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#FrauenSagenNein – Bridging the Divide
Analyzing the Affective Network
of Gender-Critical Alliances

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#FrauenSagenNein – Bridging the Divide

Analyzing the Affective Network of Gender-Critical Alliances

Pauline H. Zahn, Margreth Lünenborg

April 30, 2024

Abstract

The influence of anti-gender movements is on the rise globally as they seek to prevent the expansion of transgender rights. In Germany, the anti-gender debate has gained renewed intensity in the wake of the publication of the draft Self-Determination Act in June 2022. Within this discourse, two prominent groups of actors emerged: gender-critical feminists and right-wing populists. Despite their divergent ideological and political positions, the affordances of social media provide them with a platform for collaborative interactions. Thus, under issue-related hashtags, the boundaries between these actors are becoming increasingly blurred. This research utilizes affect theory and analysis of hashtag activism to investigate the collective protest on Twitter against the proposed Self-Determination Act. Employing social network analysis (SNA), the study identifies pivotal structures and actors within the #FrauenSagenNein (#WomenSayNo) network. Additionally, qualitative content analysis delves into the narratives and sentiments employed in constructing hostile portrayals of transgender individuals. The findings illustrate that #FrauenSagenNein served as a bridging tool that connects gender-critical feminists and right-wing populist actors, leading to their intersection. Based on these findings, it is vital to critically monitor such alliances to counter the spread of binary gender norms and heteronormative beliefs.

Keywords: anti-gender movement; Self-Determination Act; hashtag activism; affect theory; social network analysis

1 Introduction

Degrading and unconstitutional – these words are often used to describe the current German Transsexual Act (TSA) originating from the 1980s (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ), 2022). Since its introduction, the TSA has been amended several times in recent years by the Federal Constitutional Court due to its unconstitutionality. In 2011, for example, the requirement for genital surgery to change one's first name or marital status was removed from the law (Güldenring, 2013). Since then, transgender persons as well as various associations and political parties have repeatedly called for a reform of the TSA, as they still consider it unconstitutional and degrading (Meyenburg, Renter-Schmidt & Schmidt, 2015).

As a result, the federal government has proposed several bills for a Self-Determination Act (Selbstbestimmungsgesetz) in recent years to replace the current TSA, all of which failed in parliament. Recently, however, a new bill has been published, which seems to meet with broader approval. Thus, on June 30, 2022, Federal Minister of Family Affairs Lisa Paus and Federal Minister of Justice Marco Buschmann announced key points for a planned Self-Determination law. The key points include that both the gender entry and the first name can be changed in a simple procedure before

the registry office, instead of in a lengthy and costly procedure. In addition, physical gender reassignment surgeries shall not be required to precede gender reassignment in official documents (BMFSFJ, 2022).

Although no agreement has yet been reached on the draft law, it has already triggered a broad public debate. This has led to various actors publicly expressing their support for or opposition to the bill. Gender-critical debates gather a variety of actors from various political and social backgrounds, a phenomenon accentuated by scholars who have observed the rise of anti-trans and anti-gender movements in Europe over recent decades (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Bassi & LaFleur, 2022; Villa, 2017). In the ongoing German debate concerning the proposed Self-Determination Act, certain actors have spoken out against the law more dominantly than others. Notably, the discussion has been significantly shaped by the perspectives of gender-critical feminism and queer feminism (Vanagas & Vanagas, 2023). These two feminist viewpoints stand in opposition to each other, with gender-critical feminists advocating for a gender-conservative stance that insists on a binary gender system, while queer feminists advocate for gender pluralist approaches that overcome the idea of binarity. However, within discussions concerning the expansion of transgender rights, dissenting voices from conservatives and right-wing populists have emerged, gaining increasing attention in light of global anti-gender movements (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Villa, 2017).

Hence, right-wing actors and some feminists spark a transgender-critical debate online and offline. While the demarcation of the two oppositional groups is evident outside the digital realm, the groups potentially blend on social media. Consequently, scholars have already pointed out that social media unites individuals into digitally networked not solely by political or ideological affiliations, but by a common cause to fight (Simone, 2010; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014). In the German discourse on transgender rights, two contrasting groups are thus potentially forming an alliance through the bridging function of social media. However, this would not be the first time for right-wing actors to use emancipatory views for their agitation. Research has revealed the emergence of new strategies among right-wing actors involving the strategic use of feminist discourses and associated hashtags (Darius & Stephany, 2019). One example of this is the #120dB campaign, which aimed at imitating protests about violence against women similar to campaigns like #MeToo – but using an anti-migration argumentation based on explicitly racist sentiments (Adlung, Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2021). Since research has shown that gender-critical discourses have been on the rise in recent years, involving both right-wing actors and gender-critical feminists, the Self-Determination Act could potentially provide a new forum for right-wing actors to disseminate their political agenda and to ally with other movements (Tudor,

2021; Sauer, 2020; Villa, 2017). Consequently, the question arises whether right-wing actors and gender-critical feminists are forging an alliance in discussions surrounding the current bill.

