convey a "secret coded message," making viewers feel that "they are in on the activism itself" (as quoted in Newman, 2021).

4.2. Makeup Transitions to Dramatize (and Make Sense of) Violence

In contrast to the #makeupwithme videos discussed above, a significant portion of the dataset mobilizes makeup practices as a form of visual storytelling through staged, embodied violence. Here, the memetic structure shifts from conversational routine to transformation-based formats, in which creators rely on TikTok's highly recognizable technique of visual transitions. As a platform-native convention, transitions function as an iterable template that structures participation through before–after sequences, rapid edits, and gesture-based cuts, and are widely understood as markers of technical proficiency within TikTok's audiovisual grammar (Abidin, 2020; Zeng & Kaye, 2022). In beauty-related content, such transitions typically dramatize aesthetic transformation—from a natural appearance to a stylized or "full-glam" look—serving as a central visual spectacle (Otto, 2023). Across the dataset, however, creators adapt this familiar format by reconfiguring transformation as a narrative device for staging violence.

Despite their different geopolitical contexts, both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos subsets follow a similar formal logic in which makeup transitions are used to depict and transform embodied experiences of violence. In the Iran-related videos circulating after the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, creators initially reproduce conventional beauty routines: Close-up shots frame the application of foundation, concealer, blush, mascara, and red lipstick. These sequences are abruptly disrupted by transition effects that transform polished appearances into simulated injuries—bloody noses, black eyes, or split lips. Through cuts or hand gestures that alternately conceal and reveal different layers of makeup, creators juxtapose aesthetic perfection with visual markers of violence. Combined with hashtags such as #MahsaAmini and #WomanLifeFreedom, these transformations explicitly reference Amini's death while pointing to broader patterns of gender-based violence and state repression in Iran. Facial expressions—often staging grief, pain, or shock—further intensify the performative dimension, as violence is not only represented but enacted on the creators' own bodies.

A similar aesthetic logic can be observed in videos associated with the Ni Una Menos makeup challenge. These clips likewise stage bodily reenactments of violence through made-up injuries and theatrical performances of suffering. However, compared to many Iranian examples, the Ni Una Menos videos often employ a more elaborate choreography of transitions, linking multiple shots of differently made-up faces through rapid, platform-specific edits. Faces marked by bruises, taped mouths, or bloody handprints are interwoven with gestures and props—blindfolds, plastic bags, ropes suggesting strangulation—that evoke different forms of gender-based violence. In some cases, additional visual effects such as flames intensify the dramatic staging. At the same time, these representations are juxtaposed with images of composure and defiance, as creators confront the camera with steady gazes and carefully applied makeup. Within this visual vocabulary, elements such as purple eyeshadow and red lipstick emerge as recognizable symbols of feminist protest.

Within this configuration, the format performs political work by transforming makeup itself into an aesthetic medium of contentious expression. In doing so, it connects with a longer history of feminist performance art, in which the body becomes both medium and site of protest through the staging of vulnerability and violence, while also aligning with more recent "artivist" repertoires such as those of the feminist activist group FEMEN, who mobilize body paint, fake blood, and simulated injury to turn the naked female body into a political weapon. Comparable strategies can be observed in contemporary makeup art, where practitioners such as Alex Box, Isamaya Ffrench, or Eszter Magyar use distortion and prosthetics to deliberately collapse the boundary between beautification and violence. In this sense, the TikTok videos extend an existing visual repertoire across art and activism in which makeup is used as a weaponized aesthetic of resistance.

Unlike #makeupwithme formats that embed critique within narrative or audio layers, transition videos thus convey political meaning directly through the visual transformation. The abrupt shift from normative beauty aesthetics to explicit signs of violence produces a moment of rupture that destabilizes the coherence typically associated with beauty content. Through this visual logic, makeup ceases to function as decoration and instead becomes a tool for representing, reenacting, and contesting violence.

Makeup transition videos use the performed vulnerability of the female body as a protest tool which is turned against the causes of the violence itself. Recent scholarship has emphasized the constitutive role of vulnerability in political action, particularly in digital contexts (Vachhani, 2024). Butler (2011, p. 198) suggests that "receptivity and vulnerability are actually the presuppositions of agency and resistance, and not their opposite." She argues that it is precisely our susceptibility to being affected by injustice that moves us to resist it. Therefore, vulnerability functions as an "effective mobilizing force" in political struggles (Butler, 2016, p. 14). In this sense, the injured female body we see in the transition videos is not a sign of its "weakness," but, on the contrary, becomes a potent symbol for feminist resistance and the starting point for networked action.

From a visibility work perspective, these videos similarly rely on the strategic adaptation of platform-native conventions. Transformation videos are known to capture attention and sustain viewer engagement, contributing to their algorithmic amplification (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). By operating within this high-visibility format, creators increase the likelihood of circulation while embedding contentious expression within content that remains recognizable as beauty-related. The use of relevant hashtags—such as #makeup, #makeuptutorial, or #beauty, alongside activist tags—further situates these videos within overlapping

content categories, enhancing discoverability while reducing the risk of immediate suppression. At the same time, the dramatic and visually striking nature of the transformations increases shareability, reinforcing circulation within TikTok's attention economy.

This visibility is further amplified through the use of highly recognized, context-specific protest songs. Some Woman, Life, Freedom transition videos draw on a live version of "Another Love" by Tom Odell. By lip-syncing the lyrics ("And if somebody hurts you, I wanna fight/But my hands been broken one too many times"), the audio evokes themes of struggle and solidarity, reinforcing the affective intensity of the visual performances. Other videos use "Baraye" ("For" in Persian) by Shervin Hajipour, a song that became a central anthem of the 2022 Iranian protests, articulating everyday grievances of the Iranian people and their collective demands for freedom. Both songs circulated widely on social media and were adopted across various protest formats, including videos of women cutting their hair as a gesture of solidarity (Schankweiler & Straub, 2023). As such, the sounds function as a connective infrastructure linking different memetic templates, enhancing the overall visibility of the Woman, Life, Freedom protests on the platform.

In the Ni Una Menos case, the most recurrent song is "Canción sin miedo" ("Song without fear" in Spanish), a protest song by Mexican composer and singer Vivir Quintana, which stages a letter to the Mexican president, asking him to address the endemic problem of gender violence, which has become an anthem for feminist protests (Cervi & García-Blesa, 2026).

Across both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos cases, activism thus emerges as a form of platform-native adaptation, in which the aesthetic affordances of makeup content are repurposed to stage, visualize, and circulate experiences of violence under conditions of contested visibility. Notwithstanding, the consequences of making such expressions visible are unevenly distributed, contingent on the geopolitical conditions in which creators operate. For Iranian creators, in particular, participating in such forms of visibility entails very real risks to their lives. A striking example is Iranian actress and influencer Parisa Pourmeshki, who disappeared shortly after posting a makeup transition format video in October 2022 (Witness Report, 2024). Her video followed the elaborate transition choreographies typical of our dataset, shifting between multiple staged looks: a blindfolded, blood-smeared face, a mouth sealed with safety pins, or mascara running like blood from her eyes. After the video was removed from her accounts, it was reposted by users outside Iran. Many explicitly linked its publication to Pourmeshki's sudden disappearance and called for amplifying Iranian voices, urging others to "be their voice." This case underscores the ambivalent conditions under which makeup activism operates: While visibility can function as a powerful resource for feminist expression and transnational solidarity, it is embedded in asymmetrical structures where visibility carries radically different real-world political consequences depending on geopolitical context.

4.3. The Face as Canvas for Political Messages

A third memetic format identified in the dataset consists of videos in which makeup is used to transform the face into a surface for explicit inscription, where contentious expression is rendered directly through written or symbolic elements. As a platform-native adaptation, this format builds on the visual conventions of beauty content while extending them toward more overt forms of signification. It often appears in hybrid configurations, combined with the transformation-based videos discussed above, but shifts the emphasis from visual transitions to symbolic and textual marking of the body.

Across the dataset, this format is adapted in both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos contexts, albeit with different emphases. In videos expressing solidarity with the Iranian protests, creators paint national flags or maps onto their faces, visually aligning themselves with the Iranian people's struggle. In these cases, the individual body is reconfigured as a collective or national body, displacing the focus from violence against individual women to violence against a broader political community. This articulation is sometimes embedded within familiar TikTok formats such as GRWM, reframed as "get ready with me for protest," thereby merging everyday routines with explicit acts of political positioning. In some cases, this is expressed through direct inscription—one video shows an act of unveiling that coincides with the revelation of text written across the woman's eyelid: "hijab is a choice." Here, makeup is effectively replaced by an explicit political message.

In the Ni Una Menos subset, this aesthetic is further intensified, as the format more consistently foregrounds written messages and symbolic repertoires of feminist resistance. Phrases such as "Ni una más, nos queremos vivas" ("not one more, we want you alive") are inscribed directly onto the skin, often complemented by hashtags that reinforce the message at the level of metadata. Another recurring practice involves writing the names of femicide victims onto the body, producing an embodied form of remembrance that situates individual cases within a broader collective struggle. At the same time, the videos mobilize widely recognizable feminist symbols, including the Venus sign and the use of purple makeup, alongside more elaborate imagery such as female figures with raised fists or surrounded by flames, echoing established revolutionary iconography.

Within this configuration, the format performs political work by transforming makeup into a medium of direct inscription, where contentious expression is no longer embedded or implied but visibly articulated on the body itself. The face becomes a site of enunciation, collapsing the distinction between aesthetic practice and political messaging. In contrast to other formats where critique is conveyed through narration or juxtaposition, here the political meaning is materially present, rendered legible through text and symbols that anchor interpretation. This also resonates with conceptual trends in contemporary makeup art, where practitioners use written inscriptions to interrogate beauty norms and their socio-political implications—for instance, Eszter Magyar's text-based interventions on eyelids, lips and tongues such as "this is not art" or "inner beauty." Across these practices, the feminized body becomes a semiotic surface on which critique is made immediately visible and legible.

From a visibility work perspective, these videos operate differently from the previous formats, as they rely less on indirectness and more on the controlled amplification of explicit content. Rather than minimizing political legibility, creators deliberately foreground contentious expression through visual inscription, while still embedding it within recognizable beauty formats. By doing so, they ensure that the message remains immediately readable to audiences without fully departing from platform-native conventions that support circulation.

This strategy reflects a distinct mode of adaptation: Instead of disguising content, creators modulate its intensity and framing to remain compatible with platform logics. The use of familiar formats such as #makeup or #GRWM anchors the videos within high-visibility content categories, while the integration of activist hashtags—such as #NiUnaMenos, #MahsaAmini, or #WomanLifeFreedom—positions them within broader discursive networks. Rather than functioning primarily as a means of evasion, this dual positioning

allows creators to expand reach across overlapping audiences, connecting lifestyle-oriented viewers with activist content.

At the same time, these practices unfold within a context of algorithmic control and uneven censorship, where explicitly political content may still be subject to restriction. By distributing contentious expression across visual, textual, and symbolic layers—rather than relying on a single modality—creators reduce dependence on any one element that might trigger suppression. Visibility is thus achieved through compositional strategies, in which meaning is layered and distributed across the video's elements, allowing for both clarity and resilience within TikTok's contested visibility regime.

Across both the Woman, Life, Freedom and Ni Una Menos cases, this format demonstrates how activists adapt platform-native aesthetics not only to navigate censorship, but also to sustain the circulation of explicit political messaging, reinforcing the centrality of adaptation in conditions of algorithmic visibility and control.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article comparatively examined how creators associated with the Latin American Ni Una Menos movement and the Iranian Woman, Life, Freedom protests mobilize beauty practices to communicate feminist claims on TikTok. Despite their markedly different socio-political contexts, both movements repeatedly appropriated similar platform-native beauty formats to articulate distinct political struggles.

Building on these recurring similarities, we introduce the concept of "makeup activism" to describe the strategic mobilization of beauty practices to articulate feminist claims through platform-native vernaculars. The three analytical dimensions developed in this article—platform adaptation, political articulation, and visibility work—offer a framework for understanding how this communicative practice takes shape, acquires political meaning, and negotiates visibility within TikTok's algorithmically governed environment.

The first analytical dimension, platform adaptation, reveals how activists across both movements align their communication with formats that are already popular and privileged within TikTok's attention economy. This adaptation, on the one hand, reflects TikTok's transnational communicative ecology, in which creators continuously observe, imitate, and repurpose one another's practices—consistent with the platform's culture of imitation (Zulli & Zulli, 2022)—while reworking them through locally situated protest cultures, symbolic repertoires, and culturally specific references. On the other hand, activists strategically embed feminist claims within familiar beauty formats that are more likely to be amplified by TikTok's recommendation system, extending their reach beyond already sympathetic or politically engaged publics. Tutorials, transformation videos, and facial inscription, therefore, operate not simply as aesthetic conventions but as recognizable platform vernaculars that simultaneously facilitate transnational imitation and broaden the circulation of feminist claims across diverse publics.

These findings extend Kohout's (2019) concept of visual net feminism. While Kohout foregrounds the growing centrality of visual aesthetics to feminist expression, our analysis shows that on TikTok these aesthetics operate not simply as expressive resources but as platform vernaculars through which feminist politics become recognizable, imitable, and widely circulable. In this sense, visual net feminism is shaped not only by the increasing importance of visual aesthetics, but also by the platform logics that render aesthetic forms communicatively effective across diverse political contexts.

The second analytical dimension, political articulation, foregrounds how TikTok creators transform makeup from a practice of beautification into a communicative medium through which collective feminist critique is articulated. Across both datasets, beauty practices become vehicles for denouncing gender-based violence, staging embodied experiences of oppression, and cultivating affective solidarity.

These findings not only complicate longstanding feminist debates that conceptualize makeup simultaneously as a technology of discipline (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991) and a medium of resistance (White, 2018) by showing how beauty practices can be strategically reconfigured as collective performances of political expression, but also challenge influential accounts of popular feminism and platformized beauty cultures (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). Existing scholarship has frequently interpreted beauty practices on social media through the lens of neoliberal self-branding, individualized choice, and commodified empowerment. While makeup activism undoubtedly unfolds within commercialized platform environments, our findings suggest that commodification and political resistance should not be understood as mutually exclusive dynamics. Political expression, aesthetic practice, self-presentation, and entrepreneurial branding frequently coexist within the same creator profiles, rendering any straightforward distinction between activism and the commercial infrastructures that sustain visibility increasingly untenable. Rather than displacing feminist politics, these commercial infrastructures increasingly constitute the conditions through which feminist critique is articulated, circulated, and made publicly visible.

More fundamentally, however, our comparative analysis challenges dominant understandings of popular feminism derived primarily from Western liberal contexts (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Popular feminism has frequently been theorized through individualized empowerment, entrepreneurial self-branding, and the politics of personal choice. Although these dynamics remain relevant within TikTok's commercial ecosystem, neither of the movements examined here can be adequately explained through this framework alone. In both cases, makeup is mobilized primarily to articulate collective political struggles rather than individualized projects of self-realization. At the same time, the comparison reveals that these collective struggles are themselves differently constituted. Whereas Ni Una Menos mobilizes beauty practices to denounce feminicide, memorialize victims, and reinforce transnational feminist solidarity, Woman, Life, Freedom articulates feminist resistance within a broader struggle against authoritarian rule, compulsory veiling, and state repression. Similar platform vernaculars therefore accommodate distinct feminist projects whose political meanings remain inseparable from their socio-political contexts.

The third analytical dimension, visibility work, extends Abidin's (2016) account of platformed visibility by demonstrating how commercially privileged beauty vernaculars become tactical infrastructures for feminist activism. Makeup activism emerges not because beauty is inherently political, but because beauty constitutes one of TikTok's most structurally privileged communicative genres. As discussed above, beauty formats are already optimized for attention, circulation, and imitation, making them particularly effective vehicles for embedding political critique within familiar platform conventions. Their apparent ordinariness also generates a degree of strategic ambiguity, allowing contentious expression to circulate through genres more commonly associated with entertainment and lifestyle while reducing the likelihood of immediate moderation or algorithmic suppression. Rather than operating outside platform logics, activists strategically appropriate these logics as conditions for political visibility, illustrating forms of algorithmic resistance (Treré & Bonini, 2024) that work through, rather than against, the platform's recommendation and governance systems.

At the same time, our comparison highlights that similar visibility strategies acquire different political meanings and consequences across socio-political contexts. Although creators across both movements negotiate the same platform infrastructures, they do so under profoundly unequal socio-political conditions. Whereas Ni Una Menos primarily mobilizes makeup to sustain public denunciation, collective memory, and transnational feminist solidarity within comparatively open digital publics, Woman, Life, Freedom deploys these same visibility strategies in a context where aesthetic self-presentation already constitutes an act of resistance against authoritarian rule and online participation can translate into offline retaliation (Alimardani & Alterman, 2022). Visibility on TikTok should therefore be understood as a situated political resource whose possibilities and risks are shaped by the intersection of platform governance and local regimes of power.

This study has several limitations. Because the platform's recommendation and moderation systems remain largely opaque, our analysis necessarily infers platform dynamics from observable patterns of content production and circulation rather than from direct access to algorithmic processes. Likewise, focusing on two movements cannot capture the full diversity of feminist activism on TikTok, nor the many forms of political expression that remain invisible because they fail to align with platform-native vernaculars or are actively suppressed by platform governance. Future research could therefore examine more directly how creators themselves understand and strategically appropriate these communicative practices, as well as how changes in platform governance reshape the relationship between visibility and activism over time.

Ultimately, this article argues that "makeup activism" should not be understood as a universal feminist repertoire disseminated through social media, but as a shared platform vernacular through which distinct feminist projects are articulated, negotiated, and rendered visible under historically and politically specific conditions. Under conditions of platformization, beauty functions not simply as an object of consumption or self-expression, but as a communicative infrastructure through which feminist politics become recognizable, circulable, and collectively actionable. In doing so, the concept of "makeup activism" foregrounds how contemporary feminist struggles are shaped not only by their political objectives or cultural meanings, but also by the algorithmic, aesthetic, and commercial infrastructures that increasingly govern the conditions under which dissent becomes visible, circulates across publics, and acquires political durability.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Margreth Lünenborg, Ana Makashvili, and Annabella Backes for organizing the 2024 workshop "Understanding Mobilization on Social Media: Methodological Approaches to Activists' Affective and Networking Practices" at Freie Universität Berlin. The workshop provided an important intellectual setting for the exchange of ideas that brought the authors together and helped shape the early development of this article.

Funding

Laura Cervi received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. Verena Straub's contribution to this research was supported by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) as part of the research project Image Protests on Social Media (project number 494996684).

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

A large language model (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely for translation purposes (single words or phrases) and minor linguistic refinement. All outputs were reviewed and verified to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the intended meaning.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12796
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12796

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Open Access Journal

Resisting the Boys' Club: Tactical Agency, Gendered Performances, and Professional Survival in Czech Political Journalism

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Submitted: 13 May 2026 **Accepted:** 27 July 2026 **Published:** 15 September 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

Abstract

In the still masculinized "boys' club" of political journalism, women are frequently cast as passive subjects of systemic exclusion. This article subverts that narrative, moving beyond traditional victim-centric frameworks to explore the granular, everyday navigation of female and male journalists within gendered professional structures. Leveraging a robust longitudinal dataset of 139 interviews across three iterative waves, we reveal how and why political journalists deploy complex strategies and tactics to secure professional survival and visibility. This approach demonstrates how specific situational triggers fluidly shape these choices in daily practice. Ultimately, this study highlights the profound ambivalence of individual agency: While these highly restricted tactical choices enable daily survival within a hostile reporting environment, they temporarily accommodate, rather than dismantle, the underlying status quo, directly underscoring an urgent need for institutional and structural evolution.

Keywords

Czech Republic; female journalists; gendered agency; media landscape; political journalism; professional resistance

1. Introduction

Feminist media scholarship has long demonstrated that public spheres are deeply gendered, reflecting and reproducing unequal power relations in politics and media (North, 2016b). Research on women in journalism specifically documents a landscape marked by systemic exclusion from leadership positions (i.e., vertical segregation), the concentration of women in particular journalistic beats and professional roles (i.e., horizontal segregation), and persistent pay inequity (Baloch et al., 2025; Kim, 2006; Urbániková &

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Čaladi, 2026). Within this environment, both female and male journalists must navigate masculinized newsroom cultures that often result in the institutional dismissal of complaints and the assignment of female reporters to lower-status beats (Melek, 2024). Furthermore, pervasive harassment and abuse, alongside heightened safety risks and psychological harm, often foster self-censorship and withdrawal (Baloch et al., 2025; Sbaraini Fontes et al., 2024).

While structural barriers in political journalism are well-documented (e.g., Baloch et al., 2025; Pain, 2017), existing literature focuses predominantly on the descriptive mapping of female exclusion, which provides limited insight into how these conditions are navigated in everyday practice. This article addresses this gap by examining the everyday professional practices of political journalists in the Czech context—a setting marked by deeply entrenched masculinized newsroom cultures and demanding interactions with predominantly male politicians (Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). To analyze these dynamics, we adopt a feminist lens to professional agency, conceptualizing these practices as inherently bounded, contextualized, and embedded within existing power structures (Gill, 2007; McNay, 2000). Specifically, we draw on a modified reading of de Certeau (1984), applying "strategies" not to institutional power but to journalists' overarching orientations toward gendered norms and using "tactics" during daily interactions. Through this framework, we address the following research question: How do female political journalists enact agency through everyday professional practices within the masculinized environment of Czech political journalism?

By answering this question, we move beyond the general existence of agency to a granular understanding of its relational execution within the broader political journalism environment. To investigate these dynamics, we draw on a three-wave longitudinal dataset of 139 semi-structured interviews that track a core cohort of 50 female and male political journalists and politicians across local, regional, and national contexts. Thematically analyzing these accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2022) allows us to unpack the subtle intersections of gender and power. While our empirical focus remains centered on individual navigation, we explicitly recognize that the structural constraints of this environment remain immensely restrictive. Rather than documenting systemic change, this research illuminates subtle, constrained acts of individual agency within a deeply unequal system. We argue that capturing these micro-level practices is a critical prerequisite to identifying the precise pressure points where urgent, macro-level structural changes are required.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gendered Inequalities in Political Journalism

Despite the increasing participation of women in journalism, gendered inequalities persist in the profession (North, 2016b; Steiner, 2012). Political reporting thus remains notably male-dominated: Globally, women accounted for only 39% of journalists featured in political news stories in 2025 and remain underrepresented in senior and high-status reporting positions (Macharia et al., 2025).

Beyond numbers, inequalities manifest in everyday reporting dynamics and structural constraints. Political journalism relies heavily on informal, off-the-record relationship-building in settings like bars or sporting events (Kim, 2006; Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014). These homosocial spaces foster bonding between male journalists and political actors, often excluding women from these "gentlemen's clubs" (Voronova, 2014), "old boys' networks" (van Zoonen, 1998), and "brothers-in-arms" camaraderie (Lachover, 2005).

Similar patterns of exclusion have been documented in other male-dominated areas of journalism, including sports journalism (Genovese, 2015; Hardin et al., 2008) and war journalism (Palmer & Melki, 2018).

