

# Your feed, my identity: the politics of gendered narratives in the online space

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# 1. Abstract

This report explores how social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), is used to shape gender-based political discourse, and how this contributes to ideological polarization in the context of the 2024 U.S. Presidential election. Using a transdisciplinary approach, we triangulated data from desk research, a qualitative survey of voters' experiences, social media scraping of hashtags (#MAGA, #TradWife, #YourBodyMyChoice), and expert interviews from fields including computational social science, social media research, and online extremism.

Our findings reveal that gender serves as a powerful ideological anchor around which political identities form, where social media can act as an accelerant to these processes, albeit not a causal relationship. We identify specific themes around which this relationship is explored, including the employment of 'traditional roles', the spectrum of feminism being redefined, the collapse of boundaries between online and offline spaces, the predominantly emotional nature of gender-based political discourse as well as the mechanisms through which platform architectures can influence polarization. The report concludes with evidence-based intervention pathways addressing platform and algorithm design, human moderation, and community-based digital literacy approaches to mitigate harmful polarization while preserving democratic deliberation.



Image from: <https://digitalfrontiersinstitute.org/building-capacity-for-gender-transformation/>

## 2. Introduction and context

In today's digitally mediated societies, social media platforms have become powerful spaces for expressing political beliefs and negotiating personal identity. During the 2024–2025 U.S. presidential election, this dynamic was especially visible in how gendered discourse contributed to ideological polarization. This research investigates how platforms like X (formerly Twitter) influence political divides through gendered narratives. Rather than treating gender as a side issue, we analyze it as a central thread in how political identities are constructed, communicated, and contested in social media. We ask how is X used in shaping gender-based political discourse and ideological polarization during the end campaign of the 2024 U.S. Presidential election? Guided by the principles of transdisciplinarity, our study integrates open-ended surveys, platform analysis and expert interviews to explore polarization not just as a media or communication issue but as a complex societal phenomenon. Due to this complexity,

we conducted an open-ended survey of U.S. voters as a guiding point for our further research. It was designed around sensemaking theory, allowing participants to share personal experiences and contradictions in how they engage with political discourse. We then collected and thematically coded posts focusing on hashtags like #TradWife (TD), #MAGA (MAGA), and #Your-BodyMyChoice (YBMC) based on the respondents answers in the survey. Finally, interviews with researchers, civil society actors, and governance experts contextualized our findings within larger technological, emotional, and systemic frameworks. From there we were able to co-design interventions with initial respondents, based on the cumulative research we had done. We found that gendered discourse often acts as a symbolic link for ideological alignment, with platforms tending to amplify content that is emotional, provocative, or extreme to maximize visibility. Many users expressed frustration, fatigue, or a

sense of being pushed into polarized camps, especially when gender became a point of contention. Our expert interviews added depth to these findings and helped generate potential interventions, such as reintroducing human moderators and training on gender-sensitive issues, platform design and frictions to rethink users' interaction and a critical approach towards policy reinforcement, especially after Musk's acquisition of X. This research is important because it sheds light on how digital polarization is not only about

opinions or content but also about the emotional, symbolic, and systemic environments in which political discourse takes place. By focusing on gender as a lens, we reveal how deeply identity and ideology are intertwined in digital life and how platform design and societal pressures influence those links. Our transdisciplinary approach not only maps these dynamics but also contributes to developing more responsible, reflective, and inclusive interventions to navigate political expression in digital democracies.

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## 2.1 – Context: gender, elections, and ideological divides in the United States

The 2024–2025 U.S. presidential election unfolded in an environment defined by ideological division, institutional mistrust, and the politicization of gender and numerous other social issues (Rathje et al., 2021). Social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), became central to this dynamic, not only as channels of communication but as arenas of cultural performance and ideological contestation. What emerged was not merely a political debate over policy but a symbolic struggle over identity, morality, and power.

Gendered discourse was at the heart of this tension. Gender wasn't just a side issue; it played a key role in shaping political identity (Kronsell, 2012). Hashtags like #TradWife, #YourBodyMyChoice, and anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) rhetoric became shorthand for broader cultural alignments between tradition and progress, different definitions of nationalism, and perceived moral order and ideological chaos (ISD, 2024). This divide was not confined to isolated online communities: it was mainstreamed through digital virality, media coverage, and partisan rhetoric (Barberá et al., 2015). The gendered polarization of political discourse was particularly evident in how figures like Kamala Harris were framed. As a Black and South Asian woman running for the presidency, Harris embodied a progressive shift in representation that both energized certain voting blocs and triggered significant backlash (Knuckey & Mathews, 2024). It was a backlash in the sense that the opposing campaign of Donald Trump reinforced traditionalist narratives, often infused with misogyny, racial undertones, and nationalist appeals to a nostalgic idea of U.S. American identity (Knuckey & Mathews, 2024). In this context, gender became a focus point for people's deeper fears about who fits in, who should be in charge, and who gets to shape the country's future. Historically, gendered discourse also intersects with



## 2.2 – The role of X

Amid this volatile landscape, X played a pivotal role. Nowhere was this more evident than in the transformation of X following Elon Musk's acquisition in October 2022. The structural changes Musk introduced redefined how discourse was moderated, promoted, and punished, dramatically altering the conditions under which gendered political expression occurred (Forbes, 2023).