This study therefore examines the online discourse surrounding the proposed Self-Determination Act in Germany, focusing on the Twitter (now X) network emerging under the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein (#WomenSayNo), which serves as a platform for women to speak out against the draft law and engage in gender-critical debates. By analyzing the interconnections within the network and the affiliations of influential actors, it is examined whether #FrauenSagenNein connects opposing political and ideological groups, particularly right-wing populists and gender-critical feminists. Using qualitative content analysis, the study illustrates the narratives disseminated under the hashtag, including central themes and affective expressions.

2 The Affective Flows of Hashtag Activism: From Mobilizing Feminist Voices to Right-Wing Hijacking

Social media plays a significant role in the temporal and situational formation of publics, as its technological affordances enable the formation of independent networks (Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2017). One influential factor contributing to the establishment of these networks, as proposed by Papacharissi (2015), is the concept of affect, which delineates them as *affective publics*. The notion of affective publics refers to the emergence of publics that come into being through the viral spread of affective expressions within networked crowds. The connecting element in this context is the desire of individuals to express their emotions through text. Accordingly, Papacharissi (2015, p. 9) describes that “the connective affordances of social media help activate the in-between bond of publics”. These initial “latent ties” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 20) can be reinforced and sustained through the cultivation of a sense of belonging and solidarity. Consequently, these feelings contribute to the formation of a collective identity, which can eventually contribute to the emergence of communities (Papacharissi, 2016). In particular, they can help unite pre-existing or previously disorganized groups online.

In recent years, this phenomenon has been evident in numerous online social movements, including well-known campaigns such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #TimesUp. The #MeToo movement, for example, highlights the formation of a networked audience that started with a single tweet, but ultimately united a great number of individuals based on affective motives and by producing solidarity through sharing personal experiences. These social protest movements are intensely driven by affect

and do not evolve conformally, but emerge dynamically and disappear again (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018). Lünenborg (2019) describes these dynamics as *affective flows*. As exemplified in the #MeToo-movement, a single affective articulation about an issue, event, or concern can trigger an affective flow that fosters a sense of community. These affective flows can be contagious, leading to rapid and intense joint action, however, they can also be transient and short-lived (Lünenborg, 2019).

Hashtags serve a critical role in this process of organizing and mobilizing individuals, potentially leading to the formation of social movements (Papacharissi, 2016). They establish an isolated space for individuals to share and connect on a topic-related basis. However, hashtags are much more than just an organizing tool for public discourse. They serve as instruments to draw attention to social grievances and political injustices, thereby mobilizing widespread support for political and social change (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). Consequently, hashtag protests have become a prominent part of today's social movements and counterpublics (Zulli, 2020; Siemon, Maier & Pfetsch, 2024). Hashtag activism, utilizing hashtags to raise awareness about particular issues, has enabled individuals to come together for a common cause, creating ad hoc publics and sparking important conversations (Tomblinson & Wolf, 2017; Bruns & Burgess, 2012). These ad-hoc publics can also be understood as affective publics as they are short-lived communication spheres in which individuals come together purposefully driven by a common interest or concern to generate exchange about as well as attention to a particular issue (Lünenborg, 2019; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014).

Moreover, hashtags have become a popular medium for representing discourses and giving voices to groups that are marginalized or overlooked by mainstream media. Especially feminist hashtags, such as #MeToo, #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen, and #GirlsLikeUs, have provided a platform for marginalized voices, challenged patriarchal structures, and created solidarity among people with shared personal experiences. Hence, hashtag activism revolving around feminism has become a well-established method by giving women a voice in the digital sphere (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault Welles, 2020). In recent years, the use of hashtags has however extended beyond drawing attention to discrimination and has additionally become a means to propagate it. Right-wing actors are increasingly gathering on social media platforms to disseminate their political agenda driven by nationalism and xenophobia (Farris, 2017). By utilizing hashtags, these actors create isolated spaces where they can spread their worldview without engaging in constructive debate or discussion (Dahlgren, 2018). Furthermore, they have been observed using certain hashtags or imitating popular ones to mobilize

users for their own purposes. A practice commonly referred to as *hashtag hijacking* or *hashjacking* (Darius & Stephany, 2019).

Feminist hashtags have become a popular target of hashjacking. The fact that right-wing actors employ feminist hashtags initially appears contradictory to their own ideologies and policy positions, considering their lack of support for women's representation, reproductive rights, and gender equality (Sauer, 2020). However, these actors selectively target specific areas to supposedly protect women's rights while spreading their ideologies (Farris, 2017). In doing so, right-wing nationalists exploit feminist principles to establish right-wing ideologies of nationalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy under the guise of solidarity (Adlung, Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2021). To strengthen their narratives, right-wing activists use affective strategies, evoking feelings of anger or fear to attract attention and create a shared sense of identity or purpose (Dahlgren, 2018; Sauer, 2020). At the same time, women of the far right use traditional female style of intimacy and coziness on digital platforms to hide their ideological stance and mimic female influencers while distributing xenophobic and racist content (Leidig, 2023). Far-right actors often combine these affects with the process of *othering*, in which one's own group is set apart from others (Sauer, 2020). These examples highlight the inherent contradictions in this approach, as feminists are portrayed as a dangerous out-group while simultaneously instrumentalizing feminism by using pseudo-feminist arguments to advance their agenda and to oppose other outgroups. Sauer (2020) emphasizes that behind this instrumentalization of feminism lies a perceived loss of traditional power positions and an attempt to maintain heteronormative structures. Additionally, in their opposition to women's rights, right-wing populists seek to preserve outdated gender roles and traditional family structures. Thus, the new enemy for them is not feminism itself, but the perceived 'gender ideology' associated with feminism (Wielowiejski, 2020; Schmincke, 2020).