These interactional inequalities are reinforced by cultural norms that shape our understandings of journalistic expertise and authority. Political reporting is associated with rational, objective expertise historically aligned with masculine identities (Reich et al., 2026; Ross, 2001; Ross & Carter, 2011; van Zoonen, 1998), sustaining a masculinized culture that shapes source access and credibility. Additionally, everyday hostility within journalistic work environments polices female and male journalists' relational boundaries. Female journalists report experiences such as being interrupted, undermined, and subjected to sexualized comments or behavior from sources and colleagues (Lachover, 2005; Melki & Mallat, 2016; Rodny-Gumede, 2015). They also face disproportionate public backlash, including targeted online and offline harassment aimed at delegitimizing their presence in political discourse (Chen et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020; Sarikakis et al., 2023).

Finally, these interactional inequalities are embedded in broader structural conditions that shape women's participation and career trajectories. Political journalism is characterized by long and irregular working hours, expectations of constant availability, and norms that privilege uninterrupted career paths—conditions that often conflict with caregiving responsibilities, which continue to fall disproportionately on women (De Vuyst & Raeymaeckers, 2019; Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). Over time, these factors contribute to cumulative disadvantages, including slower career progression, reduced access to leadership positions, and, in some cases, exit from the profession.

2.2. Navigating Masculinized Journalistic Environments

While scholarship on gender and journalism has been instrumental in documenting persistent systemic barriers and inequalities (Byerly, 2013; Macharia et al., 2025; Steiner, 2012), the micro-level practices through which women navigate and respond to these conditions remain comparatively underexamined.

The relatively small body of qualitative studies on journalists' experiences and professional practice indicates that traits associated with femininity may, in specific contexts, be mobilized as resources in journalistic practice, even though their availability and effectiveness remain conditioned by existing gendered power relations. Bals et al. (2026) show that female journalists may gain increased recognition because of their gender, while Somerstein (2021), Genovese (2015), and Palmer and Melki (2018) suggest that gendered perceptions of women as non-threatening and approachable may facilitate entry into particular communities and private spaces and encourage interviewees to open up in ways that may not occur with male journalists.

Despite exclusion and discrimination, female journalists rarely view themselves as victims (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005; Robinson, 2004; Voronova, 2014). Rather, they emphasize their capacity to decide whether to confront, accommodate, or ignore such behavior, as well as their ability to exploit stereotypical attitudes held by male sources. As Robinson (2004, p. 187) notes, female journalists working in male-dominated contexts "use their gender strategically." Importantly, these responses unfold within structural constraints and existing gendered power relations. They should not be understood as evidence of unconstrained choice or straightforward empowerment.

Based on prior research (Genovese, 2015; Hardin et al., 2008; Lachover, 2005; Pain, 2017; Palmer & Melki, 2018; Robinson, 2004; Voronova, 2014), three recurring tactics can be identified that female journalists may adopt when navigating interactions with male sources. The first is the "help me" tactic, where journalists present themselves as deferential, less knowledgeable, non-threatening, and in need of guidance to encourage source engagement (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005)—a dynamic echoed among war correspondents who strategically accept male protection to navigate hazardous access (Palmer & Melki, 2018).

The second tactic entails using flirtation or coquetry to leverage male sources' sexualized perceptions (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014). In such cases, female journalists may leverage sexual tension (typically initiated by the source) to encourage the disclosure of information, often as the source seeks to impress them or anticipates some form of personal reward (Lachover, 2005). Newsroom management may also reinforce these dynamics by assigning women to roles in which their attractiveness is presumed to be advantageous (Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014).

The third tactic involves bracketing difference and downplaying femininity. Some journalists avoid attire that may be perceived as overly feminine to reduce the risk that male sources misinterpret their intentions (Lachover, 2005; Pain, 2017). Others deliberately limit efforts to build rapport with sources due to concerns that such interactions could be read as flirtatious (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014). Female journalists may also downplay femininity and accentuate qualities associated with dominant masculine journalistic norms, adopting more aggressive or competitive styles of interaction to assert their authority (Palmer & Melki, 2018).

These empirically observed tactics point to broader patterns in how female journalists navigate masculinized professional environments, yet they remain insufficiently theorized in existing research. The following section addresses this gap by drawing on feminist scholarship to conceptualize how such practices may be understood as situated forms of agency embedded within unequal power relations.

2.3. Towards a Feminist Conceptualization of Agency in Journalism

Feminist scholarship provides a useful framework for addressing this gap by reconceptualizing agency as situated, relational, and embedded within power structures (Gill, 2007; McNay, 2000). Following McNay (2000), agency is conceptualized not solely in terms of resistance or the dislocation of dominant norms, but as the capacity for reflection and action through which individuals navigate complex social relations in diverse ways, including accommodation, adaptation, negotiation, and, at times, transformation. Individuals act within structured environments, drawing on embodied dispositions, internalized norms, and unequal access to resources that both enable and limit their scope for action, while these environments are reproduced and negotiated through everyday practices.

These dynamics can be further illuminated with Michel de Certeau's (1984) distinction between "strategies" and "tactics." While dominant actors shape the strategies of the field—its formal rules, hierarchies, and norms—those operating from less powerful positions rely on tactics to navigate these structures in situ. Such tactics are typically situational, flexible, and opportunistic, and involve subtle adjustments in behavior and interaction.

Although de Certeau (1984) associates "strategies" with more powerful actors, we use the term to denote the broader orientations through which female journalists navigate dominant gendered norms, while reserving "tactics" for their situated enactment in everyday interactions. With respect to dominant gendered norms in journalism, three such strategies employed by female journalists can be distinguished: adaptation, negotiation, and resistance.

Adaptation refers to efforts to fit into existing professional cultures by aligning oneself with dominant norms and expectations. Tactics associated with adaptation may include adopting communication styles, behaviors, or professional identities that are coded as masculine (e.g., becoming "one of the boys," as put by van Zoonen, 1998).

Negotiation differs from adaptation in that it does not entail conformity to dominant gender norms, but rather their selective mobilization or reinterpretation to advance professional goals. Tactics associated with negotiation may include selectively presenting oneself as non-threatening, employing the "help me" tactic, or drawing on stereotypical assumptions and expectations held by sources, including flirtatious interactions (Genovese, 2015; Robinson, 2004; Voronova, 2014).

Resistance involves attempts to challenge, reject, or redraw the boundaries of dominant norms and expectations. Tactics of resistance may include establishing limits in interactions, confronting inappropriate behavior, building support networks, and participating in collective initiatives aimed at addressing inequality (Figueroa & Baines, 2024; North, 2016a).

These strategies and tactics illustrate how agency is enacted in everyday professional life through situated responses to unequal conditions. However, agency does not come for free: Navigating masculinized environments and balancing often contradictory expectations generally entails additional emotional labor for female journalists (Miller & Lewis, 2022). Agency does not operate outside of power but is entangled with it, and strategies that facilitate professional success may simultaneously reproduce existing hierarchies and norms (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the need to examine everyday journalistic practices for both constraint and agency. Within these practices, female journalists may draw on broader strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance, which are enacted through context-specific tactics in particular interactions. Rather than treating women solely as subjects of structural disadvantage, it conceptualizes them as active participants whose actions are shaped by, but not reducible to, the conditions in which they operate. This study therefore seeks to address the following research question: How do female political journalists enact agency through everyday professional practices within the masculinized environment of Czech political journalism?

3. Methods

Embedded in the Central and Eastern European context, Czech journalism is shaped by the legacy of state-socialist policies that promoted women's participation in paid employment while leaving traditional gender norms for caregiving largely intact (Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). Consequently, while women make up roughly 45% of the Czech journalistic workforce, vertical segregation remains pronounced: Only 7% of

major Czech news organizations (two out of 28) are headed by a female editor-in-chief (Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). This combination of relatively high female representation under a glass ceiling provides an important backdrop for analyzing gendered dynamics in political journalism.

The study is part of a larger project that focuses on the topic of emotions in professional relationships between political journalists and politicians. Our approach is based on a longitudinal research design that spans the years 2024, 2025, and 2026 (see Figure 1) to capture changes, trends, and patterns in the development of the overall research topic.

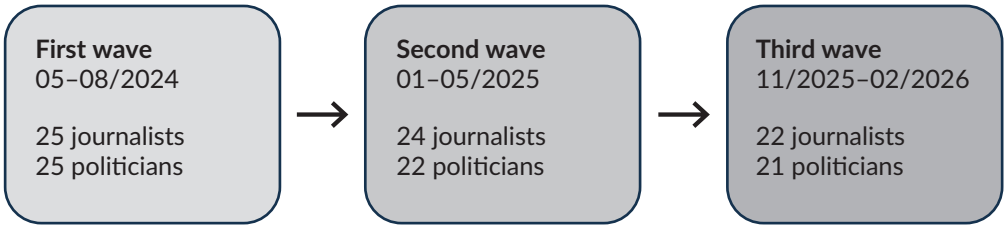


Figure 1. Data collection waves.

Gender emerged as a key factor during the first two rounds of interviews. While Wave 1 addressed journalist-politician relationships and professional practices, Wave 2 tackled the temporal change in the relationships, power dynamics, and professionalism. Wave 3 focused explicitly on how gender shapes relationships between journalists and politicians, separate from focusing on emotions in these relationships and their temporal change. This longitudinal design deepens the analysis of gendered institutional dynamics. Although no significant structural changes were documented across the waves, likely due to the deeply entrenched nature of gendered norms and practices within the studied environment, the iterative process allowed for the targeted refinement of gender-specific inquiries in the interview guide for the third wave. This repeated engagement fostered greater researcher-participant rapport to facilitate more nuanced disclosures of the gendered tactics and strategies, confirming persistent exclusionary cultures while detailing how journalists and politicians navigate these stable constraints.

The qualitative study is based on three waves of interviews with the same group of 25 political journalists and 25 politicians (see Table 1). The sample was constructed to reflect the greatest possible diversity of media (i.e., print, online, audio/radio, video/TV, and commercial/public service media) and political parties. Both groups represent the local, regional, and national levels to reflect, on one hand, the structure and audience of the media and, on the other hand, levels of political representation (e.g., local government/opposition in selected localities, regional government/opposition in selected regions, members of Parliament). We also aim to achieve heterogeneity in terms of gender, age, and professional experience. Participants were recruited through personal networks and with snowball sampling. Due to the withdrawal of some interviewees during the project (see Table 1), we conducted a total of 139 interviews over the course of three years. Out of the original group of 25 journalists and 25 politicians, there were 11 female journalists and 5 female politicians. The predominance of men, particularly among politicians, was due to the political representation in the Czech context.

Table 1. Number and structure of interviews.

Wave/groups	National level	Regional level	Local level	Total
Wave 1 (05–08/2024)				
Journalists	13 (6M, 7F)	6 (5M, 1F)	6 (3M, 3F)	25
Politicians	13 (10M, 3F)	6 (4M, 2F)	6 (6M)	25
Wave 2 (01–05/2025)				
Journalists	12 (6M, 6F)	6 (5M, 1F)	6 (3M, 3F)	24
Politicians	11 (8M, 3F)	5 (4M, 1F)	6 (6M)	22
Wave 3 (11/2025–02/2026)				
Journalists	10 (5M, 5F)	6 (5M, 1F)	6 (3M, 3F)	22
Politicians	10 (7M, 3F)	5 (4M, 1F)	6 (6M)	21

Notes: M = male; F = female.

While primarily focusing on female journalists, the study leverages the full interview corpus to provide essential relational context. Incorporating perspectives from all the politicians and journalists facilitates a more robust understanding of the institutional atmosphere—such as how external actors perceive and describe women's professional conduct. This approach situates individual strategies within the broader discursive environment of the "political boys' club."

The research was conducted according to the rules of the Masaryk University Research Ethics Committee. All interviewees signed an informed consent form. The data were anonymized, and interviewees appear under codes. For transparency, in-text quotations are appended with an anonymized attribution to detail the participant's profession, gender (F = female, M = male), operational level (national/regional/local), interview wave (1/2/3), and internal transcript number; for example: (journalist, F, national, W3.04). The face-to-face and online interviews were collected in the Czech language and ranged from 20 minutes to 105 minutes.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using AI, and then manually corrected. The data were analyzed with Atlas.ti software. A multi-step process was used to ensure the quality of the analysis: A team of three researchers conducted the coding with a shared codebook, held regular discussions, and cross-checked their work (Brennen, 2025). The thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) took two cycles of coding: a primary round based on structural, descriptive, and thematic matters; and a second round based on focused coding (Saldaña, 2009). In identifying themes during data analysis, we combined inductive and deductive approaches (Brennen, 2025). We paid attention to the themes that emerged during the first two waves of interviews. For Wave 3, we deductively set the questions focused on the gendered aspects of the professional relationship between journalists and politicians. Subsequently, we analyzed the interviews with indicators for gendered agency based on our theoretical framework.

4. Findings

Consistent with previous scholarship, our findings characterize Czech political journalism as a profoundly masculinized environment where female and male journalists are compelled to navigate a landscape defined by pervasive structural inequalities. To examine how they manage these challenges, our analysis builds upon established frameworks to explore the bounded nature of agency in political journalism. Specifically, we

utilize the "strategies" of "adaptation," "negotiation," and "resistance," alongside "tactics," such as "performative deference" and "flirtation," while introducing new, further context-specific tactics, like "resigned suffering" and "solidarity." Crucially, we apply the established tactic of "flirtation" in a new way, differentiating "reactive flirtation" (i.e., used for passive adaptation) from "deliberate flirtation" (i.e., deployed as an active instrument for negotiating access to information).

Notwithstanding these tactical variations, the baseline imperative to maintain professional access remained absolute. Under this systemic pressure, participants often downplayed boundary violations rather than labeling them as overt aggression—choosing not to "make a scene" (journalist, F, national, W1.07). The choice of particular strategies and tactics was further shaped by a complex intersection of age, experience, job title, and individual thresholds, because "everyone has that boundary somewhere else—some like getting a compliment, while for others it already crosses the line" (journalist, F, national, W1.09). While patterns emerged—such as younger age combined with daily presence in parliamentary halls leaned toward adaptation, while senior or explicitly feminist journalists more frequently negotiated or resisted—these choices remained fluid.

The following analysis first contextualizes the institutional climate, then dissects how adaptation, negotiation, and resistance strategies align with gendered tactics. Finally, we address why resistance remains the least utilized approach and discuss how these aforementioned factors jointly shape professional practices.

4.1. Setting the Stage: Sexist Anachronisms Echoing the 90s

This section briefly outlines the documented structural environment of everyday sexism that shapes the journalists' work in the Czech Republic. Operating across three analytical levels—paternalistic verbal minimization, sexualized professional devaluation, and the violation of physical or digital boundaries—these behaviors form a normalized baseline rather than isolated incidents. Journalists noted that "the 90s still apply…in terms of humor, sexism…verbal comments" (journalist, F, national, W1.10). In practice, this manifests as sleazy scrutinizing looks, coquettish compliments, and undermining devaluations—such as the use of diminutive names or calling female reporters girlies. One participant illustrated her frustration with this outdated workplace atmosphere by asking: "Are we on a children's playground or in parliament?" (journalist, F, national, W1.10). This pervasive climate was mirrored by political sources themselves; for instance, one male politician casually compared interacting with female journalists to interacting with female shop assistants (politician, M, national, W1.11).

While both female and male journalists experienced the crossing of physical boundaries, their interpretations of these events diverged sharply along gendered lines. For female journalists, physical violations often functioned as a paralyzing act that caught them off guard, leaving them struggling to immediately counter the lack of professional physical distance (journalist, F, national, W2.8). Conversely, male journalists frequently minimized these same interactions through traditional stereotypes, dismissing them as inherent, "biologically, culturally given" gender differences (journalist, M, national, W1.3). This contrast highlights the luxury of detached irony available to male journalists, who can often distance themselves from systemic manipulation through humor. This sharply contrasts with their female counterparts for whom such interactions carry distinct professional and physical weight.

Ultimately, this environment functions as a temporal pocket where sexist tropes often remain functional. Having established this context, we now turn to the specific strategies and tactics journalists use to navigate these situational constraints.

4.2. Adaptation and the Situational Determinants of Agency

Within the existing taxonomy of strategies (i.e., adaptation, negotiation, and resistance), "adaptation" emerges as a coping mechanism for those constrained by unequal power relations. This stems from a pragmatic fear of losing vital sources, facing professional ridicule, or simply the initial shock of unanticipated boundary-crossing: "[an older male politician] touched my face, and it caught me off guard, but I actually didn't say anything to him" (journalist, F, national, W2.08). Our findings reveal that this no-choice stance is most prevalent among parliamentary reporters, whose constant physical proximity to politicians overrides factors like age and job seniority. For these journalists, everyday contact forces a resigned pragmatism; adaptation is driven by habituation, which simplifies interactions and avoids the emotional and professional cost of active resistance. As one participant noted, refusing to engage with "those old guys" feels impossible. As she eloquently summed up: "I've gotten used to [sexism and double meanings], because without it, I wouldn't be able to talk to anyone" (journalist, F, national, W1.02).

In our data, adaptation to patriarchal norms manifests through two primary tactics: "reactive flirtation" and a tactic that we call "resigned suffering." Within this adaptive context, flirtation functions as reactional compliance rather than active practice. Instead of driving the interaction, journalists echo or yield to the flirtatious dynamic enforced by the source—by smiling, laughing at the sources' jokes, or acquiescing to familiar gestures, like kissing a cheek or hand. Notably, its manifestation is predominantly described by observers rather than those who utilize it, because social judgment leads adapting individuals to minimize their compliance, leaving observers to point out how some colleagues act "sweet and likable so the guy tells them more" while sources "stare and huff as the girls twirl around" (journalist, F, national, W2.03).

The second tactic—resigned suffering—operates as quiet endurance. It involves a tacit acceptance forced upon journalists who feel that securing information requires enduring lewd comments, suggestive looks, and physical boundary violations. Unlike reactive flirtation, journalists utilizing this tactic (e.g., journalist, F, national, W1.02) simply absorb the attention without returning it, ignoring, brushing off, or downplaying the behavior to maintain professional focus: "Someone touching your knee isn't really anything you have to get [worked up about]" (journalist, F, national, W1.07). By remaining non-reactive, this tactic exposes how hostile working conditions are normalized as routine costs for access.

A significant barrier to challenging this environment is ultimately the role played by others in the field, which often leads to a redirection of blame away from the patriarchal structure and toward female colleagues. This horizontal hostility manifests when journalists perceive their peers as spoiling (by participating in gendered behaviors) the professional atmosphere or even hindering the process of achieving equality (journalist, F, national, W2.03). For example, one participant (journalist, F, national, W2.07) expressed deep personal distaste for performative gestures, like hand-kissing, from politicians but felt unable to set boundaries because other female colleagues frequently engaged in even more intimate greetings. In this context, asserting one's own boundaries risks being stigmatized as hysterical rather than professional. Another journalist described this frustration with her peers in detail:

> Those kinds of remarks—they weren't exactly aggressive, but they were suggestive…I was angry at the people responsible for it…my female colleagues….I saw how they stood there, giggling and posturing, and I thought to myself: "My god, I'm going to suffer because of this again, because someone will get the feeling that this is the norm." (Journalist, F, national, W1.04)

This reveals deep internalized sexism: Instead of holding those in power accountable, journalists frequently direct their frustration horizontally toward their colleagues. Furthermore, the pressure to adopt adaptation as a coping strategy to avoid professional stigma applies across the board. When facing explicit harassment from institutional actors, journalists simultaneously confirm the violations while immediately minimizing their impact, reframing the behavior as harmless to neutralize professional friction. For example, one male journalist openly acknowledged being harassed by a female source, yet neutralized the systemic weight of the violation by laughing it off and reducing the perpetrator to a benign workplace quirk:

> Interviewer: Did she harass you?
>
> Journalist: She did, and the other one did too.
>
> Interviewer: And how does it happen?
>
> Journalist: The way it happens is…we were just talking about it with a colleague…we both experienced it very similarly—It's like, "Mr. Editor, she acts like a playful little imp." She starts pecking you on the shoulder…"I like you, I love reading your pieces, come over here," and things like that. (Journalist, M, national, W1.01)

While many journalists accept the situation as a professional reality—frequently "laughing about it, discussing it openly, and supporting one another" (journalist, F, national, W1.11)—a significant portion of the community still judges peers harshly for flirtation, both reactional and deliberate (see Section 4.3). This displacement ignores the reality that adaptive compliance is often a structural necessity for maintaining access. Ultimately, by directing moral scrutiny toward individual colleagues rather than institutional actors, this dynamic erodes professional solidarity and allows the patriarchal system to remain unchallenged from within.

4.3. Leveraging the "Little Girl" Image: Bounded Negotiation and the Rules of the Game

Beyond adaptation, our data document the strategy of "negotiation," where journalists recognize the systemic inequality and pragmatically deploy the resources available to them to navigate constraints they cannot directly alter. Within the negotiation strategy, our data reveal the utilization of "deliberate flirtation" and "help me" tactics. Unlike the adaptive tactics, negotiation is partially premeditated. Knowing that the professional environment is structurally unequal, journalists enter these spaces prepared to navigate its informal rules, frequently describing this approach through the emic metaphor of "playing a game" with sources during routine encounters:

> We can simply, within…that sort-of game, just tell each other, "You look good today," "you too," "where did you get that coat, it's great"….We just tell each other that while we're shaking hands and going to record something, because it's also simply that you see each other every other day….It's a level of small talk which helps both sides make the thing a bit more pleasant. (Journalist, F, national, W1.11)

As illustrated, this interactional game operates on a spectrum from mundane small talk to deliberate flirtation. Regardless of where the conversation starts, journalists play along to establish a comfortable rapport before pivoting to core professional inquiries. Notably, our data reveal no gendered differences in execution: Male journalists identically utilized this logic, mirroring the politician expectations to navigate the environment:

> I perceive it as a game of sorts, so a person…should know what interests the other person….They say about him [a politician] that he likes younger men….It happened to me a few times that I felt like he was checking me out….I often take it more as a kind of humor in the style of: "Yes, okay, with [the politician] I'll just undo a button, etc."….I perceive that, like, knowing interests. (Journalist, M, national, W1.12).

Far from indicating an unconstrained playing field, engaging in these dynamics highlights the specific boundaries of the journalists' agency. Unable to unilaterally change the gendered realities of the political sphere, they redirect their expertise into managing its informal rules—a pragmatic, constrained reflexivity where reporters turn gendered expectations back onto sources to fulfill their professional roles.