One of the most consequential changes was the weakening of the platform's content moderation infrastructure. Massive staff layoffs, especially in safety and moderation teams, left the platform increasingly reliant on automated systems to detect harmful content (CBS News, 2022). As a result, the enforcement of misinformation policies became inconsistent (Center for Civil Rights and Technology, 2022). By the end of 2022, the company had ceased enforcing its COVID-19 misinformation policy altogether, a symbolic gesture that signaled a broader retreat from platform accountability (Forbes, 2023).

Another significant shift was the changes to the verification system. Previously, the blue checkmark functioned as a signal of public interest or notability. With the introduction of Twitter Blue, the blue checkmark transformed from a symbol of notability to a purchasable feature, which sparked widespread

concerns about impersonation and credibility erosion (Forbes, 2023). One notable example was when members of the Taliban purchased blue checks, though these were later removed (Forbes, 2023). This change disrupted the credibility of online discourse and contributed to an information environment where ideological alignment often mattered more than factual accuracy (CyberPeace Foundation, 2023).

Musk's vision of free speech absolutism also led to the reinstatement of previously banned accounts, many of which had been removed for promoting hate speech or harassment (including Andrew Tate, a known misogynist and sexual offender) (CBS News, 2022). Paradoxically, while Musk claimed to defend free expression, the platform saw over 5 million account suspensions in the first half of 2024 alone, suggesting more aggressive but less transparent enforcement tactics (Morris, 2024).

These internal changes triggered external consequences. The European Union launched investigations into X's compliance with the Digital Services Act, citing failures to prevent illegal or extremist content (Reuters, 2025). Discussions about X's potential expulsion from the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism further illustrated the risks posed by weakened platform governance (The Times, 2024). These develop-

ments placed X at the center of a growing debate over the role of private tech firms in safeguarding or undermining democratic discourse (Schaake, 2024). Importantly, these platform-level dynamics are not peripheral to political discourse; they are its infrastructure (González-Bailón et al., 2025). As platform policies, moderation practices, and algorithmic amplification mechanisms shift, so do the dynamics of online interactions. Gendered discourse online is especially sensitive to these shifts. For instance, feminist hashtags are disproportionately targeted by harassment (ISD, 2024). Content on X that reinforces traditional gender roles is algorithmically rewarded and discussions around gender identity are often hijacked by bad-faith actors seeking emotional reaction rather than constructive debate (Regehr et al., 2024). Within this context, the 2024–2025 election cycle demonstrated how X shapes not only what is said, but how identity is per-

formed and who is heard. Users are incentivized to post content that sparks outrage, strengthens in-group identity, or conforms to easily digestible ideological positions (Rathje et al., 2021). Satire, mockery, and outrage dominate not because they reflect public sentiment, but because they perform well under the platform's engagement metrics. For gender discourse, this could imply that complexity, ambiguity, and nuance are consistently punished in favor of polarizing and emotionally charged content. In exploring how gendered political discourse played out across X during the 2024–2025 U.S. elections, this report seeks to understand not just the content of polarization, but the conditions that enable it. By mapping the systemic, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of online political identity, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital platforms shape discourse in a time of crisis and transformation.

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Photograph: Brian Snyder/Reuters

# 3 - Setting up the theoretical scene

## 3.1 - Beyond blame: dismantling social media's role in polarization

In the aftermath of pivotal political moments, such as elections, a familiar pattern unfolds of people pointing fingers: at algorithms, at bots, at big tech (Oz12er et al., 2024). This is the common way in which the issues of ideological polarization have been framed in mainstream media: as exacerbated by social media platforms (Törnberg, 2022). For example, following the surprise Brexit vote and Trump's election in 2016, outgoing President Obama warned against retreating into "our own bubbles," connecting increasing electoral volatility and political polarization with concepts like echo chambers and filter bubbles (Bruns, 2021). However, this has recently been challenged by em-

pirical evidence, as well as digging deeper into the epistemic origins of these concepts, which claim that social media does not have a major role in polarization (Van Bavel et al., 2021). Facebook joins in these latter voices, claiming they do not cause further polarization than what already exists in its users (Silverman, 2021).