3 The Case of #FrauenSagenNein

The proposal of the Self-Determination Act in 2022 sparked a polarized and radicalized debate on Twitter, leading to the formation of protest movements under issue-specific hashtags. One prominent hashtag in this context is #FrauenSagenNein, intentionally created as a space for women to voice their opposition to the proposed law, but later becoming a platform for a broader gender-critical discourse, gathering a wide variety of actors from different political and ideological backgrounds.

Past studies on networked publics have already highlighted how online communication fosters vertical and horizontal bridging between different publics (Simone,

2010; Maireder & Schlögl, 2014). Thus, not only are new political groupings emerging, but the boundaries between them are becoming increasingly blurred, raising concerns about fragmentation and polarization within the public sphere (Maireder & Schlögl, 2014). Twitter, in particular, blurs the lines between in-groups and out-groups by utilizing hashtags to create new networked publics consisting of diverse social and political backgrounds (Maireder & Schwarzenegger, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Shared emotions and the search for solidarity play a significant role in forming these unusual alliances. In the case of #FrauenSagenNein, affective rhetoric appears to unite various actors under the hashtag, with gender-critical feminists and right-wing actors being particularly prominent. This intersection of groups with different political and ideological backgrounds facilitated by networked communication has been observed in other cases, such as #120dB, where right-wing groups strategically intervened in feminist debates (Adlung, Lünenborg & Raetzsch, 2021). Scholars thus underscore the growing prevalence of anti-feminist groups adopting feminist hashtags, highlighting a concerning trend in contemporary discourse (Siemon, Maier & Pfetsch, 2024). Now the question arises whether the same applies to the discourse surrounding the German Self-Determination Act.

This research, therefore, aims to explore the online discourse surrounding the proposed Self-Determination Act in Germany, specifically focusing on the Twitter network emerging under the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein. The primary objective is to investigate whether #FrauenSagenNein serves as a bridging element among diverse political and ideological factions, potentially fostering an intersection between right-wing populists and gender-critical feminists, a convergence likely absent in offline settings (RQ 1). Addressing RQ 1 necessitates a Social Network Analysis (SNA) to delve into the interconnected and emotive framework within this digital network. RQ 2 explores the social communities existing within #FrauenSagenNein and their interrelationships. This involves analyzing the positions of community members concerning the expansion of transgender rights (RQ 2.1). Furthermore, the study focuses on identifying influential actors within these communities (RQ 2.2) and comprehending their political and ideological stances (RQ 2.3). Lastly, a qualitative content analysis grounded in the principles of Grounded Theory will be employed to scrutinize the narratives disseminated through #FrauenSagenNein (RQ 3). Its aim is to elucidate the main narratives within each community, examining prevalent sentiments expressed, and drawing conclusions about the intersections between these communities.

4 Methods

To explore whether the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein functions as a bridge between diverse political groups, a mixed-methods approach, including a social network and content analysis, was applied to delve into the Twitter network's dynamics, aiming to understand its affective relations and identify the social groups it comprises.

Data Collection and Sampling

The study is based on a sample of tweets tagged with #FrauenSagenNein. These tweets were collected in January 2023 using Twitter API endpoints accessed through a personal developer account. The analysis targets tweets dated from June 30, 2022, onwards, as this marked the release of the new draft for a Self-Determination Act that sparked the discussion under study. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, a six-month period was selected, with data collection concluding on January 31, 2023. In total, the dataset consists of 44,196 tweets.

Measures

To investigate RQ 1 and understand the network's interconnected and affective structure, a Social Network Analysis (SNA) following Knoke and Yang's (2020) principles was conducted. The data was aggregated into a network in which the Twitter accounts served as nodes ($N = 8,656$) and retweet, reply and mention relations between them as edges ($N = 39,573$; directed, without parallel edges). Data calculation, cleaning, and network aggregation were initially performed using R Statistical Software (v4.3.1, R Core Team, 2023), followed by additional calculations and network visualization using the open-source program Gephi (v0.10.1, Bastian, Heymann & Jacomy, 2009). The resulting graph encompasses all connections between nodes, excluding self-interactions. The Fruchterman-Reingold 2 algorithm, a force-directed layout algorithm, was employed for network visualization (Fruchterman & Reingold, 1991). In addition, to identify the key actors various measures of centrality were calculated, namely: *eigenvector*, *in-degree* and *out-degree centrality*.