While these strategic tools can be utilized by anyone, in our data, parliamentary halls place young female journalists in a specific, double-edged position: granting openings for immediate access and rapport building while subjecting them to patronizing, dismissive treatment from sources. Demonstrating how internalized these dynamics are, one male journalist recognized his colleague's precarious hardships while still infantilizing her:

> I have a relatively young colleague who has definitely dealt with respondents "trying something" with her, so to speak. Like, they would talk to her differently just because she's a young girl….She never explicitly said it influenced how they approached her regarding information, but she did admit that she found it unpleasant. (Journalist, M, regional, W3.01)

Beyond patronization, this vulnerability carries many more acute risks, because the strategic performance can backfire into direct harassment regardless of the journalist's intent. In these volatile moments, the illusion of a manageable game collapses into a defensive necessity, prompting a possible shift from negotiation to resistance. As a young female journalist reflects:

> I was certainly staying there a bit out of some kind of calculation…part of that journalistic instinct…but I probably didn't quite read the situation well. And then there was actually some kind of sexual proposition and some groping…from a certain politician….I said: "Well, so no," and I walked away. (Journalist, F, national, W1.11)

Because of these acute risks, age and seniority fundamentally alter how—and whether—particular tactics are executed. While younger journalists often leverage physical attractiveness, experienced journalists frequently transition to broader relational skills. Through accumulated professional authority, senior journalists often gain enough leverage to be absolved from the gendered expectations of deliberative flirtation. Though aging theoretically risks exclusion, no participants reported such professional displacement. Instead, as one senior reporter noted, it is "actually better now," recalling how early in her career a former editor even suggested "I should have sex with politicians to get information" (journalist, F, national, W1.07). Senior journalists can also transition into mentorship roles, teaching successors to navigate the landscape:

> I have a new colleague here….I told her to be nice and to sort of count on the fact…that someone will tell her she has a nice smile and looks good today, and that she should use it to her advantage. (Journalist, F, national, W1.02)

However, these strategic choices depend heavily on structural and ideological contingencies. Daily presence in parliament pushes reporters toward routine adaptation to secure ongoing access. Furthermore, while some experienced journalists grow out of these performances over time, others actively refuse negotiation tactics due to feminist convictions (see Section 4.4).

Under the negotiation strategy, performative deference—including the help me tactic (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005)—spans from deliberate calculation to split-second journalistic instinct. This subversion relies on a charade of incompetence—a harmless or uninformed front designed to manipulate the source's sense of superiority. Whether planned or deployed instinctively, this practice is primarily achieved by leaning into gendered expectations and making specific linguistic choices, all while remaining predicated on the journalist's awareness of the source's preconceived biases. By recognizing that a source may perceive a young journalist as naive or stupid, she can use questioning (often deliberately naive) to play into that expectation, effectively outmaneuvering the source while they believe they are in a position of power. As one journalist noted, being perceived as an inexperienced "little girl" offers an "excellent starting position" to operate under the radar: "When old-school politicians perceive [me] merely as an inexperienced little girl, they inadvertently lower their guard and share more information than intended" (journalist, F, national, W2.06).

This dynamic is witnessed by male colleagues with professional admiration, noting that the most effective journalists are those who lean into these gendered expectations to gain the upper hand:

> For the clever ones, it's an immense advantage because there is nothing better than when a politician underestimates you. Some [female journalists] actually work with that; they play the "Lieutenant Columbo" part….I feel like these politicians are much more prone to underestimating female reporters, assuming they will understand things less than even a beginner male reporter. (Journalist, M, national, W3.01)

However, not all male colleagues share this perspective; others argue that women possess an inherent advantage when interacting with male politicians simply by virtue of their gender (i.e., looks and sexualized rapport; journalist, M, regional, W3.02).

In summary, negotiation comprises deliberate flirtation and help-me tactics. While providing situation-specific agency, these maneuvers function as tactical subversions that leave underlying structures unchanged. In practice, these choices are directly structured by individual demographics and context. We have seen that a journalist's youth and relative inexperience can be leveraged into the help me tactic or casual rapport to secure initial access; however, this same status simultaneously exposes them to distinct liabilities, including patronization, professional ridicule, or the risk of a source crossing physical boundaries. Consequently, whether a journalist can leverage these gendered expectations or must instead pivot to active resistance depends heavily on their career stage, organizational autonomy, and their individual thresholds for tolerating sexist behavior.

4.4. Tentative Resistance: Individual Defiance and Collective Solidarity

The final and least utilized strategy identified in our data is "resistance." While adaptation and negotiation dominate, resistance emerges as a critical alternative, manifesting in two primary tactics: "principled refusal/boundary setting" in response to unequal gender dynamics; and "solidarity" (i.e., collective efforts to challenge structural barriers). The relative scarcity might stem from the slowed evolution of feminism in the Central European region, where systemic gender critiques often face unique cultural hurdles (cf. Oates-Indruchová, 2016). Crucially, this scarcity confirms that Czech journalism and society—like much of the world—remain in need of systemic change.

On an individual level, the resistance strategy manifests in assertive boundary setting against political sources who use informal patronization to undermine professional authority. As one journalist explains:

> It seems to me that we women are ridiculed more by those politicians….[Male Politician A] just wrote to me…and he addressed me by [my first name] or even [a shortened version of my first name]….I give it back to them, to those politicians, when they act like this. I simply behave assertively toward them. (Journalist, F, national, W3.08)

Resistance emerges not only as a direct reaction to the institutional atmosphere, but also as a critique of the strategies chosen by peers. By adopting a resistant stance, these individuals not only refuse to participate in the established professional norms but also actively judge the adaptation or negotiation strategies of their peers, viewing such compromises as a devaluation of professional standards. This creates significant friction among journalists, shifting accountability away from those who set the rules and toward the individuals navigating them. One journalist expressed this deep-seated principled refusal to participate:

> I simply refuse to be part of that theater. When I see my colleagues playing into it—the hair-flipping, the giggling at unfunny jokes just to get a quote—it's pathetic….They aren't journalists in my eyes; they are just part of the decoration, and they make it harder for the rest of us to be seen as equals. (Journalist, F, national, W2.03)

Ultimately, this redirected energy fragments systemic struggle into peer judgment, reserved for those within the female cohort who prioritize tactical wins over systemic integrity. Beyond individual resistance, our data reveal that a nascent sense of solidarity and collective agency is beginning to emerge, bringing a solidarity tactic to life. While solidarity was not mentioned or described often, some was still present in the form of mutual support and the sharing of negative experiences, as one journalist suggested:

> Journalist: They'll take the liberty of looking you up and down and commenting on what you're wearing…but I know that for my male colleague, the same thing happens with those older women.
>
> Interviewer: And he lets himself be pawed at?
>
> Journalist: Well, what choice does he have?…Of course, we sort of make fun of each other, but it's more like supportive fun—that we experience it together…but we actually talk about it quite a bit, because we're a similar age in that team. (Journalist, F, national, W2.06)

These solidarity actions, even if scarce, signal a shift away from a "dog-eat-dog" individualistic game and toward a more sustainable professional culture where systemic change might be prioritized over individual endurance. Crucially, this solidarity extends beyond in-group peer support to out-group advocacy. One journalist utilizes her reporting to write articles exposing sexist behavior toward female politicians, using her platform to shed light on the broader political arena (journalist, F, national, W3.08). However, the reality remains that these instances of resistance are completely marginal compared to the dominant strategies of adaptation and negotiation and the respective tactics used among them.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Czech political journalism, similar to the global context, remains a profoundly masculinized domain where structural inequalities and baseline sexism persist (Macharia et al., 2025; Melki & Mallat, 2016; North, 2016b; Steiner, 2012; Voronova, 2014). Rather than treating these defaults as unchangeable, we examine how political journalists enact agency through everyday professional practices by analyzing the specific factors that dictate tactical selection, the fluid interplay between strategies, and the resulting costs and gains. We demonstrate that journalists exercise circumscribed, situation-specific agency across a spectrum of three core strategies—"adaptation," "negotiation," and "resistance"—which do not structurally transform the environment but serve as practical ways to secure access from positions of structural vulnerability (cf. de Certeau, 1984; Reich et al., 2026; Ross & Carter, 2011; van Zoonen, 1998).

Our empirical framework introduces novel tactics—"resigned suffering" within adaptation, "principled refusal/boundary setting," and "solidarity" within resistance—while revealing how key situational factors dictate their selection. Crucially, we unpack the interplay of these choices by refining gendered behavioral resources, differentiating between "reactive flirtation" (i.e., a defensive response within an adaptation strategy) and "deliberative flirtation" (i.e., a premeditated instrument within a negotiation strategy).

The first core factor that influences agency is the spatial and structural context of the beat. "Adaptation" is triggered by the intense pressure of navigating parliamentary halls daily to secure baseline access (cf. Macharia et al., 2025; Ross & Carter, 2011). Within this high-frequency environment, journalists, regardless of age, are pushed into "resigned suffering" or "reactive flirtation" as defensive shields. The immediate gain of this tactical selection is professional survival and a reliable information flow, but the long-term professional cost is severe: the passive reinforcement of the unequal status quo (cf. Reich et al., 2026; van Zoonen, 1998) and judgement from peers.

In contrast, the "negotiation strategy" is triggered by a reporter's proactive intent to leverage a source's preconceptions. Within it, journalists utilize "help me" (Lachover, 2005) or "deliberative flirtation" (Genovese, 2015) tactics. Demographic factors heavily shape this strategy: Younger female journalists hold a distinct tactical advantage here by actively instrumentalizing the fact that they are already infantilized by sources, turning pre-existing patronization into a gain. Crucially, male journalists also utilize deliberative flirtation, leveraging gendered rapport to extract information. However, the costs of this strategic interplay are heavily asymmetric: While both genders experience physical boundary crossings, only female journalists face unique exposure to professional ridicule and patronization (cf. Robinson, 2004), while male journalists navigate these informal extractions without suffering comparable degradation.

The final and least utilized strategy is "resistance," and its interplay with the other strategies is highly contingent. When source boundaries are breached, it can lead to a rapid pivot, but a breach does not automatically guarantee resistance. The lack of structural safety often forces journalists—including seasoned ones—to brush off violations and continue to endure them under "resigned suffering" just to maintain beat access. Active resistance is instead triggered only when severe violations intersect with accumulated seniority and strong ideological convictions. Introducing the novel tactics of "boundary setting/principled refusal" reveals the unique professional costs of resistance: it incurs deep internal friction because resistant journalists frequently judge the tactical compromises of colleagues who play along, shifting accountability away from political actors and fragmenting peer relationships. Concurrently, the "solidarity tactic" spans from internal, in-group peer support to external reporting to expose structural sexism.

By tracing these mechanics, we move past simple descriptions of exclusion to show how journalists handle their limited agency within a masculinized workforce (Baloch et al., 2025; Pain, 2017). We find that while playing into gender expectations can offer a quick, unpredictable advantage (Robinson, 2004), these individual workarounds usually leave the broader unequal structures untouched. Because active resistance is often too costly to use consistently, the focus inevitably shifts to personal survival—a reality that tends to isolate peers from one another rather than bringing them together.

6. Conclusion

This study addresses how female and male political journalists enact agency in their everyday practices within the masculinized environment of Czech political journalism. We show that journalists of both genders use a flexible toolkit of fluid tactics across three main strategic paths: "adaptation," "negotiation," and "resistance." Specifically, spatial pressures in high-frequency beats, like parliamentary halls, push reporters into adaptive tactics, such as "resigned suffering" to secure baseline access. Conversely, "negotiation" allows journalists to proactively leverage source preconceptions through "deliberate flirtation" or "help me tactics"—where younger female reporters instrumentalize infantilization and male reporters deploy gendered rapport to extract information. Finally, defiance emerges via "boundary setting/principled refusal" and nascent "solidarity." While these situation-specific maneuvers provide immediate information access, they yield deeply gender-asymmetric professional costs, reinforce the unequal status quo, and fragment peer relationships through horizontal friction. Supporting an ongoing cultural shift therefore requires collective endurance rather than individual tactical compromises. To achieve this, newsrooms must implement targeted training to counter sexist rhetoric, while management should establish formal networks and transparent reporting mechanisms. Crucially, these institutional supports must look beyond sexual harassment alone to address broader structural struggles over professional authority and beat access.

While our study offers valuable insights, it is subject to certain limitations that naturally point to promising pathways for future inquiry. First, our findings are rooted in the specific Czech national context, where traditional gender expectations and the lack of high-level female representation shape the field. This regional focus highlights a clear need for comparative, cross-national investigation to explore how different media systems and varying gender structures influence tactical selection among journalists globally. Second, our reliance on self-reported data reflects participants' subjective perceptions of agency. Future studies could therefore employ observational ethnographic methods to complement these self-reported accounts in order to capture real-time negotiations of gender, power, and professional authority as they unfold on the political beat.

Funding

This work was supported by the Czech Science Foundation under Grant No. 23–06433K.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with the participants.

LLMs Disclosure

Gemini was used to assist with language editing. The authors reviewed and take full responsibility for the final content.

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12716
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12716

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Dynamics of (In)Visibility: Immanent Potential of Young Feminism Across and Beneath the Square

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Submitted: 15 May 2026 **Accepted:** 27 July 2026 **Published:** 15 September 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

Abstract

The invisibilization of feminist activism driven by postfeminist trends and the strategic use of invisibility to build safe communities free from oppression represent two sides of the same coin. Both treat invisibility as a passively determined stage preceding visible activism. Moving beyond this understanding, the current study explores the immanent potential of invisibility within contemporary feminist activism by conceptualizing (in)visibility through Deleuze's conceptual pair of the virtual and the actual. In Deleuze's philosophy, the virtual is the immaterial potential that constitutes reality, whereas the actual is the materialization of virtuality into a specific form through the process of actualization. Accordingly, we conceptualize invisibility as a persistent potential that exerts power across and beneath the surface and enables visibilization of activism upon encountering a specific event. Drawing on interviews with 20 women aged 22–35 who participated in the 2024–2025 anti-martial law protests in South Korea, this study examines how the potential of invisibility is actualized as activism. We analyze three interrelated dimensions: the temporality through which women cultivated their inherent potential while being politically and socially invisibilized; the virtual spatiality that mediates invisibility and visibility, enabling the actualization of that potential; and the physical spatiality in which activism is materialized as an inclusive and distinctive protest culture. Through this approach, we seek to uncover the dynamic potential immanent in invisible forms and fundamentally rethink the relationship between invisibility and visibility in activism.

Keywords

feminist activism; immanence; invisibility; protest; South Korea; virtuality; young women

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1. Introduction

The invisibilization of feminist activism driven by postfeminist trends (McRobbie, 2008) and the strategic use of invisibility to build safe communities free from oppression (Jackson, 2018) represent two sides of the same coin regarding the visibility of activism. Both perspectives closely associate the goal and value of activism with visibility, and existing discussions of assemblies and demonstrations primarily focus on their visible manifestations in physical spaces or online public spheres. For instance, Butler's (2015) discussion of bodies in the street foregrounds the politics of visibility in assemblies. Within this paradigm, invisibility is inevitably regarded as a temporary retreat from activism or a stage that precedes the visible phase (G. Jung & Moon, 2024).

Moving beyond this understanding of invisibility, the current study explores the immanent potential of invisibility within contemporary feminist activism, arguing that the continuation of activism necessarily involves and affirms the invisible realm. This study combines a theoretical conceptualization of (in)visibility based on Deleuze's (1997) concepts of virtuality and actualization, with an empirical analysis of young women who emerged as a central force in the 2024–2025 anti-martial law protests in South Korea (hereafter Korea). In Deleuze's philosophy, the virtual is the immaterial potential that constitutes reality, whereas the actual is the materialization of virtuality into a specific form through the process of actualization (Deleuze, 1997). Unlike the possible, which awaits the realization of a predetermined ideal prior to reality, the virtual is reality itself and possesses the capacity to create something new (Lévy, 1998). Therefore, the virtual and the actual are neither separate nor opposed; rather, they exist in a corresponding relationship on a single immanent plane. Our theorization of the relationship between invisibility and visibility is grounded in this conceptual pair. We argue that the invisible dimension of activism functions as a continuous potential that sustains its persistence and transformation while enabling its actualization (or visibilization) through specific events.

The anti-martial law protests in Korea were widely perceived as a moment in which young women, long marginalized by dominant political forces, suddenly gained visibility through a major national political event. However, through interviews with 20 young women who participated in these protests, this study reveals the potential of (in)visibility that had been continuously flowing as a virtual undercurrent before this visibility emerged. Because the actualization of virtuality in a specific event necessarily unfolds across space and time (Beck & Gleyzon, 2016; Lundborg, 2009), we conduct an empirical analysis based on research questions concerning the spatiotemporal axes through which the potential of invisibility is actualized. Specifically, we explore the temporality through which this potential is cultivated, the virtual spatiality through which it emerges into visibility, and the physical spatiality in which it is actualized. Through this approach, we seek to uncover the potential immanent in invisible forms and fundamentally rethink the relationship between invisibility and visibility.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Contemporary Feminism and the "Crisis of Visibility"

Dominant social systems and power structures have long suppressed and distorted discourse emerging from marginalized public spheres. Contemporary feminist movements, in particular, cannot be separated from the

threat posed by postfeminist trends that seek to replace socially resistant movements with individualistic discourses (McRobbie, 2008). The neoliberal rationality of the entrepreneurial self, which emphasizes autonomous, calculative, and proactive subjects, has given rise to neoliberal feminism. This perspective prioritizes the well-being of individual women over the transformation of structural social inequalities (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2014). Compounding this challenge is the explicit backlash that has emerged in recent years. The rapid expansion of the misogynistic online manosphere, which promotes essentialist views of gender and antifeminist ideologies while advocating for men's "rights," has amplified voices that position themselves as victims of feminism (Botto & Gottzén, 2024; Ging, 2019).

This situation has exacerbated the crisis of visibility faced by young women engaged in activism rooted in both online and offline environments and centered on informal, everyday practices. Early concerns about the visibility of feminist activism stemmed from the relative invisibility of online feminist practices (see Briggs, 2008; Harris, 2008), which had been led primarily by young women since the turn of the millennium. For instance, Schuster (2013) argued that older generations of activists' relatively limited access to online spaces creates an inevitable generational divide, leaving young women's online feminist activism "hidden" from potential allies and reinforcing the image of politically indifferent young women. In addition, popular discourse has portrayed online activism as providing individuals with a sense of participation through minimal effort while failing to generate meaningful political change. This discourse has been used to criticize younger activists through pejorative labels such as "slacktivism" and "clicktivism" (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2009).

However, online activism is no longer separate from mainstream discourse and institutional politics; indeed, it can serve as an effective strategy for amplifying visibility (Milan, 2015). Consequently, the current crisis of visibility is discussed less in terms of the effectiveness of activism itself than in terms of the invisibilization of young feminism under postfeminist trends. Jackson's (2018) study provides clear evidence of this shift, showing that girls often hesitate to express their views in online public spaces, where they are vulnerable to antifeminist attacks, and instead prefer more homogeneous online communities. G. Jung and Moon (2024) identified a consistent pattern in female college students' feminist practices in Korea, which they termed "quiet feminism": forming safe offline communities while concealing feminist identities from unfamiliar others. This practice reflects efforts to protect themselves from everyday backlash and antifeminist sentiment across both online and offline spaces. According to Jung and Moon, this period allows women to construct feminist identities among like-minded peers and cultivate political agency for the future. At the same time, it constitutes a "state of abeyance in the feminist movement" (G. Jung & Moon, 2024, p. 218) while awaiting a rebound.

When invisibility arises from oppression, the (re)achievement of visibility often becomes the "goal" of marginalized groups. However, this framework poses two risks. First, treating invisibility as a condition to be overcome—whether as a prior stage, a hiatus, or a temporary retreat—makes it difficult to affirm the discourses and forms of activism that persist within the invisible domains of marginalized public spheres. Second, prioritizing visibility can obscure the broader aims of activism, such as structural change. This concern echoes Banet-Weiser's (2018) analysis of how Western popular feminism has become entangled with the "economy of visibility" fostered by digital platforms organized around quantified metrics such as clicks and "likes." These risks suggest that invisibility should not be understood merely as concealment, avoidance, or disappearance. Rather, it should be understood through its generative capacity and examined in relation to visibility within the social world.

2.2. Invisibility as a Strategy: Protecting and Distancing

According to Brighenti (2007), although the pursuit of visibility is linked to the politics of social recognition, existing power relations create the possibility that visibility may instead produce vulnerability. The objectification of women through the male gaze is one example. Thus, visibility is associated not only with recognition but also with mechanisms of control. This duality suggests that invisibility may be crucial for securing power in certain contexts.

The strategic function of invisibility in minority activism must also be understood within this context. Building on Fraser's (1992) concept of multiple public spheres among marginalized groups, Squires (2002) illustrates this point using examples from Black public spheres. She identifies three types of marginalized public spheres that vary according to the social context, available resources, and political goals: (a) the enclave public sphere, where resistance is discussed and prepared within safe spaces rather than through direct engagement with the dominant public sphere under oppressive situations; (b) the counterpublic sphere, which actively engages with or challenges the dominant public sphere through visible acts of resistance; and (c) the satellite public sphere, which voluntarily separates itself from other public spheres while selectively participating in public discourse depending on the context. Squires emphasizes that these models are neither mutually exclusive nor developmental stages. Rather, they are flexible and often coexist. Furthermore, she rejects the assumption that the counterpublic sphere, which visibly confronts the dominant public sphere, is always the optimal choice for marginalized groups. This is because confrontation is not necessarily the most advantageous strategy for navigating real threats and constraints.

Interest in invisible activism as a contemporary feminist strategy remains relatively limited, though it does exist. For example, while Clark-Parsons (2022) acknowledges the capacity of digital, networked feminist movements to encourage visible forms of activism, she cautions against overemphasizing "highly visible forms of feminist media activism" (p. 101). The cases she examines, including a secret feminist Facebook group, feminist zinesters, and a grassroots feminist art collective, illustrate forms of strategic invisibility that foster connections among feminists through media while building safe communities protected from networked misogyny.

Nevertheless, studies highlighting the strategic use of invisibility in activism do not fully diverge from those examining the invisibilizing power of dominant public spheres. In both perspectives, invisibility is treated as a passive condition shaped by external circumstances, and the relationship between invisibility and visibility is framed as mutually exclusive. In other words, the visible remains visible, and the invisible remains invisible. However, explaining the continuity of activism requires attention to the interplay between visibility and invisibility, as well as to the enduring potential of the invisible domain that enables this fluidity. In the following section, we conceptualize the potential of invisibility flowing beneath the visible surface by drawing on Deleuze's concepts of virtuality, actualization, and immanence.

2.3. Theorizing Invisibility as a Virtual Potentiality

Rather than treating invisibility and visibility as hierarchical, we theorize them as an inseparable relationship through Deleuze's conceptual pair of the virtual and the actual, along with the dynamic of potentiality and actualization that connects them. Within this framework, the two are neither separate nor opposed; rather, they correspond dynamically to one another on a single plane of immanence.

In Deleuze's philosophy, the virtual is the potential that constitutes reality (Deleuze, 1997). It is distinct from the possible, which assumes an ideal model prior to reality and awaits its realization (Smith et al., 2023). By contrast, the virtual is reality itself as well as an immaterial force inherent in life that has not yet been actualized in a specific form (Deleuze, 1997). The actual corresponds to the unfolding of the virtual into a particular form of reality through the process of actualization. Therefore, actualization is not the realization of a predetermined blueprint but a process of becoming and creation (Lévy, 1998). The plane of immanence is the site where virtuality is actualized; it "does not depend on an object or belong to a subject" (Deleuze, 1997, p. 4), but is instead immanent to itself. This dynamic, through which virtual potential is actualized in diverse ways on a single plane, clearly illustrates Deleuze's opposition to philosophical traditions grounded in transcendent ideals (such as God or Platonic Ideas) that are presumed to exist prior to reality.

The relationship between invisibility and visibility can likewise be understood through the dynamic between the virtual and the actual. In this framework, invisibility is not an incomplete or preliminary state that exists merely to become visible. Rather, it persists as the potential for activism, a force that enables activism to actualize (or become visible) in specific forms through specific events. Just as Deleuze (1997) describes immanence as "a life" itself, the invisibility that exists across and beneath visible activism is composed of lived experience. Because the invisible plane of immanence is where individuals experience "life" (whether as singular subjects, members of marginalized groups, or social components), they can visibly manifest as protesters or activists through particular events. Therefore, in our conceptual framework, invisibility denotes an immanent and enduring potentiality that exerts force beneath the threshold of perception, whereas visibility signifies the material actualization of this accumulated latent force.