Many arguments on either side of this blame-game claim that their specific research can apply to all social media users. Van Bavel et al (2021) collected a series of influential experiments in their paper. Out of the ones they chose, arguments supporting social media's role in polarization, these key studies were used as examples:



- A randomized experiment found that deactivating Facebook for four weeks before the 2018 U.S. midterm election freed up 60 minutes daily for other activities, reduced both news knowledge and political polarization, increased subjective well-being, and caused persistent decreases in Facebook use after the experiment concluded (Allcott et al., 2020)
- A study found that U.S. House Representatives with extreme ideological positions (both liberal and conservative) had significantly more Twitter followers than their moderate colleagues, supporting the echo chambers hypothesis that social media platforms like Twitter may amplify political polarization rather than foster diverse political discourse, though significant only among Republicans (Hong & Kim, 2016).

Evidence against social media driving polarization included:

- Research that challenges the popular "echo chamber" narrative by demonstrating that while selective exposure to politically congenial content exists, most Americans have diverse media diets rather than isolated information environments, with echo chambers limited primarily to a small subset of highly politically engaged individuals and potentially stronger in offline social networks than in online platforms (Guess et al., 2018)
- Study that the most polarized demographic - older adults (65+), uses social media least, showing that there is no direct causation (Boxell et al., 2017)
  - However, this study has been openly criticized for potential ecological fallacy- meaning statistical error of assumptions about individuals to a group (Van Bavel et al, 2021).
- Another study examined how Facebook usage affects interethnic attitudes in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Srebrenica genocide commemoration week, finding that contrary to expectations, Facebook deactivation led to more negative attitudes toward ethnic outgroups (especially among people in homogeneous communities), improved subjective well-being, and decreased knowledge of current events (Asimovic et al., 2021)



Törnberg adds another dimension to this debate, challenging the conventional “echo chamber” explanation of polarization, arguing instead that digital media increases polarization by connecting people outside their local networks: in other words, connecting people that would otherwise not connect (2022). Evidence shows social media users regularly encounter opposing views, and in addition to online audiences being “less ideologically segregated than in-person interactions” (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011, p. 1802) emphasizes the

point that exposure to opposing views doesn’t moderate positions but often increases polarization (Bail, 2021). However, Nguyen et al. (2020) distinguishes epistemic bubbles and echo chambers, claiming the two are often confused but are separate social phenomena that must be dealt with in different ways (p. 142). This could account for many of the inconsistencies we see in previous examples on either side of the debate. Below, we created a table highlighting the main differences between the two terms:

**Table 1.**  
**Difference between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers**

Epistemic bubbles	Echo chambers
Exclude other opinions/sides by omission	Exclude other opinion/sides by active discrediting
Fragile, easily popped by exposure	Robust, resistant to contrary evidence
Formed through passive processes	Often created/maintained intentionally
Can be fixed through exposure to omitted voices	Require rebuilding of trust relationships
Members lack exposure to relevant information	Members systematically distrust outside sources

Nguyen (2020) is particularly concerned that recent research and public discourse have focused almost exclusively on epistemic bubbles (information filtering) while neglecting the more pernicious mechanisms of echo chambers. Because “echo chambers prey on our epistemic interdependence” (p. 143) in a way that epistemic bubbles do not, Nguyen argues that addressing them requires the more fundamental approach of rebuilding trust rather than simply providing more information.

Most relevant to our study is the nuance in each of the studies referenced above. Many studies reviewed by Van Bavel have exceptions to the rules, are only applicable to one group, or have been debunked as statistically insignificant. Dylko (2016) also emphasizes the importance of integrating both technological and non-technological factors in analyzing polarization (meaning online and offline factors, similar to Guess et al. (2018) analysis). Thus, while recognizing Bruns’ (2019) critique that concepts like echo chambers and filter bubbles can oversimplify online behavior, we incorporate a nuanced exploration of how features of digital platforms and human-technology behavior influence gender-based political polarization. One way in which different echo chambers were created during the 2024 U.S. Presidential election (a continuation of the one in 2020) was the so-called “fight for

the nation”, a struggle over the meaning of America’s identity, evoking sentiments of nationalism or a rebranding/returning to core American values (Woods et al., 2024). Nationalism fundamentally operates as a gendered project that recruits sexuality into its political framework; contemporary nationalist movements deploy the concept of “gender ideology” as symbolic glue to unite disparate right-wing factions while simultaneously construct hierarchical sexual power dynamics that reinforce national identity through control over reproductive bodies and enforcement of normative gender roles (Seymour, 2024).