To address RQ 2, the Louvain method for community detection (Blondel et al., 2008), an iterative approach based on modularity, was used to identify clusters of nodes within the network that represent communities. The four largest communities were selected for further analysis. To gain deeper insights into the political and ideological beliefs of these communities, a sample of tweets was drawn from each community. The sample selection process involved ranking the community members according to their eigenvector centrality. From each community, the top 100 highest-eigenvector-centrality accounts were selected. This resulted in a sample of $n = 400$ accounts for

subsequent analysis which examined the account name, account description, and the first ten tweets displayed on the account page. The study encompassed three key classifications: Firstly, the sentiments of the actors towards transgender rights were categorized as positive, negative, or unidentifiable (NI) (RQ 2.1). Secondly, the actors were categorized according to Kapidzic et al. (2019) classification, distinguishing between public, private, and media actors. This framework aims to shed light on the diverse types of participants involved in using the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein (RQ 2.2). Lastly, political and ideological beliefs were examined (RQ 2.3) by inductively deriving tags from the account description and the first ten tweets from the Twitter page. Political attitudes (e.g. right, green, anti-left, pro-AfD) were extracted from the data material, taking into account the German political spectrum from left to right as well as the German political party system. In addition, ideological beliefs (e.g., feminist, racist, critical of the state) were inductively identified from the same data material. The most prevalent political and ideological beliefs were considered representative of the overall stances of the community.

Finally, to address RQ 3 as well as to comprehend the underlying narratives driving individuals' participation under #FrauenSagenNein, a qualitative content analysis of the collected tweets was conducted employing the Grounded Theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The same sample used for the community analysis, consisting of the top 100 highest-eigenvector-centrality accounts from each community, was selected. From these accounts, the most liked tweet or retweet of each actor was chosen for analysis. The typologization process was guided by the research questions, theoretical considerations, and the codes derived from the coding phase. This process resulted in three main narratives per community.

5 Results

The network analysis of #FrauenSagenNein unveils an alliance between gender-critical feminists and right-wing activists opposing the Self-Determination Act and the expansion of transgender rights. Using affective language these actors gave emphasis to gender-critical narratives with motives of fear and anger, focusing on the exclusion of transgender women.

5.1 The Polarized Structure of #FrauenSagenNein

Between June 30, 2022, and January 31, 2023, a total of 44,169 tweets, retweets, and replies were posted under the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein by 7,544 different accounts. The network was formed from all @-interactions (= retweets, replies, and mentions),

with self-interactions removed (see Figure 1). Ultimately, the network included 8,656 different accounts, which were connected by 39,573 directed edges. These edges were composed of 34,165 (86.33%) retweets, 4966 (12.55%) replies and 442 (1.12%) mentions. Thus, the stream was dominated by retweets. Papacharissi (2016, p. 7) highlights that a high number of retweets can be understood as “reinforced messages of solidarity”. Accordingly, the stream exhibited “high spreadability” and “virality” (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 7).

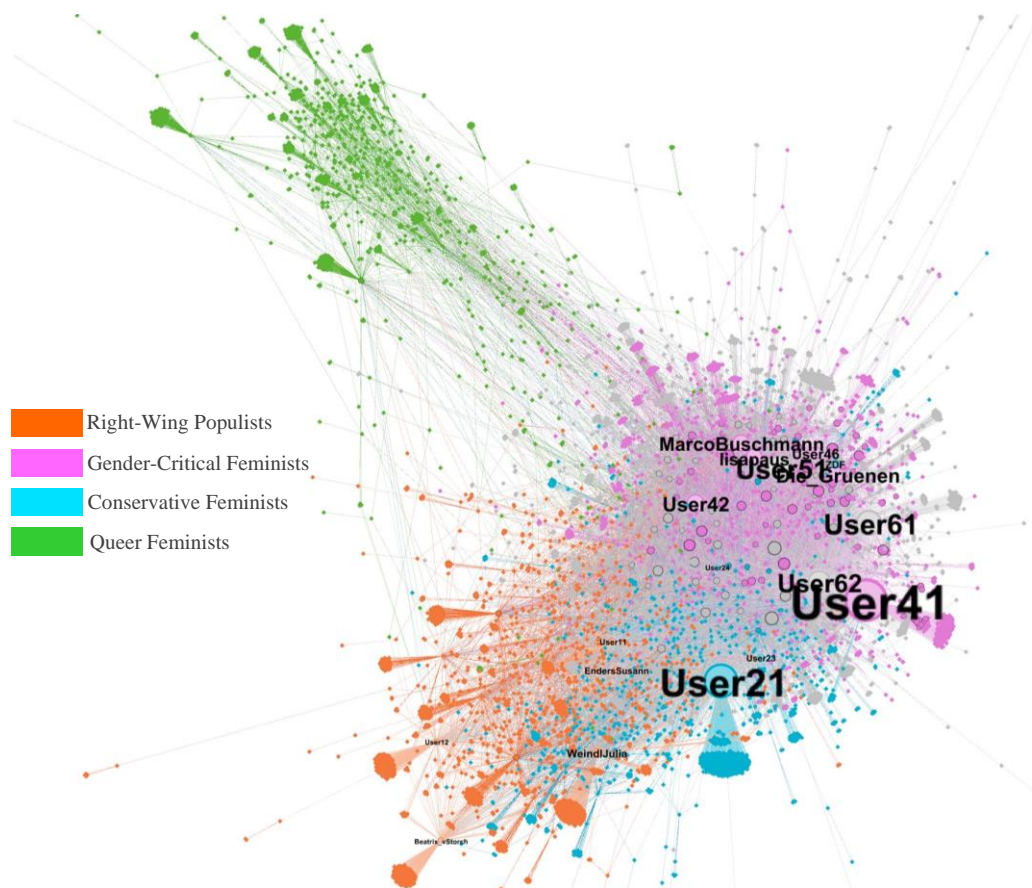


Figure 1 Network visualization of retweet, reply, and mention interactions around #FrauenSagenNein

The figure depicts the node-link structure of the #FrauenSagenNein network and was generated using Gephi 0.10.1 and the ForceAtlas2 algorithm. It highlights usernames relevant for analysis. Node and label sizes were scaled by eigenvector centrality, with larger nodes indicating greater influence. Node colors correspond to the assigned political or ideological community.