The concept of invisibility discussed in this study certainly does not exclude minority discourses rendered invisible through the oppression of the dominant public sphere, nor does it exclude activism practiced invisibly as a paradoxical strategy for resisting such oppression. However, it is also a broader concept that encompasses immanent life itself: life that is not always observable, verbalizable, or explicitly discussed, yet nevertheless sustains and enables the actual (i.e., the visible). In this regard, we propose the term "(in)visibility" to capture the dynamic between invisibility as the potentiality of the virtual and visibility as its actualized manifestation within the public sphere. This term emphasizes the relationship between invisibility and visibility as a process rather than as a static, unchanging state.

Our empirical analysis explores how the fluidity of (in)visibility unfolds through actualization in a specific real-world event. From a Deleuzian perspective, attention to the spatiotemporal axis is essential for understanding the actualization of an event. A present event exists only in relation to the past and the future, connecting the two; this connection itself implies the process of actualization (Lundborg, 2009). Furthermore, because events emerge through the transformation of immaterial potential into material form, they are necessarily actualized in space (Beck & Gleyzon, 2016). Applied to our research context, the anti-martial law protests in Korea, discussed in detail in the following section, were perceived as a moment in which young women, long marginalized by existing political power, suddenly gained visibility through a major national political issue. However, a close examination of their spatiotemporal actualization reveals that this visibility was not a sudden emergence. Rather, it was the actualization of an immanent potential that had long been present, operating beneath the surface to create difference.

As Deleuze and Guattari (1994) note, any attempt to discuss the plane of immanence involves a form of "groping experimentation" (p. 41). Accordingly, event-based analysis provides a crucial foundation for exploring how invisibility is actualized and for affirming its potential within activism. This study therefore examines the fluidity and potential of invisibility from the following research questions:

RQ1: What forms of (in)visible temporality drive the actualization of activism?

RQ2: How does the (in)visibility of activism manifest in (a) virtual and (b) physical spaces?

2.4. Research Context: 2024–2025 Korean Anti-Martial Law Protests

To empirically address these questions, this study examined young feminists who participated in the 2024–2025 anti-martial law protests in Korea. On December 3, 2024, former President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, accusing the National Assembly, which was largely controlled by the main opposition Democratic Party, of engaging in anti-national activities and supporting North Korea. This declaration, which was later found to be unlawful, stemmed from legislative conflicts arising from: a political landscape in which the opposition party held a majority in the National Assembly; the expansion of these conflicts into an investigation into the First Lady's alleged involvement in corruption; and the resulting decline in the President's approval rating among the public. Citizens immediately rushed to the National Assembly to protest, and less than three hours after martial law was declared, the Assembly passed a motion demanding its repeal (see Regan et al., 2026). Although the immediate crisis ended with the cabinet's decision to lift martial law, its political consequences continued. Large-scale protests condemning the illegal declaration of martial law and demanding Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment took place from December 2024 to April 2025.

Although the protests centered on a broad societal agenda rather than gender-specific issues, young women stood out as a particularly visible driving force. Women in their 20s and 30s comprised approximately 30% of those protesting in front of the National Assembly at the height of the demonstrations (S. Lee & Hwang, 2024). These women primarily mobilized through online networks on Twitter that were not originally organized for political participation. Instead, they were largely formed around activities such as fan culture, which are often regarded as nonpolitical, private, and trivial hobbies associated with women (Hills, 2003). This characteristic produced a scene rarely found in large-scale political protests: peaceful, festival-like gatherings marked by K-pop music and light sticks. The protests subsequently attracted attention from both domestic and international media outlets (Rashid, 2024).

The Korean women who are the focus of this study have long experienced oppression within a patriarchal, male-centered social system. Young women in particular have been targeted by misogynistic conservative forces, including the Yoon administration, as well as by groups of young men who have internalized far-right ideologies rooted in militaristic masculinity (Y. Kim et al., 2025). Consequently, beyond structural inequalities such as the gender wage gap, young women have also faced stigma toward feminism and hostility from online manosphere communities (Hines & Song, 2021), leading many to seek safe and homogeneous communities (G. Jung & Moon, 2024). To understand how these women became a significant presence in the public square despite their sociopolitical invisibilization, it is crucial to examine the capacities they cultivated within the invisible realm. For this reason, the anti-martial law protests provide an especially appropriate case for exploring invisibility as an immanent potential that materializes through specific events.

3. Methods

This study focused on Korean women in their 20s and 30s who had participated in the anti-martial law protests at least once and used social media (primarily Twitter) during the protest period. We retained the name Twitter rather than X out of respect for the language used by these women, who engaged in micro-resistance on the platform due to their resentment toward the changes introduced following the new owner's takeover.

Given the urgency of the event and the specificity of the target population, participants were recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with the researchers' networks and online communities. Twenty participants were recruited, ranging in age from 22 to 35 years ($M = 27.2$); 14 were in their 20s and six were in their 30s. Because the focus of this study was defined by age and gender, information such as place of residence or sexuality was not collected to avoid raising safety concerns for participants. To provide context for their protest participation, minimal occupational information was collected. Participants included three undergraduate students, three job seekers, three postgraduate students, and three office workers. The remaining participants worked as a designer, music industry professional, marketer, multidisciplinary artist, IT professional, freelance publisher, civil servant, and researcher. All interviews were conducted in Korean between January and February 2025, with each interview lasting approximately 100 minutes. All participants provided informed consent for participation, recording, and publication, and received an incentive of 50,000 KRW. The researchers transcribed the audio recordings and translated the direct quotations used in this article.

The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of four main parts. First, participants were asked about their attitudes toward and experiences with politics, particularly gender politics. The second section focused on their experiences participating in anti-martial law protests, including their motivations and any changes resulting from participating. Participants were then encouraged to discuss their perceptions of their generation and the communities surrounding the protests, as well as how they identified themselves as young women participating in the protests. Finally, the interviews explored the relationship between their social media use and participation in the protests.

This study employed thematic analysis following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). The researchers repeatedly reviewed the transcripts and conducted initial coding by identifying recurring patterns relevant to the research questions. Initial themes included young women's experiences participating in social movements before the anti-martial law protests, their experiences as women and feminists in Korean society, their Twitter use before the protests, the role of Twitter and online networks in facilitating protest participation, and the distinctive culture they experienced at protest sites. The initial codes generated by each researcher were refined through repeated discussion, revision, and consolidation. The final themes were then organized according to the temporal (RQ1), virtual-spatial (RQ2a), and physical-spatial (RQ2b) dimensions of the analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Historical Temporality Constituting the Potential of Invisibility

Our first research question explored the (in)visible temporality that drives the actualization of activism. The potential of invisibility that enabled the anti-martial law protests in "the present" can be understood

only in relation to the historical temporality that had developed prior to that moment. In other words, although the anti-martial law protests brought visibility to young feminist women, they were not a single, sudden event. Rather, they represented the actualization of a potential formed through a series of internal, social, and political changes experienced over time. Based on the interviews, we identify three characteristics of this historical temporality: accumulative, strategic, and conflictual.

First, the occurrence and accumulation of external political events shape the dynamics of (in)visibility, which we term *accumulative temporality*. These events are not isolated incidents. Although unpredictable, they recur in ways that affect marginalized groups. Consequently, the accumulation of past events generates a series of experiences that influence later visible phases of action by providing motivational, experiential, and network resources. In the case of the martial law crisis, young Korean feminist women already had "experience in voicing opinions and participating in broader social discourse" (#11), which played a critical role in prompting their immediate reaction to the crisis. Most interviewees reported participating in multiple protests condemning misogynistic crimes and biased investigations into them, including the 2016 Gangnam Station femicide, the 2018–2020 Nth Room digital sex crime case, and the 2024 Telegram deepfake pornography distribution crime (see Y. Kim, 2025, for detailed descriptions of each case). These experiences extended beyond feminist issues to include broader social causes, such as "LGBTQ+ issues, labor, and disability rights" (#8).

Along with these experiences, accumulated dissatisfaction toward the president and government, who "explicitly advocated anti-feminism" (#1, #3, #10), contributed to participants' shift toward visible political action. Specifically, resentment toward the Yoon administration was fueled by Yoon Suk Yeol's election campaign strategy of appealing to young male voters during his election campaign with the slogan "abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family" (#5, #8, #13, #20); by social disasters linked to government negligence or corruption, such as the Seoul Halloween crowd crush and the death of Lance Corporal Chae (#1); and by the government's passive or even hostile response to economic inequality (#11) and minority issues (#4, #9). Ultimately, the declaration of martial law served as the decisive trigger.

Secondly, changes in strategy resulting from group transformation or maturation create a form of temporal dynamics in (in)visibility that we term *strategic temporality*. During the "feminist reboot" of the mid-to-late 2010s in Korea (see J. Kim, 2021), the popularization of feminism, fueled by the series of misogynistic crimes discussed above, led many young women (particularly college students) to "naturally and inevitably become feminists" (#7). However, due to the depoliticization of student communities, intensifying backlash, social isolation during the pandemic, and increasing fragmentation and diversification within feminist agendas, this popularization entered a new phase of transition. This fragmentation and diversification are particularly evident in the emergence of *Raetpem* (self-identified "radical feminists"), who adopt an essentialist perspective that excludes transgender people and privileges biological sex (J. Kim, 2021), as well as in conflicts with perspectives that seek to include diverse socioeconomic minorities. Faced with this, some participants began to pursue more strategic and personalized forms of activism:

> In the past, I was quite aggressive, saying things like, "Anti-feminists, get out!" But [as I went through that period], I started taking a more personal approach and using language and rhetoric that could persuade even people with absolutely no interest in the issues. I didn't participate in large-scale political activities as much as I used to. However, I think there was a shift where I ended up talking a lot more about these issues with the people around me, on a personal level. (#7)

This participant argued that internalizing such a strategy helped young women proactively frame the anti-martial law protests as "mainstream public opinion," conveying messages such as "It's not strange for you to be here. Everyone is on board with this now," which in turn contributed to the movement's ability to appeal to a broad public. This finding has two implications. First, the adoption of quiet feminism by young women (G. Jung & Moon, 2024) following the feminist reboot may have been shaped not only by backlash but also by broader temporal contexts. Second, invisible practices carried out within personal networks can be viewed as more than a preliminary stage preceding visibility. They can also function as strategies of conversion and versatility that facilitate everyday micro-practices. The changes and development that occurred during this period were crucial to the actualization of (in)visibility in the anti-martial law protests as an event.

Lastly, although there have been periods in which activism sought visibility before the martial law crisis, the selective endorsement and recognition of activism by the dominant public sphere further complicate the dynamics of (in)visibility; we term this *conflictual temporality*. Participants recognized that their heightened visibility during the anti-martial law protests was largely attributable to the fact that it was a "general issue that affected the entire citizenry" (#1). One reason these young women were treated as if they had been newly discovered during the anti-martial law protests was the perception that "the countless protests held since the 2016 Gangnam Station femicide are not political movements, but rather the noisy complaints of tired and oversensitive women" (#13). Although participants viewed the opportunity to actualize their activism through the anti-martial law protests positively, they also harbored ambivalent resentment toward the exclusionary mechanisms of established groups with the power to grant such selective recognition, feeling that they were being "politically exploited/objectified" (#1, #7, #20):

> When people from the mainstream media or politics started saying things like "Young women are the future," I thought, "They never paid us any attention when we were doing this before." Though, it didn't feel so bad to be in the spotlight and finally have people acknowledge us. (#3)

Furthermore, the asymmetrical power relationship between dominant and marginalized public spheres encompasses not only whether activism is recognized or ignored but also which aspects are highlighted and how they are framed. During the anti-martial law protests, the complexity of representation was reflected in participants' differing responses to popular narratives portraying young women as "good, harmless fangirls" holding light sticks. While some participants welcomed media portrayals that highlighted their commitment to K-pop culture, others expressed frustration that their visibility was confined to a nonpolitical, consumerist fandom, reducing them to the stereotype of the "good girl." Such portrayals hindered a nuanced understanding of the reality that "those women came out with a sense of pride, meaning they're just as earnest and genuinely concerned about this national issue as they are when they're fangirling over what they love" (#7).

4.2. Virtual Spatiality as a Medium for the Actualization of (In)Visibility

For the second research question, we examined how the (in)visibility of activism manifests in space. This section focuses on the virtual spaces that mediate the actualization of (in)visibility. Online spaces centered on Twitter facilitated this process by sustaining the potential of invisibility and enabling its actualization during the anti-martial law protests. This role aligns with existing discussions of how online spaces can

complement and expand social movements within alternative political spheres (Jackson, 2018; J. Kim, 2017). We refer to this role as virtual spatiality, where virtuality denotes both Deleuzian potentiality and virtuality in the technological sense.

In Korea, Twitter remains significantly less popular than major social media platforms such as Instagram, Naver Band, KakaoStory, and Facebook (Han et al., 2025). However, it has established itself as an important platform for feminist activism, particularly through the use of hashtags in political campaigns (J. Kim, 2017; S. Lee, 2024). As young women assumed key roles in the anti-martial law protests, Twitter's importance in this context remained evident. Notably, nearly all participants stated that although Twitter played a significant role in their protest participation, their online networks had originally been formed around hobbies and entertainment rather than political engagement. These networks encompassed a wide range of fandom activities, including K-pop, sports, theater and musicals, pets, gaming, films, TV dramas, web novels, and web comics.

Feminism served as a shared political plane of immanence that connected these individuals across their diverse and dispersed interests. It is no coincidence that people with similar political views, shaped by shared identities and life experiences, also find common ground in matters of taste and preference. As Fraser (1992) argued in her critique of Habermas's concept of the public sphere, preferences, interests, and identities are not formed independently of public discourse. A clear example is the role of fandom culture, once regarded as the exclusive domain of apolitical young women, in shaping the political sentiments expressed during the anti-martial law protests and in making women's perspectives, positions, and voices visible. These women shared similar political interests and moral commitments not only because of shared identities and experiences, but also because of the nature of their cultural interests and the political dimensions of fandom itself:

> Readers of web novels and web comics, as well as fan communities in general, often seem far removed from real-world politics. But personally, I think these people who've come together on Twitter through their shared interests do have political concerns. When I see flags and slogans at protests inspired by web novels, I've noticed that they're very often based on works where the protagonist acts with goodwill and justice. These women are taking action that resonates with the message of the stories they love. (#16)

It is important to note that participants' preference for loose, network-based forms of participation over organized movements built on strong internal cohesion facilitates connective action through social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2023). Various features of digital media enable this form of participation, which Milan (2015) conceptualizes as the "politics of visibility." First, online embodiment through social media profiles and forms of protest centered in digital spaces can position individuals as the protagonists of their own stories. Second, technological features such as tags, citations, and mentions make it easier to reach and mobilize others. Third, the asynchronous nature of digital interaction reorganizes time and space, enabling movements to persist and recur.

One example of this mechanism is hashtag activism on Twitter, which has received considerable scholarly attention (e.g., J. Kim, 2017; S. Lee, 2024). However, the declaration of martial law unfolded amid the rapid expansion of personalized recommendation algorithms. At a time when timelines were primarily organized

by nonlinear algorithms rather than chronological order, participants perceived recommendation algorithms as having greater influence than hashtags in mobilizing young women during the anti-martial law protests. These recommendation feeds served not only as immediate channels for accessing information about protest sites, but also reinforced Twitter's role as an active feedback channel that shaped norms and public opinion at those sites (as discussed in the following section). This mediating role between online and offline spaces was grounded in participants' belief that "even if I don't personally know the person who originally posted it, since it's a post retweeted by a friend, they must be someone in a similar situation or with similar thoughts" (#6), as well as in the expectation that "algorithms will show me information about protests tailored to my interests without me having to search for it" (#15).

Finally, we found that the rejection of collectivity emphasized in network-based connective action and embedded within diversity was also reflected in participants' resistance to homogeneity. Although participants identified themselves as feminists, or were at least conscious of their interest in women's issues, they simultaneously expressed a reluctance to be subsumed under homogeneous group identities. This resistance to collectivism as a monolithic entity is connected to their wariness of the strategies employed by far-right groups in modern Korean history, which have expanded their influence across generations by promoting internal homogeneity, external exclusivity, and hostility toward marginalized groups (see Yang, 2025). Far-right politics in Korea has emerged through the convergence of ideologically connected groups, including anti-North Korean organizations, conservative Protestant forces, online manosphere communities, and far-right YouTubers (Shin et al., 2025). In recent years, groups of young men motivated primarily by misogyny and anti-feminism have gained prominence within far-right circles, deepening the intersection between far-right politics and gender issues. As a result, many interviewees expressed a reluctance to be defined as a homogeneous group, emphasizing that "I'm just interested in practically amplifying the voices of individual women. I've always been wary of nationalist or group-centered ways of thinking" (#19).

4.3. Physical Spatiality as the Actualization of (In)Visibility

Finally, we examined physical spatiality as the actualization of (in)visibility, one of the spatial manifestations of (in)visibility addressed in the second research question. Shaped through historical temporality and mediated by virtual spatiality, the potential of invisibility materialized as a distinctive and inclusive protest culture at the protest site. We conceptualize the core characteristics of this physical spatiality as appropriative, intersectional, dispersed, and reciprocal.

First, *appropriative spatiality* is evident in the appropriation of cultural forms that have been socially trivialized or regarded as nonpolitical within the protest space. The protests took on a festival-like atmosphere through the use of K-pop as protest music and the incorporation of light sticks (i.e., symbols of fandom culture) and flags bearing humorous slogans. Notably, Girls' Generation's "Into the New World," described as a "tradition dating back to 2016" (#13) and the "anthem of the feminist movement" (#8), first gained prominence during protests at Ewha Womans University related to the corruption scandal involving former President Park Geun-hye, another impeachment case in modern Korean history. During the anti-martial law protests, it became established as a representative protest song for the broader public. In this context, fandom culture served as the foundation for an inclusive protest culture and a network connecting people with similar social concerns. This culture shaped not only the visual and auditory identity of the protests but also the behaviors expected at protest sites, giving rise to the following self-deprecating joke:

> People said that this protest was the culmination of everything these fangirls have been trained to do up until now. Staying orderly, waiting in the cold for a long time, singing along perfectly, bringing plenty of supplies and light sticks, and sharing information with each other. (#13)

Second, *intersectional spatiality* emerged as intersectionality became a central concern of the protest space. Intersectionality refers to the overlap of social identities, such as gender, race, sexuality, and class, and the diverse outcomes that result from these intersections. It has been a key concern of fourth-wave feminism, which is often associated with the rise of the internet (Munro, 2013). The open-mic stage at the front of the protest site, which provided opportunities for diverse citizens to speak publicly, exemplified this commitment. The stage functioned as a venue where people with intersecting identities could share their experiences and explain what had led them to participate in the protest. Interviewees recalled that during the early, less organized stages of the protest, the atmosphere was not entirely open. For example, one participant noted that "when a woman began by saying, 'I am a feminist,' some people booed her" (#17). However, this atmosphere quickly improved as BISANG Action for Yoon Out & Social Reform, one of the key organizers of the anti-martial law protests, strengthened its policies against discrimination and hate speech in response to criticism and the views expressed by young women on Twitter and other platforms (B. Jung, 2025). Consequently, the stage transformed the protest site into a space where "vegan women activists could come forward and speak about animal rights and women's rights" (#1) and where "people could voice their positions and identities in their own words" (#2), extending beyond the issues of martial law and impeachment.

Third, *dispersed spatiality* was evident in the growing participation of young women not only in the large-scale protests held in front of the National Assembly and Gwanghwamun Square, but also in regional and spin-off protests and demonstrations organized by civic groups unrelated to impeachment. One notable example was the Namtaeryeong protest, in which members of the Korean Peasants League drove tractors from various regions to Seoul to demand Yoon's impeachment. The protest was organized in response to police efforts to block the tractors from entering Seoul at Namtaeryeong Pass, and participants ultimately succeeded in breaking through the blockade. Most interviewees who attended these spin-off protests reported initially feeling "scared" because the gatherings were smaller than the main protests and often involved direct confrontations with the police or opposing groups. However, they explained that these protests became opportunities to reaffirm solidarity with members of other marginalized groups. As one participant stated:

> In the protests I've participated in so far, I've usually gone as a direct stakeholder, but this one was different. For example, even when I went as a feminist, I found myself listening to the stories of people who care deeply about disability issues. Because I looked each person in the face and listened to their remarks, I felt that my solidarity was connecting with real people. (#10)

Y. Lee (2025) argues that this sense of solidarity stems from the shared experiences arising from Korea's highly oppressive political structure toward marginalized groups.

Finally, the extensive exchange of resources among protest participants, which has become an established feature of protest culture, can be conceptualized as *reciprocal spatiality*. A culture of donations and prepayments spread widely, taking a unique form that extended beyond financial support for organizations

leading or participating in protests. For example, individuals would prepay part of the cost of meals or drinks at restaurants and cafés near protest sites, allowing participants to receive food and beverages free of charge. This practice was particularly popular among those unable to attend the protests in person and among celebrities. It also helped secure support from nearby business owners who might otherwise have worried about economic losses associated with the demonstrations. In addition, several interviewees described purchasing or shipping supplies, including snacks, hand warmers, and hygiene products, directly to protest sites:

> During the Namtaeryeong protest, I only sent supplies. Since I couldn't be there in person, I watched the situation [online] and felt tremendous guilt. At that time, someone in an anonymous group chat compiled a list of items needed on-site, and I noticed some of the items were things I could buy at a convenience store. So, I ordered them for delivery from a convenience store. (#14)

These four characteristics provide concrete examples of how the potential of invisibility among politically marginalized young women created a unique and inclusive protest culture through its process of actualization. The findings demonstrate that this protest culture is distinctive not only because it fostered solidarity across activist groups and generations but also because it created a rupture in the male-centered, dominant political model of visibility "by raising issues in ways the older generation never imagined" (#15). These two dimensions are closely interconnected, as the inclusivity of the protest space reflects a deliberate effort to avoid reproducing earlier exclusionary structures.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed that two dominant perspectives, one focusing on the invisibilization of activism through oppression by dominant powers and the other on invisible activism as a strategic choice, share a common limitation. Both treat visibility as the ultimate goal of activism and invisibility as an inevitable preliminary stage. Drawing on Deleuze's concepts of virtuality, actualization, and immanence, we conceptualized the potential of invisibility that sustains the continuity of activism. Based on this conceptualization, we explored how the invisible potential of young feminism was actualized across space and time within the specific event of the anti-martial law protests in Korea.

Regarding the first research question about the (in)visible temporality that drives the actualization of activism, this study demonstrated that the young women who participated in the anti-martial law protests did not suddenly appear in public spaces. Rather, they navigated shifting dynamics of (in)visibility over time, encountering external events that prompted visible actions as well as internal catalysts that fostered strategic, spontaneous, and vernacular practices within invisible domains. We also showed how the power of the dominant public sphere impedes critical recognition of these forms of actualization by rendering them invisible and reframing them through oversimplified representations. We described these historical temporalities as accumulative, strategic, and conflictual, illustrating how (in)visibility is continuously shaped both within and beyond activist practices.