The network structure, depicted in Figure 1, cannot be clearly assigned to one of the characteristic network topologies proposed by Smith et al. (2014). It consists of a densely connected core (purple and blue) transitioning to a looser group at the base (orange). On the left, a smaller, less connected group (green) contrasts with the larger core. While it resembles a polarized network, it deviates by having a substantial primary group facing a smaller opposing group. Additionally, it shows some features of

a community cluster, despite varying group sizes. Overall, this network structure embodies polarization often seen in Twitter networks (Conover et al., 2011). Notably, hub-and-spoke structures appear frequently within these groups, in which several peripheral nodes, connected by a central node, radiate out. The hierarchical structure suggests indirect connections among nodes, likely through retweets or mentions (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015).

5.2 The Communities of #FrauenSagenNein

Louvain's Community Detection Algorithm was used to identify communities within the network. The algorithm yields a moderate modularity value of 0.337, indicating that related groups are grouped into larger, more comprehensive communities. In total, 79 communities of varying sizes were calculated. Of these, the four largest communities account for 72.92% of the network, making up a majority of the network, which is why they were examined for further analysis. The four largest communities are color-coded in the network, as shown in Figure 1. Since the Force Atlas2 algorithm, which was used for network visualization, places stronger connected nodes closer together, the visual distance of the communities indicates differences between them (Jacomy et al., 2014). Thus, to learn more about the communities and how they differ from each other, the top 100 highest-eigenvector-centrality actors of each community were analyzed.

The examination reveals substantial similarities between Community 1 (orange), 2 (purple) and 4 (blue), which form interconnected groups centered on prioritizing sex over gender, the basis of the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein. Community 2 and 4 function as the network core, embodying a collective adherence to gender-critical feminism. Notably, while Community 2 shares certain political sentiments with Community 1, particularly in its unfavorable stance towards the Green Party, Community 1 distinguishes itself by aligning with right-wing populism, a political strand absent in the other communities. In contrast, Community 3 (green) clearly deviates by representing contrary views rooted in queer feminism and thus forms a countercurrent to the network core. The analysis of each community is described in more detail below.

Community 1 – Right-Wing Populists

The largest community (orange in Figure 1) comprises 2,316 accounts, constituting 26.76% of the entire network. The prevailing sentiment regarding the expansion of transgender rights leans heavily negative, with 80% expressing unfavorable opinions, 12% holding positive views, and 8% unidentified. Private actors dominate the community, with 90% of accounts held by private individuals, 8% by public individuals and

2% by media. Identification of influential actors reveals that both public and private figures, harboring negative opinions on transgender rights extension, hold influential positions. Notable public actors include the politicians Julia Weindl and Susann Enders from the Freie Wähler party (free voters), as well as Beatrix von Storch from the AfD. In addition, two private accounts are among the influential players (User11 and User12). The actors depict low eigenvector centrality and out-degree values, yet the in-degree values are moderate or high in some cases, meaning that they engaged more as recipients of interactions rather than initiators. The examination of the political and ideological stances reveals a clear bias against the Green Party and left-wing politics as well as a favoritism toward conservative and right-wing parties. This inclination gains credence from the presence of influential figures linked to the conservative Freie Wähler party and the right-wing populist AfD party. Ideologically, the prevalent belief supports only biological sex, dismissing the concept of social gender. Additionally, recurring sentiments reject state policies, with a sharp focus on public health policies, and migration issues. As a result, this community was labeled as “right-wing populists”.

Community 2 – Conservative Feminists

The second-largest community (blue in Figure 1) encompasses 16.64% of the network ($n = 1,440$). Regarding transgender rights extension, 65% hold negative views, 16% are positive, and 19% remain ambiguous. The analysis of participant categories reveals a predominance of private actors (81%), followed by public actors (8%) and media actors (11%). Employing centrality measures, User21 emerges as the most influential individual in the community, also holding the second-highest influential position within the overall network. Interestingly, two influential accounts in the community represent viewpoints favoring transgender rights expansion. User23, identified as a pro-transgender rights private account, exhibits a high in-degree value, indicating frequent references or mentions by other users. The public service television station ZDF (@ZDF), characterized as non-identifiable, holds a zero out-degree value and a minimal in-degree value, signifying negligible interactions with other accounts and reliance on a select few influential accounts for its positioning within the network. Analogous to Community 1, the political and ideological orientations exhibit an unfavorable inclination towards the political stances and representatives affiliated with the Green Party. While no distinct allegiance to any specific political party, the community shows an affection for the conservative political spectrum. Furthermore, a predominant trait shared with Community 1 is the espousal of the belief in the exclusive existence of two

biological sexes. However, differing from Community 1, is the community's conspicuous alignment with feminist issues, particularly within the framework of gender-critical feminism. Hence, this community was characterized as “conservative feminists”.

Community 3 – Queer Feminists

The third largest community (green in Figure 1), constitutes 14.85% (n = 1,285) of the overall network. Diverging notably from preceding communities, this cohort demonstrates a markedly distinct stance regarding the advocacy for transgender rights. Specifically, 87% of community members espouse a favorable perspective, while only 5% convey a negative viewpoint, with 8% abstaining from a clear position. These proportions signify Community 3 as a countercurrent entity within the network. Examination of the actors revealed that 92% of the profiles are private accounts, with a mere 5% attributed to public figures and 3% to media accounts. Notably, all actors within this community exhibit low eigenvector centrality values, which is consistent with the classification of the community as a countercurrent entity. Both in-degree and out-degree values are comparatively subdued, indicating the absence of prominently influential figures. The political and ideological dispositions starkly contradict earlier communities advocating for Green Party positions, disfavoring right-wing factions like the AfD, and distancing themselves from racism and conspiracies. Despite a shared feminist identity, a clear distinction emerges: rejecting gender-critical feminist notions and actively supporting the LGBTQI+ community, affirming social gender recognition. Thus, this community was classified as “queer feminists”.

Community 4 – Gender-Critical Feminists

The fourth community (purple in Figure 1) represents 14.67% of the network (n = 1,270). In their stance on transgender rights expansion, 47% are negative, 21% positive, and 32% ambiguous. While relatively less negative than Communities 1 and 2, this variance might be attributed to a larger presence of public actors, many showcasing positive or indistinct sentiments towards transgender rights expansion. Specifically, the analysis categorized 45% of the accounts as private accounts, 41% as public actors, and 14% as media. Centrality analysis pinpoints User41 as the most influential figure within the community and the broader network. Figure 1 illustrates a hub-and-spoke arrangement centered around User41, indicating substantial aggregation of accounts. This is substantiated by an exceptionally high in-degree value, ranking second highest across the network. Examination of User41's interactions reveals engagement with numerous positively categorized or non-identifiable public and private actors, potentially explaining the reduced polarization in actor and opinion classifications compared to Communities 1 and 2. Beyond User41, other influential actors emerged: the German

Green Party (@Die_Gruenen), the FDP politician and Federal Minister of Justice (@MarcoBuschmann), as well as Green Party politician and Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Lisa Paus (@lisapaus). These actors display moderate in-degree and zero out-degree values, indicating limited participation but inclusion through others' engagement. This community's political inclinations lack a clear orientation, yet four prevalent ideological beliefs surfaced. Aligning with Communities 1 and 2, it rejected the concept of gender identity, emphasizing only biological sex. Many accounts self-identified as feminist or gender-critical feminist. Notably, a smaller subset explicitly expressed support for the LGB community while actively excluding transgender individuals, indicating a nuanced stance toward sexual orientation versus gender identity. Hence, the community was categorized as “gender-critical feminist”.

5.3 Narratives on Gender-Self-Determination

A content analysis was conducted to investigate what motivated the actors in the communities gathering under the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein. This analysis unveiled three prevailing narratives within each community. Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of the narratives identified. Evident from the analysis is a discernible convergence in narratives among the gender-critical communities (Community 1, 2, and 4), all conveying the same central message. One of these aligning narratives centers around the rejection of the concept of a self-identified gender and instead emphasizes sex as the primary determinant (*sex not gender*). A second narrative delves into the discourse surrounding gender-segregated spaces, especially women's only spaces, and the exclusion of transgender women from those spaces (*women only spaces*). Lastly, the third narrative revolves around concerns regarding women's safety and the perceived threats to women's rights in the context of gender self-identification (*women's rights in danger*).

Community	Primary Narrative	Second Narrative	Third Narrative
Right-wing populists	sex not gender	women only spaces	women's rights in danger
Conservative feminists	sex not gender	women's rights in danger	women only spaces
Queer feminists	rejecting TERFs	rejecting transphobia	rejecting #FrauenSagenNein
Gender critical feminists	women only spaces	women's rights in danger	sex not gender

Table 1 Identified Narratives in the Communities

The narratives are ordered to indicate their prevalence within the community, with the most prevalent narrative placed first, followed by the second and third most prevalent.

In stark contrast, gender-positive community 3 diverges significantly, reinforcing its role as a countercurrent within the network. Specifically, all three dominant narratives within this community shared a common focus on criticism, namely of the hashtag itself (*rejecting #FrauenSagenNein*), the transphobic sentiment disseminated within it (*rejecting transphobia*), and the gender-critical feminists who gathered underneath it (*rejecting TERFs*).

However, a common feature across all communities resides in the utilization of affective language to support their viewpoints. Consequently, the tweets frequently express sentiments of frustration and anger directed not only towards other communities but, in the cases of the gender-critical communities towards transgender individuals. Additionally, humor and satire are employed to further discredit the opposing communities and the transgender individuals under discussion. The subsequent sections explore the narratives in more detail, distinguishing between transgender-exclusionary and transgender-inclusive discourse.