Regarding the second research question, which concerns how the (in)visibility of activism manifests in space, we examined virtual spatiality as the medium through which the potential of (in)visibility is sustained and physical spatiality as its actualization. First, we analyzed Twitter's role in facilitating loose, personalized

connections grounded in fandom culture and feminist concerns, as well as the role of algorithmically curated recommendation feeds in supporting connective action across online and offline spaces. We then examined how physical spatiality, the potential of invisibility actualized through virtual spatiality, manifested as a distinctive and inclusive protest culture at protest sites. This culture was characterized by appropriation, intersectionality, dispersion, and reciprocity. As evidenced by these findings, young women actualized their potential by creating a rupture in an existing political model marked by exclusion and male-centered visibility.

These findings contribute to a renewed understanding of "invisibility," a concept that has often been treated either explicitly or implicitly as a condition to be overcome or as a state imposed by external circumstances. Our findings suggest that invisibility flows through space and time as a form of potentiality, enabling visibility through specific events while providing a foundation for the continuity and transformation of activism. Furthermore, by examining the role of young Korean feminist women in the anti-martial law protests, this study extends a theoretical conceptualization into empirical analysis, demonstrating how the potential of (in)visibility among marginalized groups can be actualized as a political capability that challenges and contests dominant political models.

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on a single case. As a result, it does not address the broader range of conditions that shape activism's (in)visibility across different contexts. Even within this case, the analysis focused on a relatively small sample drawn from a comparatively homogeneous marginalized group and did not extend to how that group is perceived by external actors. Because the activism of marginalized groups is always situated in relation to dominant public spheres, particularly in terms of (in)visibility, future research should broaden the scope of inquiry to deepen the current understanding of the role of (in)visibility within activism. Building on the conceptual framework and findings presented here, future studies could explore the social and technological conditions under which the potential of (in)visibility is actualized across different movements and contexts. Such work could encompass a wider range of cases, countries, and social identities while also examining the complex dynamics among political actors operating both within and beyond (in)visible forms of activism.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and academic editors for their constructive feedback.

Funding

This work was supported by the Kwangwoon University Research Grant in 2024.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

The interview data are not publicly available due to privacy concerns.

LLMs Disclosure

DeepL Write was used to proofread the grammar of the English manuscript originally written by the authors. No other AI tools were used for any other purpose.

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12745
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12745

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Transnationalization of Anti-Gender Politics on Social Media: Hashtag Practices and Cross-Border Visibility

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Submitted: 6 May 2026 **Accepted:** 11 August 2026 **Published:** 29 October 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

Abstract

Gender politics have become central arenas of contemporary political struggle, with anti-gender movements mobilizing across borders to contest women's and LGBTQI+ rights. While research has shown that anti-gender actors articulate strikingly similar positions across national contexts, it remains insufficiently understood how such similarity translates into shared transnational action. This study examines how anti-gender movements collectively generate transnational visibility on social media by analyzing ten years of Twitter (now X) communication from 148 anti-gender social movement organizations in Croatia, Germany, France, Italy, and Poland (N = 126,711 tweets). Drawing on concepts of networked framing and discourse coalitions, this study employs a mixed-methods analysis of hashtag co-usage on Twitter, combining quantitative measures of transnational hashtag connectivity with qualitative thematic content analysis. The findings reveal that anti-gender movements co-create visibility for opposition to gender equality through a threefold pattern, including a continuous dissemination of ideological narratives, an episodic activation of campaigns, and a strategic extension of anti-gender frames into broader public debates. These practices enable actors to jointly enhance the visibility and persistence of anti-gender claims across multiple publics while simultaneously adapting frames to divergent political contexts. By linking cross-border hashtag practices to the co-production of visibility, this study contributes to research on gendered public spheres by demonstrating how similarity among anti-gender actors becomes transnationally consequential through the joint production of visibility in networked communication environments.

Keywords

anti-gender movements; digital activism; far-right politics; hashtag activism; networked framing; social media; social movements; transnational communication; transnationalization

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1. Introduction

Gender politics have become one of the most contested arenas of contemporary political struggle across Europe. Since the early 2010s, movements opposing so-called "gender ideology" have mobilized against reproductive rights, LGBTQI+ equality, and gender mainstreaming policies. These mobilizations have contributed to major political developments, including Croatia's constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, Hungary's removal of gender studies from accredited university programs, Poland's near-total abortion ban, and Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Although embedded in distinct national contexts, these movements display remarkable resemblance: Across countries, anti-gender actors invoke similar narratives about protecting children and families, and portray equality policies as ideological impositions that threaten national sovereignty and moral order (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Scholars therefore describe anti-gender politics as a transnational movement, highlighting cross-border cooperation and diffusion (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024; Holvikivi et al., 2024; Koch, 2024; Lavizzari & Siročić, 2023; Mariani, 2025).

Digital media are widely assumed to facilitate this transnationalization, as they enable actors to disseminate claims, mobilize supporters, and connect dispersed audiences (Bennett, 2005). Although research on anti-gender movements' online strategies remains limited, existing studies show that these actors use digital infrastructures to circulate narratives and coordinate campaigns, often through professionalized advocacy networks and multilingual communication (Hall et al., 2024; Jaramillo et al., 2026; Reinhardt et al., 2023). Prior research has identified prominent actors such as CitizenGO operating across linguistic contexts (Righetti et al., 2025) and documented instances of cross-border online exchange among organizations (Tronina, 2024). At the same time, studies show that anti-gender communication between actors remains largely structured along national lines (Tronina, 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2022). This pattern mirrors findings in transnational public sphere research, where interaction-based measures (such as retweets, hyperlinks, or follows) often reveal limited cross-national exchange, falling short of the transnational promise associated with digital media (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Heft, Reinhardt, & Pfetsch, 2023; Stier et al., 2021).

How, then, does anti-gender politics acquire a transnational character in digitally networked environments that remain predominantly nationally segmented? Scholarship on transnational and Europeanized communication suggests that transnationality may emerge not only through dense interaction but also through discursive synchronization and shared communicative markers across contexts (Eder & Kantner, 2000; Wessler et al., 2008). Rather than examining direct interaction between actors or comparing anti-gender discourses across countries, this article investigates how digital communication practices render ideological similarity transnationally visible. Drawing on the discourse coalition approach (Hajer, 2006) and research on networked framing in digital communication (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), I conceptualize transnational visibility as the sustained cross-border presence of aligned claims within shared online issue publics.

To examine this process, I analyze how anti-gender movements produce transnational visibility through shared hashtag practices on social media. Rather than focusing on formal organizational ties or mobilization moments, the analysis traces how actors converge through recurring communicative practices that render aligned claims visible across national contexts. Drawing on ten years of Twitter (now X) communication from 148 anti-gender social movement organizations (SMOs) in Croatia, Germany, France, Italy, and Poland, the

study analyzes 148,088 tweets to investigate how shared hashtag practices connect actors, frames, and issues across borders. I conceptualize repeated cross-national hashtag usage as an indicator of transnational discourse coalitions, in which actors converge around shared storylines that generate collective visibility.

Empirically, this study combines quantitative measures of transnational hashtag connectivity with qualitative thematic content analysis to examine how anti-gender movements co-construct transnational visibility over time. The analysis identifies three recurring modes of hashtag usage: First, actors continuously disseminate ideological narratives that sustain the baseline visibility of anti-gender claims. Second, they engage in episodic campaign-driven communication that produces temporary spikes in attention. Third, they strategically extend anti-gender frames into broader public debates. Through these practices, actors co-create visibility for their claims across borders while adapting communication to domestic contexts.

By specifying how transnationality is enacted through shared hashtag practices, this study contributes to scholarship on anti-gender mobilization and digital political communication. It demonstrates that the transnational character of anti-gender politics lies not only in shared ideology or organizational networking, but also in the materialization of discursive similarity into sustained collective visibility. In this sense, hashtags enable geographically dispersed actors to operate as a transnational discourse coalition without formal organizational integration. Understanding these dynamics is crucial because anti-gender politics frequently serves as a testing ground for broader illiberal political projects eroding current democracies (Lombardo et al., 2021). Such transformations are often preceded by prolonged periods of discursive contestation in which exclusionary narratives gain visibility and gradually become normalized. Digital communication infrastructures allow actors to sustain this visibility across borders over time.

The next section introduces the theoretical framework, conceptualizing transnational visibility through networked framing and discourse coalitions, followed by the data, methods, and analysis of cross-national hashtag practices. The article concludes by discussing the implications for the transnationalization of anti-gender politics and the role of digital communication infrastructures in shaping contemporary ideological struggles.

2. Theoretical Framework

This framework conceptualizes the transnationalization of anti-gender movements as a process in which discursive similarity coalesces into a shared communicative formation across national contexts, arguing that digital platforms allow movements to materialize a cohesive transnational presence through networked communicative practices.

2.1. Anti-Gender Discourse Coalitions

Anti-gender movements are commonly described as heterogeneous alliances composed of religious fundamentalists, conservative activists, and far-right actors (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Despite their organizational diversity, research shows that these actors rely on a remarkably consistent set of discursive narratives. The anti-gender playbook constructs gender equality as an ideological imposition promoted by powerful elites and hostile interest groups, while feminist and LGBTQI+ actors are framed as members of a coordinated "lobby" seeking to impose progressive norms on unwilling societies (Roth & Sauer, 2022). These

storylines often take a populist form, opposing a supposedly threatened "people"—represented as families, children, or "ordinary citizens"—to liberal, feminist, or LGBTQI+ elites (Tranfić, 2022). At the same time, anti-gender narratives frequently position national communities against external actors such as the European Union, international organizations, or "the West" (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). Research has shown that anti-gender mobilizations across countries display striking similarities in rhetoric and repertoires of action, while simultaneously adapting these narratives to national contexts (Overhaart & van der Veer, 2024; Reinhardt et al., 2023; Roth & Sauer, 2022).

To account for this diversity, Edenborg (2021) proposes conceptualizing anti-gender mobilization as a discourse coalition. Building on Hajer (2006, p. 70), discourse coalitions consist of actors who reproduce shared storylines within public discourse over time. They do not require formal cooperation; rather, they emerge when different actors circulate similar interpretations of political issues. Through repetition, they increase the visibility of their demands and create an "appearance of discursive unity, as if everyone were talking about the same thing" (Edenborg, 2021, p. 176). As political influence increasingly depends on the ability to generate visibility for particular claims, discourse coalitions shape political agendas by repeatedly circulating shared interpretations and rendering them recognizable within the public sphere.

Research on transnational public spheres highlights a similar mechanism. While political communication typically remains embedded in national public spheres, transnational communication may emerge when similar issues are debated across multiple contexts using similar frames and criteria of relevance (Eder & Kantner, 2000; Heft, Pfetsch, et al., 2023). This represents a comparatively weak form of horizontal transnationalization, in which debates become linked through discursive convergence. Stronger forms additionally involve explicit references to actors or developments in other countries, thereby creating direct communicative linkages between national debates (Koopmans & Erbe, 2004; Wessler et al., 2008). Both differ from interaction-based understandings of transnationalization that emphasize interorganizational networking and transnational collective action that involve coordinated cross-border mobilization (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). Yet even these comparatively weak forms of horizontal transnationalization can become politically consequential. When the same claims gain visibility across multiple national arenas, they may influence supranational decision-making processes in multilevel governance systems such as the European Union or trigger policy diffusion across states (Ayoub, 2016). In this sense, recurring parallel visibility can generate the appearance of a transnational discourse coalition.

Building on this perspective, I focus on the discursive convergence (even though explicit cross-border references occasionally surface in the analysis). I thus conceptualize the cross-border similarity of anti-gender mobilization not merely as ideological resemblance but as a transnational discourse coalition that produces visibility for anti-gender claims across multiple public spheres.

2.2. Networked Framing and Hashtag Activism

Digital platforms provide the infrastructure through which transnational discourse coalitions can materialize. In the digitally networked public sphere, visibility is increasingly shaped by user engagement, platform architectures, and algorithmic amplification (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Treré & Bonini, 2022). Connectivity therefore becomes a central organizing principle of contemporary political communication (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014; Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

Framing theory explains how political actors construct meaning around social and political issues. Frames define problems, attribute responsibility, and propose solutions, thereby shaping how audiences interpret political claims and mobilize around them (Benford & Snow, 2000). Social movements rely on framing processes to articulate grievances and legitimize their claims within public debate. A key mechanism in these processes is frame alignment, through which movements connect their interpretative frames with those of other actors or with broader public concerns (Snow et al., 1986): When movement actors link previously unconnected but ideologically compatible frames (frame bridging), reinforce shared values and beliefs (frame amplification), extend their claims to adjacent issues in order to reach wider audiences (frame extension), or more fundamentally redefine existing interpretative frameworks (frame transformation).

In digitally networked communication environments, framing processes increasingly occur in a distributed manner. Rather than being centrally orchestrated by a small number of movement organizations, interpretative frames emerge through the aggregation of many dispersed contributions across networked publics (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014). Meraz and Papacharissi (2013) term this phenomenon networked framing, a process through which dispersed actors collectively construct and circulate shared storylines that shape public debate.

Hashtags are a key communicative device within networked framing. As discursive markers, hashtags organize fast-paced communication by linking actors, topics, and ideas into searchable issue publics. Beyond merely labeling topics, the adoption of a shared hashtag allows actors to publicly associate their claims with a particular interpretative frame and contribute to its circulation across networked communication environments (Jackson et al., 2020; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Jackson et al. (2020, p. 30) note: "The use of hashtags and other conversational conventions enables an emergent organization whereby tweets coalesce into a larger collective storytelling." In this way, hashtag activism illustrates how geographically dispersed actors can participate in shared meaning-making without requiring formal coordination.

As demonstrated below, hashtag practices are not limited to coordinated campaign moments. The long-term use of particular hashtags allows movements to continuously debate and reproduce ideological narratives over time, creating a persistent communicative layer in which interpretative frames remain visible and available for future mobilization. This dynamic applies both to periods of intense campaigning and to phases of lower mobilization, during which narratives remain present and can be reactivated when political opportunities arise. At the same time, movements strategically exploit digital affordances through practices such as "agenda surfing," attaching their claims to trending topics in order to increase visibility (Knüpfer, 2025), and sometimes even attempt to "hijack" these hashtags (Knüpfer et al., 2020). Through such practices, actors extend their frames into broader public discussions and connect them to wider political conversations.

Taken together, networked framing and hashtag practices can be understood as mechanisms through which transnational discourse coalitions become visible in digitally networked communication environments. Discourse coalitions emphasize how actors converge around shared storylines without requiring formal coordination, while networked framing explains how these storylines are produced and circulated in a distributed manner across networked publics. Shared hashtag practices materialize this process and make it empirically observable: By using the same tags, geographically dispersed actors connect their contributions to shared streams of communication and align their framing practices across contexts. This framework therefore shifts the analytical focus from what actors say to how they use digital affordances to co-create visibility for their shared anti-gender claims.

3. Data and Methods

This study examines how anti-gender SMOs leverage hashtagging practices on Twitter to generate transnational visibility and discursive alignment across Europe. Rather than reconstructing anti-gender discourse or comparing national discursive differences, the analysis focuses on how cross-border similarity is enacted and materialized through platform affordances. In particular, hashtags serve as a key mechanism for connecting actors, claims, and audiences across national contexts, thereby facilitating cross-border resonance and enabling the formation of transnational discourse coalitions. Rather than capturing direct interaction between actors (e.g., retweets or mentions), this approach conceptualizes transnationality at the level of shared visibility and discursive alignment, as reflected in the cross-border co-use of hashtags (Schünemann, 2020).

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of hashtag co-usage and transnational connectivity with qualitative thematic content analysis. The quantitative component identifies patterns of cross-national hashtag convergence and measures the connective capacity of hashtags across actors and countries. The qualitative component examines how hashtags are strategically instrumentalized to frame and extend anti-gender discourse.

3.1. Country and Account Selection

The analysis focuses on anti-gender SMOs in five European countries: Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, and Poland. These countries have experienced significant public controversies related to gender, sexuality, and reproductive rights and show prior evidence of transnational anti-gender mobilization. At the same time, they represent diverse political and socio-cultural contexts. Although all five countries are members of the European Union, they vary considerably in levels of gender equality and democratic quality (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021; Freedom House, 2021), arguably influencing the organizational forms, strategies, and opportunities available to anti-gender actors (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021), for instance, how intensely SMOs draw on transnationally connective hashtags, or the frames they attach to them. Although this study does not directly test these relationships, the diverse case selection allows for the identification of transnational patterns across heterogeneous national environments.

SMOs are formal organizations that pursue movement goals through coordinated action (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The sample includes civil society organizations such as non-governmental organizations, associations, and foundations. Religious institutions, educational institutions, media organizations, and political parties were excluded to maintain a focus on civil society actors rather than institutional or partisan actors.

Organizations were identified based on their documented participation in anti-gender mobilizations, membership in relevant national or transnational networks, or active promotion of anti-gender positions. Identification was conducted through systematic review of organizational participation in key events and networks, including the World Congress of Families, the Agenda Europe network, and national events. Data sources included official event websites, archived webpages accessed via the Wayback Machine, existing datasets (Velasco & Swindle, 2024), as well as expert reports and academic literature.

For each organization, its primary national Twitter account was located. Where no official organizational account existed, individual accounts of organizational leaders or presidents were included, as these frequently function as primary communication channels. The final sample consists of 148 Twitter accounts distributed across the five countries (Croatia: 9; Germany: 26; France: 41; Italy: 43; Poland: 29).

Because research on transnational anti-gender communication remains limited, the dataset was not artificially balanced across countries or organizations. No additional homogenization (e.g., equalizing country samples) was conducted, as the aim was to capture the full range of emergent patterns in transnational hashtag use. Although this design may result in stronger representation of larger countries or more digitally active organizations, such unevenness reflects real-world structural differences in movement presence and platform use across countries. It therefore corresponds to the empirical distribution of actors rather than to imposed sampling decisions.

3.2. Data Collection, Operationalization, and Analysis

Tweets were collected from the 148 identified accounts using the Twitter API (Academic Research access) between 2022 and 2023. The collection covered the period from January 2012 to July 2022, capturing the consolidation of anti-gender mobilization alongside the rise of Twitter as a central arena for political communication. Only original tweets were included; retweets were excluded to focus on actors' own communicative practices. Furthermore, only tweets containing at least one hashtag were retained, as hashtags constitute the primary unit of analysis (resulting in 148,088 tweets containing 37,917 unique hashtags). To focus on shared discursive practices, the analysis was further restricted to "mutual hashtags," defined as hashtags used by at least two different accounts. This filtering removes idiosyncratic tags and isolates hashtags that function as connective discursive elements. A total of 7,743 mutual hashtags were identified, representing 20.4% of all unique hashtags and a final analytical corpus of 126,711 tweets.

Hashtags were classified as transnational if they were used by accounts from more than one country (Schünemann, 2020). To measure their connective capacity, a transnational connectivity score (TCS) was calculated (following Heft et al., 2021):

$$\mathrm{TCS}_{\mathrm{h}} = \frac{n_{\mathrm{countries}}}{N_{\mathrm{all_countries}}} + \frac{m_{\mathrm{accounts}}}{M_{\mathrm{all_accounts}}}$$

where $n_{\mathrm{countries}}$ represents the number of countries in which the hashtag was used, $N_{\mathrm{all_countries}}$ represents the total number of countries in the dataset, m_{accounts} represents the number of unique accounts using the hashtag, and $M_{\mathrm{all_accounts}}$ is the total number of accounts. The score increases when a hashtag is used by many accounts across many countries. Hashtag frequency per actor was excluded to avoid overrepresenting highly active accounts and to ensure that connectivity reflects breadth of adoption rather than volume of use (Supplementary File, Part A). The ten most connective hashtags were identified for each year to account for temporal variation and to detect shifts in transnational alignment over time while maintaining a manageable corpus for close reading. An inspection of hashtags beyond the top ten indicated that they largely reinforced the same thematic patterns rather than introducing substantively different themes.

To examine the strategic functions of hashtag use, the study employs thematic qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). Rather than focusing on isolated hashtag campaigns, the analysis seeks to identify

recurring modes of action enacted through hashtag practices. Hashtags were treated as analytical entry points and preliminary codes, allowing for the systematic examination of how actors use them to frame their claims.

Tweets containing highly connective hashtags were subjected to close reading. As the dataset includes multiple languages (Croatian, French, German, Italian, and Polish), all tweets were translated into English using the DeepL API prior to coding. Automated translations were manually reviewed to ensure conceptual accuracy and consistency, particularly for politically sensitive or context-specific terminology.

The coding process followed an inductive and iterative procedure involving repeated reading, memo writing, and progressive refinement of codes. Interpretation was informed by scholarship on hashtag activism and digital framing practices (e.g., Fielitz & Staemmler, 2020; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Östin & Lindgren, 2024) as well as frame alignment theory (Snow et al., 1986), which provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how hashtags not only function as mere topical markers but as strategic tools for aligning individual meaning systems with collective narratives by bridging issues, amplifying core messages, and extending or adapting frames to reach broader publics. The aim was not to categorize tweets by topic alone, but to identify patterned strategic uses of hashtags across contexts. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories based on recurring patterns in hashtag usage and associated tweet content.

This process resulted in the identification of three overarching modes of hashtag use: (a) conversational anti-gender hashtags, which reinforce and disseminate core anti-gender frames; (b) campaign-related anti-gender hashtags, which support short-term mobilization and campaigns; and (c) external hashtags, which are not part of anti-gender discourse but through which actors insert their claims into broader public debates. While individual tweets may combine multiple logics simultaneously, this typology captures dominant patterns in how anti-gender SMOs use hashtags to co-produce transnational visibility.

Although all analyzed tweets are publicly accessible, ethical considerations guided the presentation of qualitative material. To avoid further amplifying anti-gender actors and their messaging, tweets are paraphrased and anonymized in the analysis. This decision is based on harm minimization and responsible research practice when studying far-right political actors (AoIR Risky Research Working Group, 2025).

4. Results

4.1. Most Transnationally Connective Hashtags

Of the 7,743 mutual hashtags (used by at least two accounts), 1,397 (18%) were transnational, meaning they appeared in tweets from at least two different countries. Although this represents a minority of mutual hashtags, these transnational hashtags accounted for the majority of mutually hashtagged tweets—64,964 of 126,711 (51.3%)—indicating that most mutually hashtagged communication in the dataset is embedded in cross-border hashtag streams, which is an initial indicator of transnational visibility practices.

To identify which hashtags contribute most strongly to cross-border linkage, I use the TCS, which captures breadth of use across both accounts and countries. Table 1 lists the ten most connective hashtags per year.

First, a small set of enduring "anchor hashtags" consistently drives transnational connectivity across the decade. In particular, #gender, #prolife, and #lgbt repeatedly rank among the most connective hashtags. This continuity reflects how anti-gender actors rely on a stable vocabulary that is recognizable across national contexts and flexible enough to attach to diverse claims. Alongside these enduring hashtags, event-specific hashtags such as #demofüralle, #marchforlife, and #familyday appear prominently, reflecting national protest events. Finally, several highly connective hashtags reference major political events and controversies beyond the immediate anti-gender agenda, including #trump, #brexit, #covid19, and #ukraine. Their presence indicates that anti-gender actors do not communicate only within a gender-policy niche but routinely tweet about broader public debates. While these hashtags also represent a stronger form of horizontal transnationalization by explicitly integrating developments abroad, the analysis primarily focuses on similarity-based transnationalization. Moreover, some high-connectivity hashtags reflect platform conventions rather than substantive anti-gender discourse, such as #ff ("Follow Friday"), which is used to recommend accounts to follow (see Supplementary File, Part B).