Primary narratives on the exclusion of transgender individuals

Sex not gender. Although minor variations in reasoning, Communities 1, 2, and 4 all emphasize the importance of biological sex as the primary determinant of gender. Their arguments revolve around the idea that gender is determined by biological characteristics, such as genitalia and reproductive ability. Moreover, they dismiss the notion of more than two genders, insisting on a dichotomous division into men and women, as exemplified by tweets like:

Are any with conspiratorial feelings again claiming there are more than two genders? Women womentoilet, men mentoilet, all others Pampers diapers. (7 January 2023, 17:13)

Additionally transgender women and their experiences are largely ignored or dismissed. Users argue that only individuals assigned female at birth are considered “real women”. One user for example expresses:

If trans women were truly women, they wouldn't be trans. (30 June 2022, 17:21)

In some cases, members of the communities are even amused by the notion that transgender women identify as such, due to their differing experiences from those of cisgender women. The rejection and lack of acceptance towards transgender individuals, particularly transgender women, is further evident through the use of derogatory

language when referring to them. Transgender women were repeatedly labeled as “biological men” and often discussed solely in terms of their genitalia, such as “penis carrier” or “penis bearer”.


Women-only spaces. Furthermore, Community 1, 2 and 4 all address the issue of women-only spaces and whether transgender women should be included or excluded from such spaces. Members express frustration at the perceived infringement on their right to access safe spaces, emphasizing that the public women's restroom was created as a safe space for cisgender women:

The public women's toilet was once introduced to create a #Safespace for half the population. Now it is to be replaced by the #UnisexWc, so that a marginal part of the population does not feel discriminated against by a binary toilet sign. #FrauenSagenNein (20 November 2022, 19:52)

Thus, the narrative is reinforced by the argument that biological women are already facing numerous security risks in their daily lives, necessitating the provision of special shelters where they could feel safe. Exemplifying this sentiment, one tweet read:

Fullest solidarity with all biological women. They, and especially girls, deserve shelters that exclusively include biological women #FrauenSagenNein Get together and then sue in the #FederalConstitutionalCourt???? No to the #SelfDeterminationAct (07 January 2023, 16:30)

The communities share the belief that allowing transgender women access to these spaces could increase the risk of sexual assault or abuse. This apprehension is amplified by the fear that the Self-Determination Act would facilitate criminal men's access to women's spaces. For instance, politician Susann Enders (@EndersSusann) from the Freie Wähler party highlights the presumed danger posed if the law came into effect:

No to the #SelfDeterminationAct. The rights of #women and #girls is in danger. 25 women's associations oppose the law of  in Berlin. Everyone could change their gender entry annually. This opens up access to protected women's spaces for offenders. #FrauenSagenNein (20 November 2022, 10:43)

Consequently, members advocate for separate cisgendered-women's only spaces, such as restrooms, shelters, and saunas. This demand is explained by the need for privacy and emotional well-being.

Women's rights in danger. Lastly, Community 1, 2 and 4 express concerns that women's rights are being threatened by the concept of gender self-determination. They highlighted issues such as women's safety, the marginalization of feminist voices, and the protection of women from discrimination and violence, as exemplified by tweets such as the following:

This slaps women right in the face and negates what women's rights activists fought for years!

😬 #FrauenSagenNein (30 June 2022, 19:09)

Additionally, the community feels particularly threatened by transgender women, whom they perceive as cisgender men. They believe that men might falsely claim to be transgender women to commit sexual assaults on women. They underline this by saying that it is mainly men who supported the proposed legislation. One user even sarcastically highlights this by stating:

Trans rights are men's rights!?? (19 December 2022, 16:04)

Arguments of this nature reflect the frustration and dissatisfaction with the inadequate consideration given to cisgendered women in decision-making processes, asserting that women's voices are being discredited, ignored, or even silenced when it comes to the implications of gender self-determination.

Counternarratives on the inclusion of transgender individuals

The narratives of the Community 3 sharply contrast those of the other communities, as the community does not employ the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein in its intended manner (*rejecting #FrauenSagenNein*); instead, it utilizes the hashtag to denounce transphobia (*rejecting transphobia*). The community criticizes presumed gender-critical feminists for their values and directly attacks them. The community members heavily criticize TERFs, expressing emotions like anger and (*rejecting #TERFs*). They dismiss them as not truly feminist and for exploiting feminism to promote discriminatory beliefs. They label TERFs with derogatory terms such as “paranoid” and “sadistic” and frequently accuse them of hate, even associating them with racism and other forms of discrimination. Furthermore, the community strongly opposes the supposed alignment of gender-critical feminists with right-wing groups, condemning them as fascist, far-right, and transphobic. They emphasize support for the Self-Determination Act as a marker of true feminism and use hashtags like #FrauenSagenJa (#WomenSayYes) to express agreement with the bill, contrasting it with #FrauenSagenNein (#WomenSayNo) used to oppose gender-critical feminists.

6 Discussion

This study delved into the polarized Twitter network encompassing the hashtag #FrauenSagenNein, aiming to comprehend the complex dynamics within gender-critical protest movements in the digital public sphere. Specifically, the research focus was on the hashtag's function as a bridging tool among divergent political and ideological groups. This exploration uncovered an intersection, where conservative and gender-critical

feminists coalesce with right-wing actors in their opposition to the proposed Self-Determination Act. Utilizing affective language steeped in fear and anger, these groups accentuate gender-critical narratives centered on the exclusion of transgender women. Remarkably, the themes echoed in this movement reflect historical tropes prevalent in the discourse on expanding transgender rights emanating from transphobic attitudes rooted in cisgender-centric, heteronormative, and misogynistic stances (Bassi & LaFleur, 2022; Hines, 2020; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). The affordances of Twitter enable an affective alliance between groups of actors who were previously and beyond this topic ideologically in opposition. As such we observe normalization of right-wing anti-gender discourse.

In the case of #FrauenSagenNein, which was originally aimed at a female and feminist audience, the analysis demonstrates the hashjacking by conservative and right-wing actors, such as Freie Wähler or AfD. These groups have utilized #FrauenSagenNein to engage in the ongoing gender-critical and trans-hostile debate, initiated by gender-critical feminists. Thus, findings indicate connections among these opposing actors, as they not only coexist under the same hashtag but also share similar messages, sentiments and narratives which paves the way for alliance formation. These unanticipated intersections across diverse social movements, in this case right-wing actors and gender-critical feminists, have become more prevalent in online networks in recent years (Nikunen, 2018; Loza, 2014).

Within #FrauenSagenNein, the bridging element primarily revolves around the shared gender-critical and trans-hostile stance. The narratives revolve around rejecting the concept of gender as a social construct, instead defining individuals solely by their biological sex and propagating notions that invalidate gender identities, particularly those of transgender women. Moreover, both groups produce narratives of fear around transgender individuals, portraying transgender women as dangerous heterosexual men who should be denied access to women's spaces. While gender-critical feminists are primarily motivated by concerns for their own physical well-being and the preservation of their “fought for” rights, the conservative and right-wing community engages in the discussion as defenders of cisgender women's rights. Ultimately, it is fear as the shared and amplified emotion that leads both groups to reject the Self-Determination Act.

What further unites gender-critical feminists and right-wing actors is the construction of a shared enemy centered around transgender individuals and the concept of gender as a socio-cultural construct in general. For years, feminists have been involved in debates regarding the nature of gender as a construct and the integration of transgender individuals into feminist discourse (Hines, 2020). For right-wing actors,

however, the issue of gender has increasingly come to the forefront in recent years, serving as a replacement for previous enemies (Schmincke, 2020; Wielowiejski, 2020). Their anti-gender ideology is part of their new strategies to remain relevant and compensate for their perceived loss of power (Farris, 2017). In this strategic shift, they choose their enemy based on the specific discourse they engage in. In the discourse of a Self-Determination Act and #FrauenSagenNein, right-wing populists direct their rejection toward the queer movement and instrumentalize feminism to spread their anti-gender agenda. Ultimately, these anti-gender campaigns are utilized as a means to uphold heteronormativity and heterosexuality as the norm and to regain hegemony (Schmincke, 2020).

#FrauenSagenNein, originally aimed at (gender-critical) feminists, thus joins a series of feminist hashtags that have been hashjacked by right-wing actors to disseminate their political agenda (Darius & Stephany, 2019; Krämer 2017). This poses the risk of right-wing populists strategically using gender politics to form alliances with individuals who may not necessarily agree with other aspects of right-wing ideology (Schmincke, 2020). Thus, these alliances allow right-wing actors to harness anti-gender movements, predominantly leveraging affective language. By capitalizing on sentiments of fear, right-wing populists channel these emotions into directed anger, especially targeting transgender women (Sauer, 2020).

However, the network of #FrauenSagenNein not only bridges gender-critical groups but also gathers factions with opposing views within feminism itself. While gender critical feminists under the hashtag adhere to sex-based or gender-critical ideologies, queer feminists challenge these views, perceiving gender as a socially constructed concept independent of biological sex. Within #FrauenSagenNein, a trans-hostile attitude permeates the discourse, evident through verbal insults, the non-recognition of transgender individuals, and the prevalence of negative sentiment. Consequently, a subset within feminism contributes to perpetuating discrimination against transgender individuals through online abuse and discrimination, a behavior criticized by queer feminist scholars (Hines, 2019; Butler, 1990). The tension between gender-critical feminists and queer feminists, found within #FrauenSagenNein, highlights an ongoing debate on the inclusion of transgender women within feminism, alternating between perspectives rooted in biological essentialism and those advocating for a more inclusive and intersectional feminism (Tudor, 2021; Hines, 2019).

Overall, the findings of this study underscore the importance of critically examining the current rise of anti-gender movements aimed at preserving existing gender structures and heteronormativity as well as perpetuating discrimination against non-cis-gender individuals, including transgender persons. To address this, gender must be

recognized as socially constructed, fluid and detached from predetermined states tied to biological sex. Amidst the rise of anti-gender movements, however, public sentiment seems inclined towards upholding heteronormativity and reinforcing existing gender binary notions, rather than rethinking gender structures. To dismantle these power structures and foster inclusivity for transgender and gender diverse individuals, positive representation in public discourse and media is crucial. This representation should encapsulate broad, intersectional perspectives to counteract exclusionary power dynamics. Furthermore, feminism must endorse greater inclusivity, rejecting trans-exclusive ideologies, and advocating for the rights and empowerment of all women, irrespective of their gender identity.

Notes

Although certain tweets were originally composed in English, the authors of this article have translated all German-language tweets. Twitter handles are exclusively disclosed in instances where an alias is employed or for accounts associated with public figures, such as those in the media and political spheres.

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