Notably, many of the highest-connectivity hashtags are in English, although the SMOs primarily post in their national languages. This selective cross-linguistic practice can be read as a low-cost mechanism of discursive integration: English hashtags enable cross-border discoverability and connect otherwise

Table 1. Most connective hashtags per year.

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
#ff	#gender	#gender	#ff	#prolife	#prolife
#lgbt	#femen	#ff	#gender	#ff	#charliegard
#prolife	#ff	#manifpourtous	#laudatosi	#obama	#trump
#vita	#manifpourtous	#facebook	#prolife	#zika	#fakenews
#gay	#barilla	#lunacek	#demofüralle	#familyday	#usa
#gender	#prolife	#papa	#lgbt	#brexit	#gender
#l	#video	#prolife	#prayforparis	#gender	#macron
#la	#marchforlife	#gpa	#vincentlambert	#paris	#charlie
#lourdes	#obama	#apple	#demofueralle	#amorislaetitia	#marchforlife
	#twitter	#demofueralle	#islam	#trump	#down
					#freespeechbus
2018	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	
#prolife	#prolife	#fakenews	#covid19	#ukraine	
#fakenews	#fakenews	#covid19	#prolife	#usa	
#alfieevans	#gender	#covid	#covid	#covid19	
#gender	#notredame	#lgbt	#gender	#gender	
#facebook	#marchforlife	#blacklivesmatter	#gpa	#roevswade	
#macron	#vincentlambert	#covid2019	#unplanned	#macron	
#lgbt	#gpa	#1	#pma	#lgbt	
#islam	#macron	#2	#afghanistan	#ukrainewar	
#usa	#lgbt	#coronavirus	#lgbt	#prolife	
#life	#pmasanspère	#prolife	#matic	#roevwade	
#marchforlife					

language-segmented discussions without requiring full translation of the surrounding text. While the data cannot determine whether coordination is deliberate, the outcome is a more interconnected transnational issue space than would emerge from national-language hashtagging alone.

Connectivity, however, is uneven. Only a limited subset of hashtags attains high connectivity across all five countries, such as #fakenews, #lgbt, #macron, #marchforlife, #prolife, #propaganda, and #usa. A larger share circulates within partially overlapping regional constellations. The strongest dyadic linkage occurs between France and Italy, accounting for 46% of all two-country combinations, followed by France and Germany (23%). These three countries also dominate triadic constellations, comprising 73% of all three-country combinations. In four-country constellations, Poland joins this core group (87.5%), whereas Croatia appears least frequently in cross-national combinations. Hashtag practices blur national boundaries but do not erase them.

Taken together, the results show that anti-gender SMOs engage in recurring cross-border hashtag co-use over the entire period. The transnational discourse coalition is therefore not episodic but durable and spans the five investigated European countries, albeit to varying degrees. Engagement online is not limited to gender-related issues; it also extends to wider political and cultural discussions, often articulated through seemingly unrelated hashtags.

While these quantitative patterns confirm that a structural infrastructure for cross-border connectivity exists, the following section employs qualitative content analysis to reveal the strategic logics and communicative modes through which this visibility is actively co-produced.

4.2. Modes of Hashtag Use

To understand how the transnational discourse coalition operates on Twitter, I inductively identify three modes of hashtag use. These modes describe how anti-gender SMOs (a) reproduce and circulate core ideological frames, (b) mobilize attention around campaigns and events, and (c) extend movement frames into broader public debates by inserting their messaging into other hashtag streams. Importantly, these modes can overlap within a single tweet, but they represent distinct logics of visibility production.

4.2.1. Shaping and Disseminating Anti-Gender Narratives

The first mode consists of conversational anti-gender hashtags: They recur across time and contexts as part of ongoing movement communication rather than short-lived mobilizations. The most prominent are #gender, #prolife, and #lgbt, which appear across nearly all national settings and repeatedly rank among the most connective hashtags (Table 1). These tags function as durable discursive infrastructure: They are broad enough to support continuous commentary, yet recognizable enough to index a shared ideological stance. While #prolife carries a clear movement-specific direction, #gender and #lgbt are broader terms also used by LGBTQI+ or feminist actors, suggesting an attempt to dominate discourse on gender and sexuality, rather than simply to spread a separate anti-gender hashtag. Across countries, these hashtags are used to circulate central elements of anti-gender discourse identified in prior literature, while mainly opposing two main topics, namely LGBTQI+ and abortion rights, which are sometimes even connected.

Posts frequently rely on the "gender ideology" frame as a flexible diagnostic narrative: Gender and LGBTQI+ equality are portrayed as an imposed ideology, linked to propaganda, totalitarianism, or "dictatorship," and contrasted with a naturalized moral order centered on heterosexual marriage and procreation. LGBTQI+ rights are framed as the agenda of a powerful "lobby," while "ordinary people," families, and especially children are positioned as threatened subjects requiring protection (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Such narratives align with a populist "us vs. them" logic and provide connective tissue to conspiratorial interpretations of political change (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). The following tweet, paraphrased and anonymized from a Polish public account, exemplifies this:

> An attack on family and the innocence of our children. How society, culture and law fall victim to the social engineering of #gender ideology and #lobbyLGBT. See the documentary 'Twilight. The gender ideology offensive.' (May 25, 2019)

The gender ideology frame is universal and, owing to its vagueness, can be applied transnationally. At times, actors also localize their claims, for instance, by using anti-colonial vocabulary to portray gender equality as a foreign imposition (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021; Stolze, 2026), and directing blame at supranational actors such as the EU or UN.

> Everyone in Rome against the colonization of #Gender! #StopGender (tweet paraphrased and anonymized from an Italian public account, from June 4, 2015)

In the anti-abortion domain, the conversational mode is dominated by a "pro-life" branding strategy. The hashtag #prolife operates as a transnational label that links national debates to a global anti-abortion issue public. The 148 investigated SMOs often opt for this English hashtag, despite having national-language equivalents, such as "#zazivot," "#provita," "#provie," "#jazumleben," or "#zażyciem." By utilizing a universally recognized hashtag like #prolife, national groups can align their claims with a global debate, expanding their reach beyond language-specific hashtags.

Tweets commonly adopt framing strategies characteristic of contemporary anti-abortion rhetoric: Embryos and fetuses are personified as "children" or "unborn babies," and abortion is equated with killing rather than pregnancy termination. By rebranding their position as "pro-life" rather than "anti-abortion," activists frame themselves as defenders of universal rights, implicitly casting supporters of abortion rights as "against life." This linguistic shift reflects an adaptation to increasingly secular contexts, where appeals to human rights and protection narratives resonate more broadly than explicitly religious arguments (Achtelik, 2018; Saurette & Gordon, 2016). This sentiment is exemplified in the following tweet, paraphrased and anonymized from a German public account, which asserts that choice advocates are proponents of death:

> Even those who like to talk about a 'cluster of cells' say that when it comes to an #abortion, they decide 'against a child' and never 'against a cluster of cells.' Find the error…. #AbortionKills #ProLife instead of #ProDeath (June 6, 2021)

Some posts further expand this framing by positioning anti-abortion activism as protective of women (e.g., through references to regret or trauma) or of marginalized groups. In particular, references to disability—such as the use of #down in relation to Down syndrome—portray abortion as a form of ableist

discrimination. In these instances, anti-gender actors attach their messaging to broader anti-ableism discussions, illustrating how hashtag use can simultaneously reinforce core ideology and extend into adjacent debates. While #prolife fits within the category of shaping and disseminating anti-gender ideology, hashtags related to disability also exemplify the monitoring and alignment mode I discuss later, illustrating how tweets can serve multiple framing functions simultaneously.

Overall, conversational anti-gender hashtags function as a long-term visibility strategy. By repeatedly posting under high-recognition tags (especially #gender and #prolife), anti-gender SMOs keep their frames continuously present within searchable hashtag streams, sustaining a transnational discourse coalition that is easy to join and easy to encounter.

4.2.2. Mobilizing Around Campaigns and Events

The second mode consists of campaign-related hashtags used to mobilize support for specific actions and to coordinate attention around events. This includes both offline protest events and short-lived, issue-centered bursts of activity. In the dataset, examples include national protest tags such as #demofüralle/#demofueralle (Germany), #manifpourtous (France), and #familyday (Italy). These hashtags are largely national in their primary audience and volume, yet they circulate to a limited degree beyond their country of origin.

Such occasional cross-border use contributes to extending the visibility of protest events beyond national boundaries. SMOs outside the host country reference them to signal solidarity, to present national campaigns as part of a broader European pattern, and to "borrow" labels that carry established movement legitimacy, as illustrated in the following tweet:

> #DemoFuerAlle who value the family, the 1st German #ManifPourTous yesterday in Stuttgart! (paraphrased and anonymized from a German public account, from April 6, 2014)

Even minimal cross-national repetition can expand the visibility of national protest events beyond domestic publics and cultivate an impression of synchronized, Europe-wide resistance to gender and sexuality policies.

A particularly illustrative label is #marchforlife. The March for Life has been held in the USA since the 1970s, and several accounts praise it and American anti-abortion activism for its pioneering role. Here, transnational visibility operates through imitation and referencing: Activists connect domestic events to a globally familiar repertoire, drawing on the symbolic power of a longstanding movement label without requiring coordination.

In addition to offline-related hashtags, the data reveal limited instances of online campaign dynamics centered on "right-to-life" cases, including #alfieevans, #charliegard, and #vincentlambert. In these cases, tweets were used to mobilize sympathy, express condolences, and articulate broader "pro-life" narratives. Participation was limited to a handful of SMOs, yet the hashtags circulated across borders and generated temporally concentrated bursts of activity. Compared to more durable conversational tags such as #gender or #prolife, these campaign hashtags were issue-specific and short-lived, typically peaking within narrow time windows.

Among them, #alfieevans attracted the widest engagement, with 23 organizations producing 896 tweets across four of the five countries under investigation. Alfie Evans, a British infant suffering from a severe neurodegenerative condition, became the subject of an international legal and political controversy after a dispute between his parents and medical authorities over the continuation of life support. The case received substantial public attention, particularly in Italy, where actors advocated transferring him for treatment and framed the situation as a paradigmatic "right-to-life" struggle. This framing resonated strongly within anti-gender networks and facilitated cross-border uptake of the hashtag.

As shown in Figure 1, activity peaked almost simultaneously across countries in April and May 2018, following earlier references that began in February, initially driven by Italian accounts, which were among the first in the sample to pick up the UK-originated campaign. The near-synchronous rise and decline of #alfieevans tweets point to a shared temporal dynamic rather than purely isolated national reactions. While the data do not allow conclusions about intentional coordination, they indicate transnational resonance within the discourse coalition, as organizations in different countries responded to the same focal event within a similar time frame. Emotionally charged individual cases thus function as temporary visibility accelerators, intensifying cross-border engagement and reinforcing a shared moral narrative around anti-abortion and right-to-life claims.



Figure 1. Frequency of #alfieevans hashtag usage over time.

4.2.3. Extending Frames Into Broader Public Debates

The third mode consists of external hashtags, i.e., tags not inherently tied to anti-gender discourse but strategically used to extend movement frames into high-attention public debates. This practice aligns with frame extension and alignment processes (Snow et al., 1986): Movements attach their claims to ongoing issues to remain visible, appear relevant, and reach audiences beyond their core publics.

Empirically, this mode appears through recurring engagement with internationally salient hashtags and references (e.g., #usa, #trump, #macron, #covid19, #ukraine) which circulate across the sampled countries. Not every use reflects strategic frame extension; many posts simply comment on current affairs. However, a subset of tweets uses external hashtags as visibility gateways: Anti-gender claims are inserted into streams where attention is already high, thereby broadening potential reach and positioning the movement as an interpreter of unrelated crises through its ideological lens.

An example of such alignment involves the use of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to draw a provocative comparison between the killing of Ukrainians and abortion. By employing the hashtag #ukraine, the following tweet inserted anti-abortion claims into an ongoing conversation about wartime atrocities:

> They condemn the #ukraine war (rightly so) but wage a #war against innocent, defenseless unborn children in the #womb with over 70 million victims every year. Now the #WHO—that criminal gang—wants to enforce killing before birth worldwide without a time limit. (paraphrased and anonymized from a German public account, from April 4, 2022)

Another illustrative example is the use of #blacklivesmatter, a hashtag originally associated with anti-racist and anti-police brutality activism. Within the dataset, some posts express explicit opposition to Black Lives Matter (BLM), while others seek to redirect the conversation toward anti-abortion claims. This occurs, for instance, through the addition of slogans such as "Beginning in the Womb" or the creation of derivative hashtags including #UnbornLivesMatter and #BabyLivesMatter. By inserting their messaging into a high-visibility hashtag stream, anti-gender actors move beyond their core issue publics and engage in adjacent political debates. Such practices appropriate the symbolic infrastructure of another movement, potentially reshaping the interpretive context of the hashtag while amplifying anti-gender claims within it (Knüpfer, 2025). This appropriation, however, is also not power-neutral: Derivative slogans, much like uses of "All Lives Matter," aim to deracialize and dilute BLM's central claim by generalizing it. Framing anti-abortion politics in this way therefore also redirects attention away from the racialized violence BLM was created to address.

Compared to conversational and campaign hashtags, external-hashtag practices are less voluminous and more situational. Yet they play a distinct role in the transnational discourse coalition, as they connect anti-gender communication to adjacent issue publics and expand the coalition's visibility beyond explicitly anti-gender debates. Doing so, they help embed anti-gender narratives within broader political conversations, even when the connection is tenuous, as hashtagging affords low-cost linkage across topics.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how anti-gender movements generate transnational visibility through social media communication. Combining quantitative analysis of hashtag connectivity with qualitative analysis of hashtag practices, it shows how cross-border alignment emerges through shared communicative practices on Twitter. The findings demonstrate that the transnational character of anti-gender mobilization online is produced through recurring hashtag use that renders aligned claims visible beyond national settings. In this way, ideological similarity becomes a communicative infrastructure through which geographically dispersed actors participate in a shared issue space while continuing to address domestic audiences.

Empirically, the analysis first identified the most transnationally connective hashtags per year using a transnational connectivity score and then examined three recurring modes of hashtag use through which this visibility is produced. First, conversational anti-gender hashtags function as a durable discursive infrastructure that enables the continuous circulation of core ideological narratives. Hashtags such as #gender and #prolife operate as recognizable markers that link national debates to broader transnational issue publics and sustain the baseline visibility of anti-gender claims over time. Second, campaign-related hashtags generate temporary bursts of attention around specific events, protests, or highly emotional cases. Although such campaigns are often nationally anchored, their occasional cross-border uptake allows activists to situate local mobilizations within a broader narrative of transnational resistance. Third, the strategic use of external hashtags enables actors to insert anti-gender frames into high-attention public debates. Through practices like agenda surfing, anti-gender actors attach their claims to unrelated issues and extend their interpretive frames into broader political conversations. While this threefold typology may reflect a general structural logic of hashtag activism rather than being unique to anti-gender mobilization, the narratives circulated through it are movement-specific, as anti-gender actors consistently frame their claims as resistance to a transnational "gender ideology" (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

Taken together, these practices demonstrate how the discursive similarity of anti-gender actors becomes transnationally consequential in digital communication environments. Rather than relying on dense interaction or formal coordination, transnationality emerges through the repeated alignment of claims online. Through the repeated use of shared hashtags, dispersed organizations place their claims within common communication streams and make aligned narratives visible across countries. This suggests that transnational discourse coalitions are not only ideological formations but are enacted and materialized through everyday platform practices that sustain visibility over time.

These findings contribute to research on anti-gender mobilization by showing that the widely documented similarity of anti-gender narratives across countries (Holvikivi et al., 2024; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Roth & Sauer, 2022) is not only a matter of shared ideology but also of communicative practices that continuously reproduce and circulate these narratives across borders. At the same time, these findings complement prior research showing that anti-gender online communication remains largely structured along national lines (Tronina, 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2022) and that transnational communication assessed through interaction typically remains limited (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Heft, Reinhardt, & Pfetsch, 2023; Stier et al., 2021). Rather than contradicting this scholarship, the present study demonstrates that cross-border visibility can arise through the co-presence of aligned claims in shared hashtag debates. This visibility-based form operates independently of direct exchange, persisting even where interactional measures show minimal connectivity.

Read together, these findings suggest that anti-gender communication may be nationally segmented in direct exchange yet transnationally connected in discursive visibility, thus underscoring the need to treat transnationality not as a single phenomenon, but as a set of related dimensions requiring different methodological approaches.

Despite these insights, several caveats must be noted. Participation is uneven across countries: While French, Italian, and German SMOs appear more discursively interconnected, Polish and especially Croatian actors are less embedded in cross-border conversations. This partly reflects methodological factors, including larger samples and higher Twitter activity in some countries, which increase opportunities for transnational hashtag overlap. But it also mirrors country clusters identified in earlier analyses (Tronina, 2024), where France, Italy, and Germany formed more cohesive structures in their social and organizational networks. Moreover, the French movement has been an inspiration for Italian and German anti-gender mobilization, suggesting these transnational ties are grounded in offline movement dynamics, not only in the present sample. Nevertheless, the relative contribution of sampling, platform use, and underlying movement structures cannot be disentangled with the present data. Future research should therefore assess whether similar country clusters emerge across other platforms, datasets, and organizational samples. Also, future comparative research beyond Europe will be necessary to determine whether these patterns reflect specifically European processes of transnationalization or the localized uptake of globally circulating anti-gender repertoires. Still, we can conclude that national constellations continue to shape the configuration of cross-border ties.

Moreover, although instances of mutual hashtag use were identified, they were at times relatively rare and dispersed, more akin to finding needles in a haystack than clear, large-scale mobilizations. Mutual campaigning and monitoring, in particular, occurred rather sporadically and typically involved only a subset of actors. These overlaps should therefore be interpreted as indicative patterns: They demonstrate that resonance exists, but further research is needed to determine its depth.

An exploratory approach across ten years of social media communication and a broad hashtag range uncovered general tendencies but may have obscured more fine-grained dynamics. Future research could combine this longitudinal approach with focused case studies that trace particular campaigns and examine the heterogeneity of actors involved. Such work could further clarify how different actors participate in transnational communication, how narratives evolve over time, and how online visibility relates to offline mobilization and political influence.

Taken together, the findings highlight the importance of examining not only the content of political claims but also the communicative infrastructures through which they circulate. Digital platforms do not automatically produce transnational political publics, but they provide affordances through which dispersed actors can repeatedly align their framing practices and sustain shared narratives across borders. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for analyzing how contemporary ideological movements operate in networked communication environments and how discursive coalitions shape political debates beyond national boundaries.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Humboldt University Berlin and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT and NotebookLM were used for language editing and technical assistance in R, including support with code generation and debugging during data processing. All conceptual development, validation of procedures, analysis, interpretation, and substantive writing were conducted by the author.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12820
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12820

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Open Access Journal

Navigating Online Visibility: Construction of Feminine Identity in Chinese Influencers' Affective Networked Publics

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Submitted: 15 May 2026 **Accepted:** 11 August 2026 **Published:** 1 October 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

Abstract

The rise of fashion and beauty influencers in China has produced highly visible representations of idealised femininity that increasingly appeal to young women and girls. This study examines how influencers on the Chinese social media platform Weibo discursively construct feminine identity through digital self-branding and how young women interpret and negotiate this mediated feminine visibility. By employing in-depth interviews with 31 Chinese urban young women and a feminist critical discourse analysis of 48 selected posts produced by leading female influencers, this study identifies three interrelated discursive resources through which idealised femininity is assembled: ambiguous feminism, an entrepreneurial beauty discourse, and aspirational consumption. Drawing on Berlant's concept of intimate publics, the study argues that these discourses circulate affectively through relatability, producing both belonging and discipline within the community. Participants actively negotiate these representations through tactically extracting symbolic values and managing pressures to construct a legible feminine subjectivity. Furthermore, this study argues that asymmetric gendered power relations are reproduced through affective circulation within feminised digital spaces.

Keywords

China; feminine identity; influencer; intimate publics; women's digital self-representation

1. Introduction

In China, digital content creators have become increasingly professionalised through the emergence of multichannel networks (MCN) and influencer incubators since the mid-2010s (Han, 2021; Sun et al., 2026). Through systematic training in content production and platform operation, alongside marketing support, a

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growing number of creators have begun to pursue influencer work as a full-time career. They are capable of strategically generating online personas, cultivating substantial followings, and converting online symbolic capital into commercial value (Abidin, 2016; Dippner, 2018; G. Zhang & de Seta, 2018). Within this ecosystem, fashion and beauty constitute an appealing and commercially significant sector, accounting for the largest share (33.6%) of the RMB 90 billion total expenditure on Chinese influencer marketing in 2023 (TopKlout, 2024).

Beyond its commercial scale, existing studies have shown that Chinese fashion and beauty influencers have developed at the intersection of digital popular cultures and platform commerce, where aesthetic expertise, neoliberal entrepreneurship, and relational and affective labours are closely intertwined (Guan, 2021; Liao, 2021; Sun et al., 2026). More importantly, their content, audience addressability, and thematic repertoire are also highly feminine-coded, frequently centring on clothing styles, make-up, and/or relationship advice. Through beauty tutorials, product recommendations, and sharing personal stories, fashion and beauty influencers become models of "aspirational femininity" and translate these ideals into concrete routines, consumer choices, and modes of presentation that followers can incorporate into their everyday lives. In this sense, their digital communities function as a platformed pedagogic site through which idealised femininity is made visible, desirable, and actionable (Calder-Dawe et al., 2025; Camacho-Miñano & Gray, 2021).

This remarkable economic success and growing cultural impact are of central importance in the Chinese context, given that Chinese young women are navigating their feminine subjectivity and femininity in a post-socialist society where state-sanctioned collectivism is reconfigured through neoliberal and market-oriented self-governance (Rofel, 2007). This transformation has produced new expectations for modern femininities and gender relations, which are mediated intensively through women's digital self-representation and "confessional" discourses throughout their online activities, and more so in fashion and beauty influencer-led digital communities (Sun, 2023). Existing studies of fashion and beauty influencers in the Chinese context tend to focus on the production side, including content and discourse analyses of digital materials (Liao, 2021; Sun, 2023; Sun et al., 2026), or interviews with content creators (Guan, 2021). However, less attention has been paid to how meanings circulate between mediated representations and their reception by followers. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, this study approaches meanings as neither merely residing in influencer texts alone nor being simply transmitted to audiences; instead, they are produced, interpreted, and modified by individuals through reflexive interpretive processes (Blumer, 1986). Young women actively associate mediated representations of idealised femininities online with their own bodily experiences, gendered aspirations, and situated social environments. Simultaneously, as influencers' digital sites essentially rely on the "intimacy sells" grounded in relational attachment (Glatt, 2024), this article adopts an affective scope to understand how these discursively represented femininities are articulated through resonance, anxiety, and attraction. Bringing these two analytical dimensions together, this study poses the following research questions as below:

1. How do fashion and beauty influencers discursively represent femininity/feminine identity through intimate and affective self-branding practices to sustain online visibility?
2. How do young women interpret, negotiate, and affectively engage with these mediated visions of idealised femininity within influencer communities?

To address these questions, this article combines feminist critical discourse analysis of digital posts produced by fashion and beauty influencers on Weibo with in-depth interviews with young female participants. This article is not concerned with linear media effects or direct causal claims. Instead, it focuses on the relations of power and cultural tensions embedded in these discursive representations and young women's engagement with them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Influencer and Gendered Visibility

This article uses the term "influencer" to refer to professionalised social media actors who have transformed online visibility into commercially oriented careers. This usage distinguishes influencers from the earlier concept of micro-celebrity, which emerged from studies of ordinary users' strategic pursuit of online fame and recognition (Senft, 2008). Chinese influencers (the vernacular Chinese term is *Wanghong*) share key features identified across the broader internet celebrity literature, including curated authenticity, audience-management work, and the commercialisation of one's personal identity (Abidin, 2018). Their online performance is closely tied to self-branding, through which individuals construct a coherent "meta-narrative and meta-image of self" (Hearn, 2008, p. 198). However, influencer visibility is not merely the outcome of an individualised entrepreneurial practice; instead, it is produced within platformed environments in which influencers need to negotiate platform governance, commercial imperatives, and quantifiable metrics such as likes, comments, follower counts, and traffic conversion (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Khamis et al., 2017).

This platformised visibility is deeply gendered. Feminist media studies have shown that women's influencer work is organised through aspirational labour, in which the promises of creative autonomy, flexibility, passion, and fame obscure insecure, unpaid, and feminised forms of digital labour (Duffy, 2017). In fashion and beauty sectors, visibility depends particularly on the continuous glamour and aesthetic labours, in which one's body, personality, lifestyle, and social connections become resources to be curated and commercialised (Elias et al., 2017; Wissinger, 2015). Platform infrastructures further discipline these forms of visibility by privileging normative forms of attractiveness, lifestyle performance, and feminine respectability, while marginalising bodies and identities that fall outside these norms, including LGBTQ+ identities (Bishop, 2018; Obreja, 2025).

The labour of maintaining gendered online visibility is associated with a set of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses driven by an intensified concern for self-improvement, self-discipline, and self-choice (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dobson, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). A growing number of scholars adopting a critical postfeminist perspective argue that discourses around women's empowerment, makeover capability, and free choice in popular culture and media seemingly celebrate women's autonomy; however, they obscure structural oppression and inequitable socio-political systems (Harris, 2004; Nayak & Kehily, 2008). Existing scholarship has demonstrated that postfeminism as a cultural sensibility has been transnationally re-localised within Chinese influencer culture, while acquiring distinctive inflections shaped by state ideology, platform infrastructures, and market imperatives. Liao (2021) shows how fashion influencers embody an aesthetic, entrepreneurial, and patriotic femininity, arguing that their willing complicity with nationalist discourse constitutes a postfeminism with Chinese characteristics.

Extending this inquiry to independent (*yesheng*) lifestyle bloggers on the Xiaohongshu platform, Guo (2022) reveals a paradox whereby postfeminist aspirations towards flexible, passion-driven entrepreneurship are simultaneously enabled and constrained by platform governance and algorithmic control, illustrating how postfeminist subjectivity is co-produced with platformisation. Focusing on the femininity of beauty influencers, Sun (2023, p. 38) identifies a hybrid "beauty assemblage" on Weibo, arguing that the seemingly empowering rhetoric of self-optimisation ultimately reinforces neoliberal capitalism alongside residual patriarchal gender scripts. The literature on postfeminism helps conceptualise women's empowerment as an ambivalent discourse through which feminine self-making becomes both agentic and disciplinary, as well as commercially valuable.

More recent work on MCN-affiliated beauty influencers further shows that gendered influencer self-presentation, audience engagement, and intimacy are increasingly industrialised, turning authenticity and affect into standardised and monetisable formats (Sun et al., 2026). However, less attention has been paid to the politics of intimacy and how intimacy intersects with the construction of idealised femininity. It remains unclear how affective dynamics contribute to connection, aspiration, or discipline in the networked feminine publics, and how audiences engage with these discourses and values. To address this gap, this article directs analytical attention towards the affective forces within mediated visibility and towards how these discourses become meaningful to young women in China.

2.2. Affective Networked Publics and Relatability

Berlant's (2008) argument that publics presume intimacy provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the enactment of influencer digital communities and their impact on young women's gender subjectivity. According to Berlant:

> This "women's culture" is distinguished by the view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities. (Berlant, 2008, pp. viii–ix)

Berlant (2008, p. xiii) conceptualises the network of women consuming these cultural artefacts as an "intimate public sphere," which fosters a sense of belonging based on shared vulnerability, aspirations, and the textures of ordinary life. Such publics provide emotional consolation and mutual recognition, while also reinforcing disciplinary norms concerning "how to live as an x" among women (Berlant, 2008, p. xiii). In this sense, influencer digital self-representation is not simply a narcissistic practice; it is also normative, invitational, encouraging women to feel together and affirm their attachment to an imagined community. Berlant (2008, p. x) further identifies a "juxtapolitical" quality in feminine intimate publics, in which women's discussions remain closely tied to political concerns, such as heteropatriarchal systems, but operate primarily through sentimental narratives rather than calling for concrete political action.

Kanai (2018) deepens Berlant's theory and proposes the concept of relatability to explain how such intimate publics are sustained. Kanai (2018, p. 3) argues that relatability is not accidental likeability or familiarity in digital communication, but a branded social relation that requires ongoing "affective labour" and "techniques of self-management" (Kanai, 2018, p. 7). It requires content creators to appear authentic and individualised while remaining sufficiently "average" or "normal" to become representative of the audience's perceived

common feelings (Kanai, 2018, p. 19). The personal experience revealed by an influencer must therefore appear plausible and pleasingly generalisable, thereby enabling a wider range of followers to "see themselves" in the post (Kanai, 2018, p. 19). Given that relatability takes hold through affective narratives in digital communities, Ahmed's (2004) theory of "affective economies" is useful as a supplementary framework for understanding how these emotional relations play a role in making connections among participants. According to Ahmed (2004, p. 120), emotions do not reside within a specific object, but are produced as effects of "circulation," through which they move between "signs" and "figures" across a social field. This repeated circulation can accumulate affective value, so as to create a sense of "sticking together" among collective bodies (p. 130).

Existing research has largely examined the affordance of networked platforms for gender politics, such as mobilising women's collective memory and experience to enhance women's solidarities through online activism (Huang & Sun, 2021; Yin & Sun, 2021). However, in Chinese online sites/communities, women's connection and gatherings do not always unfold through political engagement, particularly when, increasingly, young people's online activities are associated with aesthetic practices, consumption, and entertainment (Jia & Han, 2020). In the Chinese digital context, strict platform censorship and state governance have proved an obstacle to the circulation of feminist discourses and collective actions, as witnessed in the suppression of the #MeToo movement and the removal of NGO feminist accounts on Weibo (Yin & Sun, 2021; Zeng, 2020). Women's voices are coordinated within the "state–market nexus" on Weibo, where commercially profitable and politically safe women-centred content is advanced, while more vocal feminist content is excluded through the platform's certification system, algorithmic ranking, and vertical marketing infrastructure (Liao, 2024, p. 191). This platform ecology reinforces an asymmetrical power dynamic impacting feminist visibility, which influences women's potential for making feminist claims in online public fora. Therefore, it is necessary to address women's discursive proposition and engagement in juxtapolitical places, as these are valuable for understanding how women live and imagine "the good life" (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). In a digital community, even though these cultural artifacts should not be overstated as forces capable of transforming systemic structures, they may retain political significance for publics in everyday "digital inscriptions" (Lasén & Hjorth, 2017, p. 123; McGuigan, 2005). Indeed, recent research has shown that feminist discourses emerging among Weibo beauty influencers are characterised as "state-aligned," i.e., they advance gender concerns while avoiding contentious framings (Sun & Ding, 2024, p. 7). However, we know less about the political and cultural meanings that young women generate through participation in these intimate communities, and what forms of feminine discourses are visible, relatable, and recognisable to young women.

3. Data and Methods

The empirical data were drawn from part of a doctoral project that focused on Chinese online femininity and young women's gender identity construction. During data collection, the study drew on 23 ranking lists of top influencers compiled by academic and media-industry institutions, which were used to identify highly visible Chinese influencers. After reviewing the credibility and selection logic of each list, a cross-referencing strategy was used to identify potential influencers who appeared repeatedly and met all four criteria: (a) have female identity; (b) create digital content relevant to the fashion and beauty sectors; (c) have an active social media presence; and (d) have a substantial follower base of at least half a million. Ten influencers were ultimately identified (see Table S1). Posts published by the selected influencers over six

months between 2021 and 2022 were scraped. This process yielded 1,157 digital posts from Weibo, one of the largest and most popular social media platforms in China, which all selected influencers used as an official platform for self-branding. Each post was catalogued by assigning an identification number and coded using a protocol comprising basic descriptive information, including post format (text, image, video, or a combination of these), authorship (original or reposted), and the number of comments, likes, and reposts. While this article does not report quantitative results, this coded corpus provided a structured foundation for the subsequent selection of the qualitative sample.

At the interview stage, participants were eligible if they were urban young women aged 18–33 and active social media users, defined as posting original content on any platform at least twice a month on average. Participants were initially recruited through advertisements posted on the researcher's own Weibo and WeChat accounts, and subsequently through leaflets and emails distributed at the University of Liverpool. Snowball sampling was then employed to recruit additional participants by asking interviewees to recommend friends who also met the criteria. In total, I recruited 31 participants who varied in education, occupation, life stage, and age. Following ethical approval by the committee, the interviews were conducted either online via Zoom or in person in a quiet setting, such as a library room. Each interview lasted 1–1.5 hours. Each participant received a consent form and a participant information sheet outlining privacy provisions. All personal data provided by participants were handled in accordance with procedures for confidentiality and anonymisation.

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding proceeded in two rounds. First, transcripts were coded inductively, staying close to participants' own language about what they noticed, valued, or disagreed with in influencers' content. Second, these initial codes were consolidated into two groups of higher-order themes: the dominant feminine identities participants attributed to influencers (e.g., "entrepreneurs," "feminist," "stylised girl") and the recurrent topics they discussed (e.g., "intimate relationships," "affective connection," "consumerism," "bodily makeover"). After immersing in the data, I further iteratively compared and grouped these codes and generated three provisional interpretive domains concerning feminist identification, entrepreneurial beauty self-management, and classed lifestyle aspiration.

This study then returned to the catalogued corpus to purposively select posts through progressive theoretical sampling, in which materials are selected based on an emerging conceptual understanding of the topic rather than a fixed a priori quota (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The selection criteria considered typical relevance to the themes identified in interviews, textual richness, and response rates. This procedure ensured sufficient information combined with thematic variation. In total, 48 posts were selected for critical discourse analysis through a feminist lens, informed particularly by Lazar's (2007, p. 147) argument that "the tacit androcentrism" is pervasive in many cultures and discourses, "in which not only men but also women are complicit through their habitual, differential participation in their particular communities of practice." Gender ideology and hegemony in contemporary society do not take the form of overt domination (Lazar, 2007) and therefore require critical examination to reveal asymmetrical power relations. The analysis here focuses on the textual dimensions of the posts, including captions, hashtags, and any text embedded within images or videos. In practice, following instructions from linguistic works by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and O'Halloran and Tan (2023), this study examined lexical choices (naming), grammatical strategies (social action and circumstance), mood (clause types), modality (modal auxiliaries), and metaphor in the posts.

The final analysis moved between participants' accounts and the selected influencer posts to capture the contradictions and complexities in the relationship between the posts and participants' interpretations. In this process, an affective dimension emerged as salient across both datasets, prompting an additional layer of analysis. Informed by Kanai (2018) and Ahmed (2004), this study brought in an additional analytical layer focusing on how affective circulation operated in influencers' discursive construction and young women's attitudes and feelings towards those representations.

4. Findings

4.1. Feeling Feminist Identities as a Sisterhood Connection

My study found that influencers on Weibo circulate an ambiguous feminism, addressing women's issues through self-reflection on aspects of their own lives, recommending books and films, and offering commentaries on gender topics and news events. In the sample, these posts avoid explicit commercial intent, which distinguishes them from most of the commercialised content that encourages product consumption and efforts to improve one's physical appearance. The discursive strategy of the sampled influencers neither treats feminism as a completed historical project that women have already achieved, nor calls for feminist activism. Rather, this ambiguous feminism can be tethered to "the performance of individual value" (Kanai, 2018, p. 156), which is incorporated into influencers' self-branding practices to cultivate a sisterhood alliance with followers.

One post by the user @Zhang (@原来是西门大嫂) declares that "what we need has never been help or protection, but genuine respect and equality," which positions women as agentic individuals rather than passive subjects in need of rescue. The slogan "girls help girls" and the metaphor of "a single drop of water, when gathered, can create a tsunami" invoke a sense of collective strength among women. Yet, the horizon of this solidarity appears to extend no further than speaking out about everyday gender discrimination, such as "being judged for clothing, body shape, and age; or being labelled as a female boss or female director." Collective narratives thus create a sense of a feminist "we" without requiring a shared political programme or sustained collective action. These discourses foster recognition of gender inequalities through a commitment to sisterhood, yet a critique of institutional inequality remains absent.

Moreover, the sexism women encounter is simplified as a personal matter. This is evident in a post by user @Becky Li (@黎贝卡的异想世界), who shared her self-reflections following participation in an Audi-sponsored "She Power" forum:

> Due to my personality, I often step back during disagreements with others and prefer to compromise rather than argue with another person….Many women around me tend to act in this way….When a girl does not listen to others, people may assume her "difficult to deal with."…Please fight for yourself, stick to your beliefs, [do] not compromise easily.

Here, "compromise" is articulated as a purely personal psychological problem rather than a socialised response to external judgements and stereotypes. The subsequent encouragement for women to fight back confines the solution to the individual level. In this discursive framework, individual women's efforts constitute the affective bond, while narratives of overcoming and fighting difficulties are associated with the

requirement to be an agentic subject. Empowerment then becomes the work of adjusting the self rather than transforming the social and cultural regulations and norms that make "compromise" necessary. This discourse of ambiguous feminism therefore operates through a double movement: It creates affective sisterhood by naming shared gendered oppression and injuries, while simultaneously individualising the response through self-empowerment and self-management. This representation of feminism is underpinned not only by the need to navigate algorithmic or commercial visibility (Cotter, 2019), but also by a discursive strategy within the Chinese censorship programme that permits deliberate discussion and criticism of social problems while suppressing the possibility of collective gathering for social mobilisation (King et al., 2013).

In my participants' views, this ambiguous feminism functions less as a political identity or stance; instead, it is perceived as a cultural resource and affective attachment in the negotiation of feminine subjectivity. This feminist discourse is primarily perceived as a form of cultural taste and intellectual inspiration. As participant Xinzi remarked:

> I noticed the documentaries and movies they recommended…[those] about women's growth imply a lot of feminist meanings. I am interested in knowing more about this knowledge, because I am a woman. It made me feel that she [the influencer] has good taste in artistic and literary works; importantly, she is taking care and standing with us.

Xinzi describes feminist content as "knowledge" and attributes her interest in such content to the shared identification as a woman. The influencer community therefore becomes a space from which women can derive cultural and intellectual value, even though this digital content is embedded within a vast volume of entertainment and commercial information. Meanwhile, the influencer, as a provider of "feminist knowledge," is perceived as an insightful modern subject with good taste, which resonates with my participants' expectations of ideal femininity. Participant Kaixi's response reinforces this point, as she notes:

> They are not, like, a promoter for me. I know some of them have graduated from the top universities….They are beautiful, independent, and caring about what women want.

Such self-revealing feminist narratives produce authenticity precisely by appearing not to resemble branded content, thereby creating shared sentiments that bind women together (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Other participants suggest that cultivating an online identity rooted in feminism enables influencers to symbolically construct a trustworthy, women-friendly community. As Yuanyuan states:

> I find we have the same concerns, like the struggle in intimate relationships….I feel the courage in their casual talk….As they said: "I don't need a man. [I need] to be beautiful and rich."

This suggests that participants expected to receive more emotional support from those who shared the same values and positions. Intimate connection here is based not on agreement over a clearly feminist identity, but on recognition of common feminine concerns (Hemmings, 2012).

However, when feminism takes the form of a political declaration, it is decoded as dangerous and suspicious. This is clearly illustrated by Xinzi, whose attitude shifted abruptly when she was asked: Does your interest in feminist content mean you support feminism movement? She responded: "If someone loudly says they are

a feminist, I will be wary of them." These responses suggest that my participants classify feminism into two distinct categories: the cultural consumption of feminism and political identification as a feminist. The former is perceived as safe and acceptable, while the latter is perceived as radical, ignorant, and disrespectful in the digital media space. Xinzi explains that overt feminist activity is "incompatible with Chinese mainstream culture values" and "excessively confrontational." CiCi expresses the same attitude: "You know some feminist online communities on Douban….People's attitudes are extremely radical and superficial….I mean, it evokes a gender antagonism."

Although my participants did not explicitly identify strict censorship as a force shaping their vigilant attitudes towards activist feminism, their attitudes imply an assessment of online risk, including reluctance to depart from mainstream values or engage in disputes on the platform. This suggests a form of self-restraint informed by "control parables" about which kinds of speech may cause trouble (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1240). Indeed, beyond technologically platformed governance, feminism is marginalised as overly aggressive and unreasonable in Chinese digital cultures (Leibold, 2011; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019). Within these cultures, feminism is frequently misconstrued as fighting against and exploiting men or combatively claiming privileges in social life (Wu & Dong, 2019). Influencers provide a "palatable feminism" that aligns with a broader expectation that women should adopt an empowered subjectivity (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21), while shielding women from becoming embroiled in acrimonious quarrels. This affective solidarity does not indicate an absence of feminist consciousness; rather, feminist politics are undermined alongside the articulation of a neoliberal feminist subject (Rottenberg, 2018).

4.2. Making Beauty and Body a Feminine Discipline

The second theme is an entrepreneurial discourse of fashioning physical appearance, which shares features with the "aesthetic entrepreneur," who is "autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practices" (Elias et al., 2017, p. 30). This study further identified that this entrepreneurship is not merely manifested in bodily narratives but also works affectively as a feminine discipline that produces a self-made subject in psychic life (Scharff, 2016).

The key discursive tropes of aesthetic entrepreneurship in my sample include "beauty equals productivity," "let's fight for the oil skin," and "beauty is our weapon," which suggest that the enhancement of personal physical appearance is rationalised as an extension of women's rights and a powerful resource (Lazar, 2006). In the discourse of this idealised femininity, work on beauty and the body is presented as an achievable makeover project, in which women have common struggles and need to strive continuously, thus positioning commercial products as the ultimate way of solving the problem. As user @Zhang (@原来是西门大嫂) posts:

> Our city girls are always saying we should stop staying up late, but we just can't help ourselves! When you wake up in the morning and see that dull and tired look showing on your skin, there's always a quiet regret creeping in. That's why it's so important to give your skin a timely rescue. This set of #YSLHigh-EnergyNightRepairCP# can help your skin recalibrate back to a healthy state.

The use of the first-person plural "our" and the collective identity "city girls" indicates an affective relation in which personal experience is generalisable, allowing a broad range of followers to recognise themselves in the post. The confession "we just can't help ourselves!" manufactures a collective struggle. The influencer here

portrays herself as a fellow struggler rather than a professional beauty expert. The influencer then uses the second person "you" to speak directly to the audience, which creates a more engaging setting. The statement "see that dull and tired look" attempts to trigger a shared feeling of guilt or self-dissatisfaction among followers. Giving "your skin a timely rescue" indicates that skin care is an urgent mission or project that needs to be managed. The consumption of the beauty product "YSL High-Energy Night Repair CP" is articulated as a necessary approach to mitigating this risk, and the phrase "recalibrate back to a healthy state" implies that beauty is measurable and fixable. Women are invited to embrace a self-monitoring position, which requires constant attention, work and vigilance in the never-finished labour of self-optimisation (Gill, 2007).

My participants' attitudes towards this aesthetic entrepreneurship were contradictory and extended beyond the dualism of rejection and acceptance. There was an apparent trend in my interviews showing that the labour required for body makeovers was perceived not as conformity but as a personal decision and a form of women's liberation. Some participants (Sisi; CiCi; April) described influencers' beauty practices using terms such as "brave," "an endeavor," and "a progressive action." As CiCi stated:

> I think nowadays many people are actually not ashamed to admit they had plastic surgery….Bravely revealing your experience can earn more compliments and admiration from others online. This is because everyone knows how hard it is, for example, to lose weight or undergo cosmetic injections.

If we take for granted, after Winch (2015), that women's bodies are increasingly understood as assets, brands, and entryways to empowerment, adaptability and self-motivation become essential qualities for successfully achieving the construction of body. In my participants' opinion, undertaking aesthetic labour was not limited to a gendered achievement but was related to a series of neoliberal values, including self-responsibility and becoming a "resilient subject" (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Suffering and pain are thus recognised and converted into evidence of courage and diligence, which echoes the "positive energy" discourse promoted by the Chinese government that celebrates personal triumph in overcoming difficulties rather than grievances against the external norms and regulations in citizens' social life (Chen & Wang, 2019).

Ongoing self-reflection and scrutiny in daily life led to a disquieting situation among my participants, as April said: "My main concern is whether sleeping on one's side will cause nasolabial folds, as I always lie on my back to sleep….I am also worried crossing my legs might make them crooked." As Gill (2007, p. 155) contends, "no area of a woman's life is immune from the requirement to self-survey." In fact, homogeneous, heteronormative beauty standards generated disciplinary pressure for my participants. Participant Ning described the exhaustion of inhabiting this neoliberal subjectivity, stating:

> I can't help comparing myself to those chic women online….I feel I am not working hard like them, for example, carefully doing skincare every night or going to the gym….I don't think my beauty can reach that level.

As women's beauty practices become intertwined with neoliberal self-governing ideologies, those who fail to conform may be labelled as lacking "the ability to bounce back" (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 480).

Notably, this anxiety did not lead to disengagement from entrepreneurial beauty practices among my participants; rather, they strategically participated in manageable ways. My participants were aware of the

distinction between "show-off posts" and "informative posts." Participant Chenchen stated that she preferred those who "reveal true and unedited photographs of their past appearance" over those who "disguisedly show-off their good body shape." This purposive selection by my participants was further based on how relatable an influencer's style and physical traits, including bodily and facial features, were to their own bodies and appearances. As Lili said:

> The *Wanghong* [influencer] I follow is relevant to me; for example, I have combination-oily skin, and so does she; I am short, and she is too. The skincare products she recommends and the outfits she matches up are useful and suitable for me.

The influencer here is not a paragon of beauty but a relatable mediator, through whom styling practices are customised and made actionable. Thus, aesthetic discipline in my participants' views was not fixed or universal; instead, it was continuously negotiated and recalibrated in accordance with their particular physical features. The hyper-feminised images, such as the *Wanghong face* identified in earlier research on Chinese influencer culture (Dippner, 2018), appeared far from ordinary women's appearances in my participants' interpretations and were therefore less easily relatable. Similarly, the relevant slogans about being beautiful at all times appeared detached from the realities of women's social lives, which increased the pressure they experienced. This does not mean that beauty disciplines and regulations imposed on women were weakened; rather, they were reproduced through the shared vulnerability, negotiated compliance and neoliberal encouragement. Young women were affectively encouraged to inhabit a self-optimised subjectivity through the experience of feeling understood.

4.3. Having a "High Quality" Life as Aspirational Belonging

The final predominant theme concerns classed gender identity, in which consumption-based distinctions are repackaged as measures of women's legibility as modern feminine subjects. Although China has been transitioning towards a market-oriented economic structure since 1978, the notion of class is difficult to define within a post-socialist regime that foregrounds the "common prosperity" agenda as a governing priority (Yu et al., 2025). Class is therefore closely associated with cultural constructions negotiated and rationalised through lifestyle, taste, and consumerism (Rocca, 2017; L. Zhang, 2010). This provides a basis for influencers to circulate a normative femininity organised around the imagined lifestyle of a higher class. As user @Kakakaoo states in a post promoting anti-ageing skincare:

> As a "high-quality woman among human beings" [人类高质量女性], my anti-aging efforts must be improved to match the high standard, right? Keep using a basic approach is a waste of time and money. A powerful and effective high-quality anti-aging tool is the right way to go. Estée Lauder #Re-Nutriv Platinum Cream# is really an "old buddy" on my skincare table. It's expensive, but absolutely stunning.

The repeated use of the terms "high standard," "high-end," and "high quality" constructs a semantic field in which product choice becomes a declaration of class or stratum belonging. Consuming expensive skincare is rationalised as an essential and justified investment, while lower-cost alternatives are dismissed as wasteful and ineffective, thereby excluding women who do not hold themselves to elevated standards. Here, the influencer ironically uses the phrase "high-quality woman among human beings" to balance the tension

between superiority and relatability. The term originated in a widespread internet meme in which a man arrogantly displayed his wealth while seeking a partner and described himself as a "high-quality bachelor among human beings." The influencer's use of this self-deprecating humorous tone allows her to acknowledge her high-class identity while jokingly avoiding appearing elitist and boastful. This "high quality" identity is thus presented as something followers can simultaneously laugh about and aspire to, rather than a boundary that excludes them.

In the interviews, the "high quality" life was not associated with the ostentatious display of status or vanity; instead, it was perceived as a symbol of self-achievement, aesthetic taste, and social distinction. Among my participants, this notion is naturalised as a constitutive condition of embracing an entrepreneurial feminine identity. As participant Qiqi explained: "Even though a big-name bag places a burden on my salary, I feel like stylish modern women should have at least one or two luxury bags." Qiqi's response indicates that high-end consumption may not signify that women possess the corresponding financial capacity. This resonates with a broader media and marketing discourse that extravagantly celebrates Chinese women's consumption capacity, which cultivates the illusion that women have achieved a higher-class identity, even though their financial circumstances do not reach that level (Yang, 2023). Notably, the phrase "should have" suggests a normative expectation and common sense attached to the generalised feminine category of the "stylish modern woman." Drawing on Rofel's (2007) concept of the desiring subject in China, luxury consumption becomes a marker of individual autonomy and modern selfhood, distinguishing this subject from the Maoist-era subject, whose desires were expected to respond to collective need. Within this discourse, young women are encouraged to symbolically experience an aspirational feminine identity through repeated consumption (Johansson, 2001). The financial burden that Qiqi acknowledged thus becomes the price of gaining and maintaining access to this idealised feminine identity.

Those who cannot afford high-end products, including full-time students who rely on family support for their living expenses, appear to negotiate this exclusion. My participants described managing their budgets through the selection of "affordable alternatives." As Xiaoou stated:

> I really like the boxy style of the YSL handbag, but it is too expensive for me. I would like to choose a bag with "same feel" [style] on Taobao [a shopping platform].

The search for a bag with "same feel" suggests that the significance of luxury products lies not in the item itself but in its internalisation as a symbol of aesthetic authority and fashion refinement. The luxury brand provides this participant with a set of aesthetic coordinates for judging, confirming and calibrating their consumption choices. By drawing on this taste in consumption, the respondents symbolically approach a particular higher-class identity. This cohesion thus does not necessarily depend on the price hierarchy but is circulated through a recognisable aesthetic.

My participants' discussions also extended beyond the consumption of commercial products, encompassing a set of leisure activities, such as attending operas, skiing, wine tasting, and travelling abroad. For my participants, the appeal of this glamorous lifestyle lies not primarily in what the subject permanently possesses but in whether they can be seen and recognised by others. As Yujia explained:

> I don't post frequently on my social media…the social media channel for me is like a social business card or a self-introduction. There is nothing fun about broadcasting a normal day….What I post is likely just when I [go] to some fancy restaurant, concert, travelling, or go skiing.

Yujia described social media as a "social business card or self-introduction," which reveals how digital self-representation moves beyond purely individual expression to operate as a strategic instrument of social positioning. The activities she selectively posts, such as visiting fancy restaurants, attending concerts, travelling, and skiing, constitute a desirable lifestyle that becomes a symbolic resource for social positioning, rendering her visible online. Yujia's statement that "there is nothing fun about broadcasting a normal day" suggests the social currency of attractive femininity, echoing influencers' online practices within affective and attention economies (Ahmed, 2004; Marwick, 2013). In Yujia's account, these leisure activities are perceived as exciting, interesting, and worthy, while the ordinary and mundane aspects of daily life are excluded because they lack aspirational appeal. In this sense, influencers' digital representations provided my participants with a symbolic resource to perform a lifestyle aligned with a shared imagination of middle- and upper-class leisure practices. This offers a common aspirational vision that binds young women together, while marginalising genuinely ordinary women's experiences by rendering them invisible.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the discursive construction of feminine identity within fashion and beauty influencer communities and examines how young women engage with and make meaning from these representations. The article extends existing scholarship on digital femininity by bringing the affective dynamics of influencer communities into the analysis, and particularly by demonstrating how affective stickiness is gendered and how it serves to construct idealised femininity in the online intimate publics. This article also contributes to Chinese influencer studies by foregrounding young women's interpretations. They navigate these discourses and values in the desire and imagination of being a new modern feminine subject. By combining an examination of influencer posts with young women's interview discussions, the findings suggest that influencers construct a feminine "we" by addressing women's shared experiences, anxieties, desires, and concerns across three tropes, including ambiguous feminism, aesthetic self-management, and aspirational consumption. Influencers' gendered visibility is closely linked to the establishment of emotional recognition and attachment among young women.

Influencer communities generate a feeling of empowerment for women, while disciplining what is proper, legible, and respectable. By framing gendered pain and vulnerability within positive, courageous, and sisterly supportive narratives, influencers render feminist concerns emotionally accessible. Moving beyond the purely commodified feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), an ambiguous feminism in Chinese influencer communities provides women with a political sensibility to engage with sexism and gender stereotypes, while overlooking the significance of activism in social transformation. Within the complex dynamics of Chinese state, market, and digital platforms, feminist identity is reconstructed as well-educated, intellectual, and self-possessed. This formation cannot be explained solely by the cultural stigmatisation of feminism; instead, it is also related to systematic platform governance in which commercially compatible and politically non-confrontational women-centred content enjoys greater visibility. The political horizon of feminism may be narrowed to intra-feminine affirmation and individual self-transformation rather than collective claims directed towards structural relations (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

This neoliberal logic of pursuing equality is enhanced by entrepreneurial practices of fashioning body and consumption. Influencers provide affective glue by positioning themselves as strugglers who share bodily anxiety with broader ordinary women. Beauty and body work is portrayed less as a need to accommodate the external gaze, but as a common project of self-improvement and self-empowerment among women. While this aesthetic entrepreneurship challenges the traditionally submissive femininity embedded in long-standing Chinese gender norms (Barlow, 2004), it generates new forms of discipline in which increasingly strict beauty standards are rationalised as self-investment (Elias et al., 2017). Moreover, high-consumption discourse offers followers symbolic proximity to a "high-quality woman" identity that they can rehearse. In a post-socialist Chinese context, consumption becomes more than a sign of wealth; instead, it operates as evidence of personal autonomy, modernity, and distance from an earlier collectivist subject whose desires were expected to remain subordinate to collectivist ends (Rofel, 2007; H. Wang, 1998). Such high-consumption lifestyles reproduce a hegemonic ideology of class distinction, in which women who do not possess the corresponding economic capacity or taste are excluded and positioned as subordinate and unfashionable.

The influencer community occupies a juxtapolitical position, in which women create connections and bonds through shared grievances and feelings about what it means to live as a woman (Berlant, 2008). However, as hooks (1989) insisted, naming personal pain without connecting it to a critical consciousness of structural inequality can be readily absorbed by neoliberal culture. My participants are capable of recognising the risks of engaging with these discourses yet remain unwilling to relinquish them, which reflects a cruel optimism towards the figure of a new feminine subject who is well-educated, self-reliant, and economically independent (Berlant, 2011). This construction of normative femininities does not suggest a cultural transition of Western postfeminism; rather, it is jointly shaped by the interplay among platform commerce, censorship, and Chinese sociocultural norms.

However, because the study's sample comprises urban, educated young women, the findings are not intended to be generalised to women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds across China. Future research could examine the intersections of class and region and how women from diverse backgrounds engage with these gendered discourses and representations. Furthermore, as this qualitative study focused solely on fashion and beauty influencer content on Weibo, it does not represent the full landscape of Chinese digital feminine communities. Future research could pursue cross-platform comparisons and explore the role of platform affordances, as well as algorithmic systems in shaping the circulation of affective discourses.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank three anonymous reviewers and the academic editors for their constructive and valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The interview data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participants' privacy and confidentiality. The social media posts analysed in this study were publicly

accessible at the time of data collection. However, some posts are no longer publicly accessible because the account holders have subsequently changed their access settings. To respect these current access restrictions, the archived social media data are not publicly shared. The author welcomes any enquiries regarding the data and research materials, subject to applicable ethical and confidentiality requirements.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude AI (Anthropic) to assist with language editing, citation, and reference formatting during the final preparation of the manuscript. All AI-assisted suggestions were critically reviewed and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Media and Communication
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12851
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12851

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Open Access Journal

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

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Submitted: 21 May 2026 **Accepted:** 31 August 2026 **Published:** 29 October 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contested Regimes of (In)Visibility in Gendered Public Spheres" edited by Stefan Wallaschek (Europa-Universität Flensburg) and Mareike Fenja Bauer (Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt – Oder), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i511

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

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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 & Kortes-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

collective and action-oriented hashtags such as #transrightsarehumanrights or #reclaimTikTok. Overall, this cluster does not primarily center emotions but instead circulates embodied knowledge useful for affected communities.

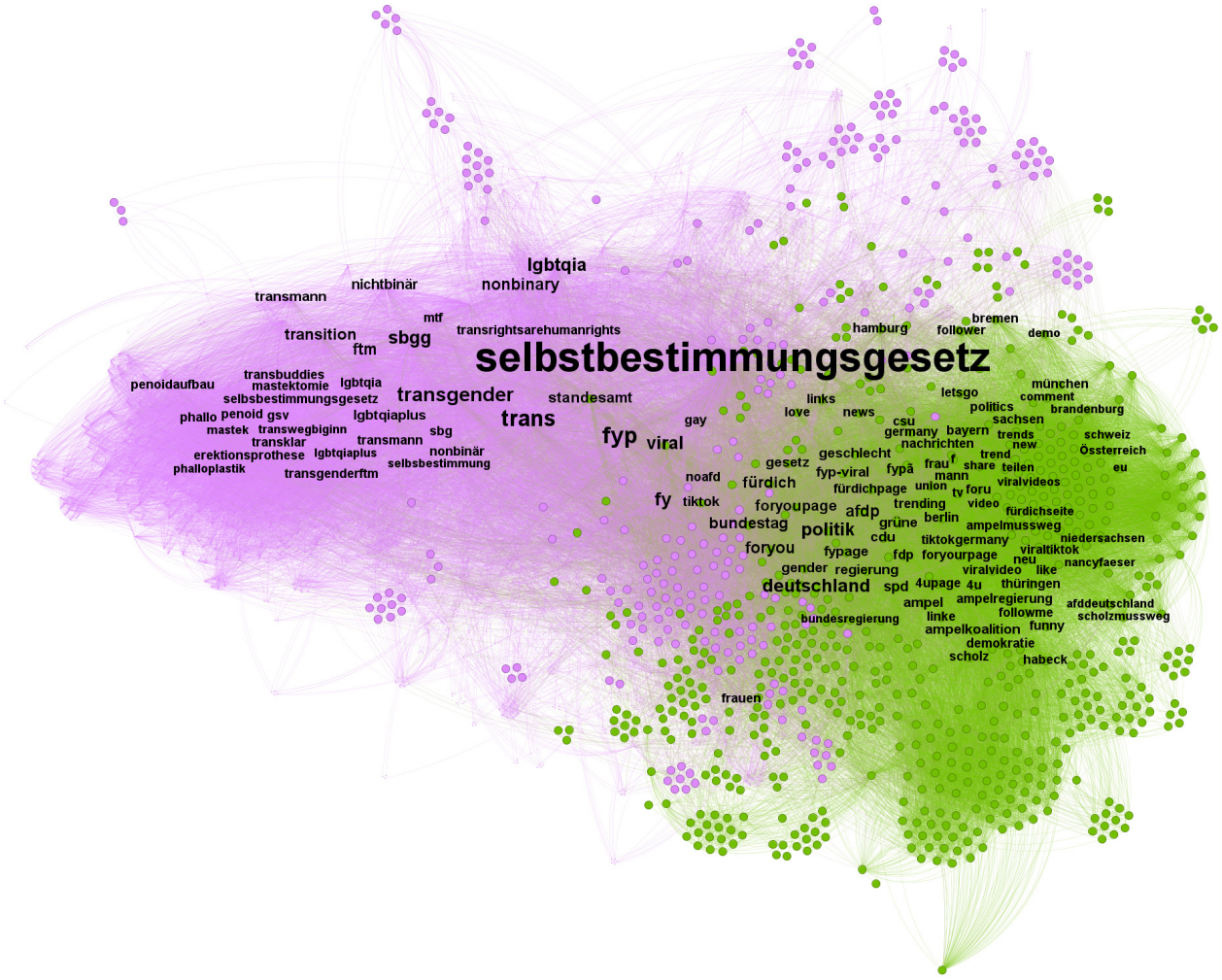


Figure 1. Two largest hashtag clusters visualized in Gephi using the ForceAtlas2 algorithm. Note: Label size reflects degree centrality.

A closely connected cluster (Figure 2, blue) more explicitly centers queer pride (#happypride, #pridemonth), intersecting with love or rather legitimizations of queer love (#loveislove, #lovehasnogender), and offers a sense of community (#queerTikTok, #youarenotalone) and protection (#protecttranskids), and foregrounds awareness fused with solidarity and empowerment of trans people. Another related cluster (Figure 2, orange) conveys awareness around the legal process, the process of coming out, as well as health-related information (#awareness, #namechange, #gendermarker). These are often combined with hashtags that express feelings of empowerment (#beproud, #respect, #acceptance, #selflove), support, solidarity, and belonging (#transsolidarity, #transcommunity, #lgbtqsupport).

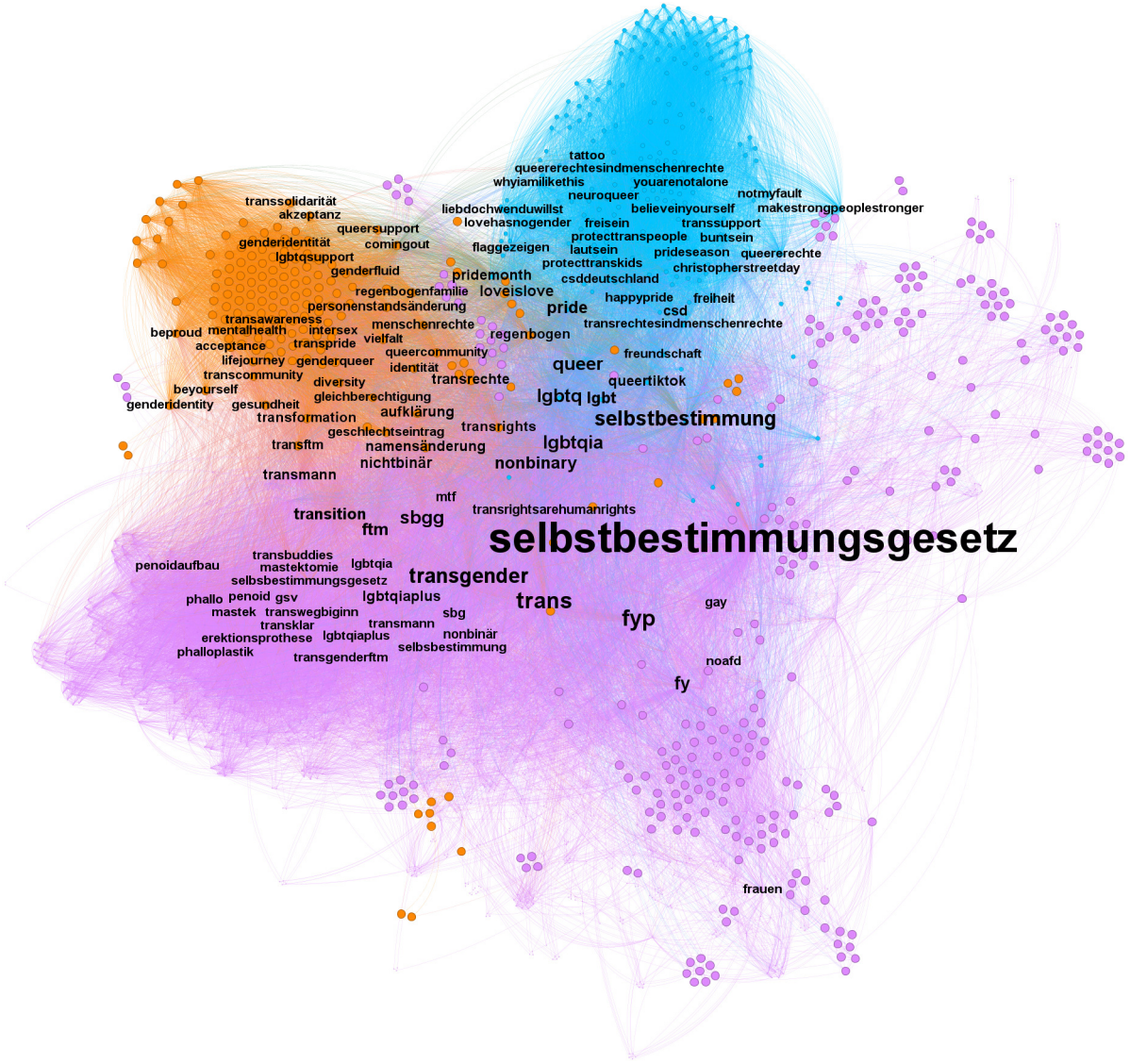


Figure 2. Hashtag clusters of awareness and solidarity for trans people.

In contrast, the second-largest cluster (Figure 1, green) within the network can be characterized as trans-antagonistic and, at least in part, far-right. Although this cluster comprises only 16.71% of all nodes, it accounts for a disproportionately high share of co-occurrences (22.69%) and exhibits a comparatively high density (0.124), indicating a more tightly interconnected affective-discursive formation. Part of this elevated density is likely driven by the frequent use of so-called popularity hashtags (#viral, #fyp), which artificially increase connectivity within the cluster. At the same time, the cluster is strongly anchored in national political discourse, centering hashtags related to #Germany, #politics, and #AfD, frequently combined with anti-government hashtags targeting the then-governing parties—the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the Green Party, and the Free Democratic Party—often collectively referred to as the "traffic light coalition" (*Ampelkoalition*) and calling for their resignation, embedding the issue within a wider anti-government and authoritarian political agenda. Hashtags associated with speeches and statements by prominent AfD politicians such as Alice Weidel and Beatrix von Storch further suggest patterns of amplification and intra-community reinforcement.

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).

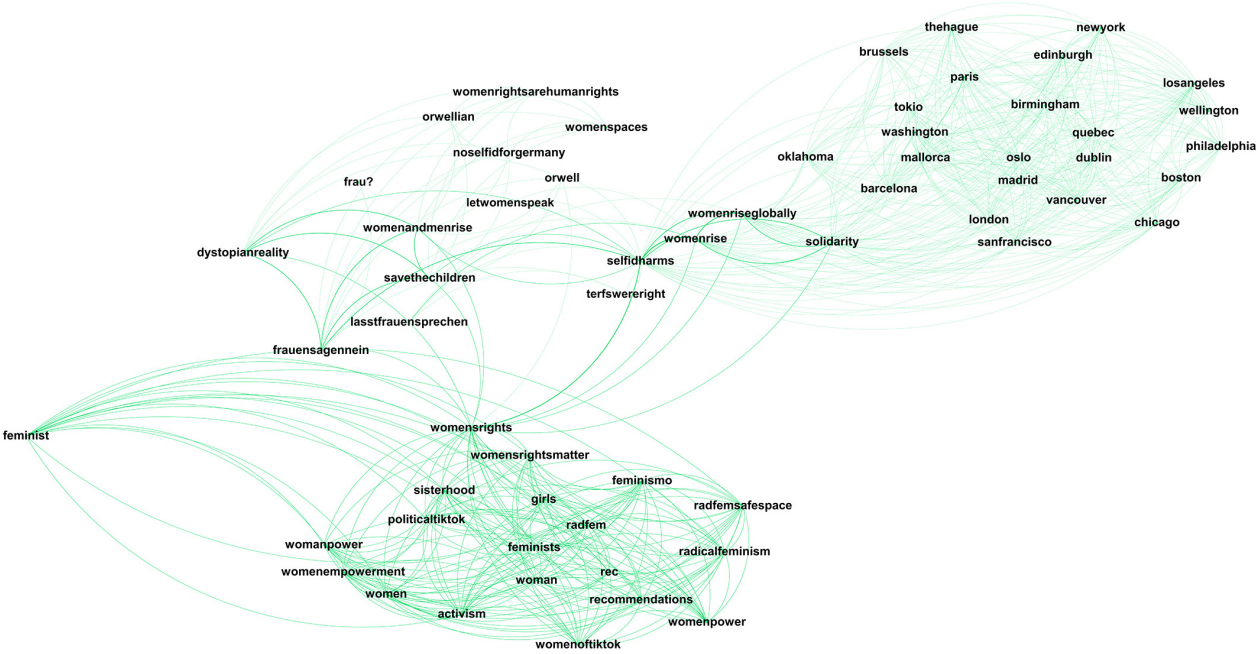


Figure 3. Trans-exclusionary feminist hashtag cluster.

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.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editors as well as the two reviewers for their exceptionally detailed and constructive feedback, which helped to significantly improve the article.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the Freie Universität Berlin and Cogitatio Press.

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

ChatGPT by OpenAI and Claude by Anthropic were used during the writing process for language refinement. All theoretical work, methodological decisions, data analysis, interpretation, and final editorial decisions were made by the authors.

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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
ISSN: 2183-2439

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