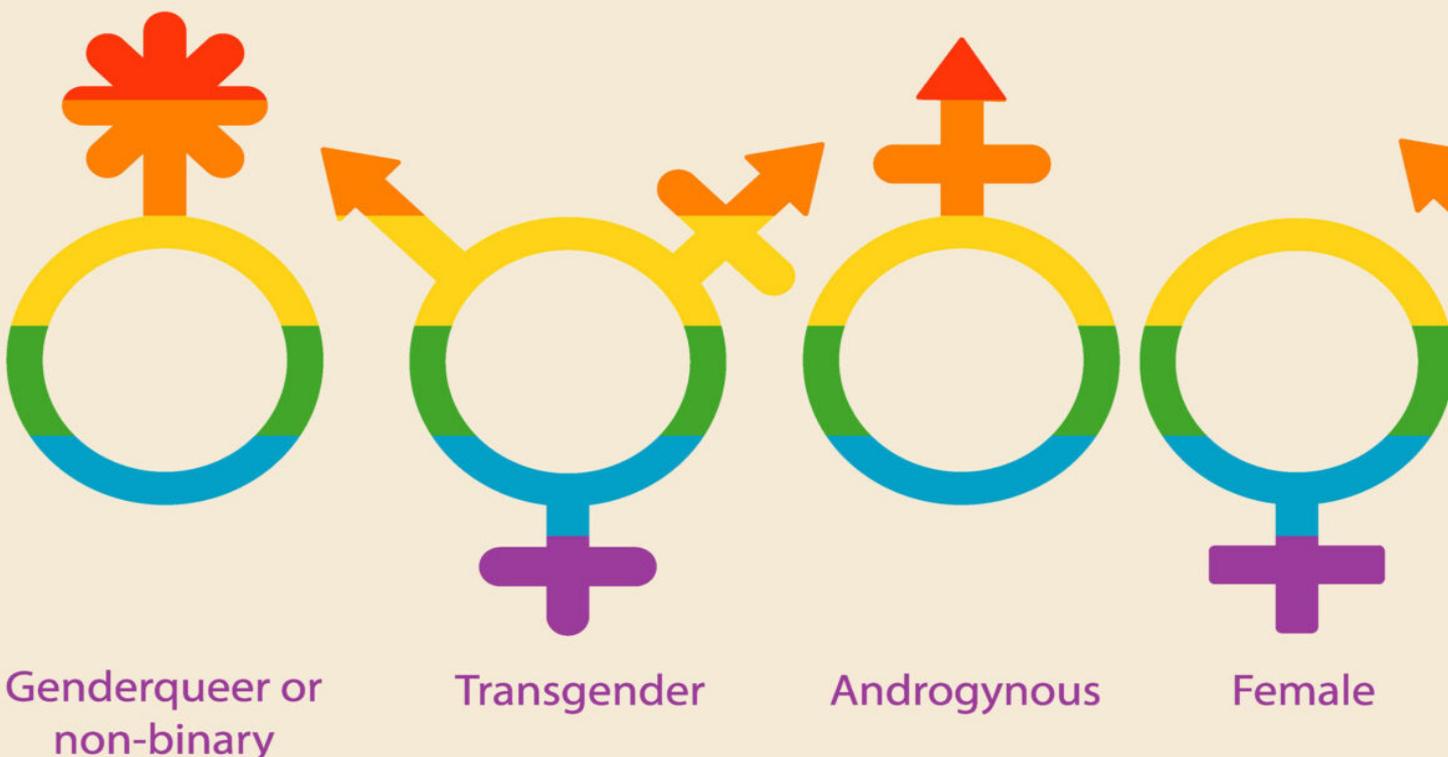
While the empirical evidence regarding social media’s causal role in political polarization remains contested, theoretical perspectives suggest we must examine how digital communication environments may function as discursive spaces where abstract ideological tensions become reconfigured and amplified through gendered frameworks—transforming political positions into embodied anxieties about sexual normativity, gender hierarchies, and reproductive sovereignty that transcend mere informational bubbles to constitute deeper structures of affective polarization (Seymour, 2024). Thus, within the landscape we have showcased above, we will now delve a little more into theory around gender, and the implications of it in an online setting.

## 3.2 – Gender and social media: beyond binary thinking

Our approach to gender recognizes it as a socially constructed category: something that is not an intrinsic thing, but rather a set of socially constructed meanings and processes (Teibowei & Therese, 2024). Rather than imposing rigid categorizations, this report follows the definition of gender as presented by users themselves, whether within or beyond the binary. However, it's important to acknowledge that within the context of online polarization, discourse often reverts to binary thinking that reinforces traditional gender norms (Peña-Fernández et al., 2023). The early internet of the 1990s was often conceptualized as a utopian space where traditional social categories, including gender, could be transcended (Kendall, 2002). However, this optimistic view has been challenged by research showing that virtual environments often reproduce and can even amplify existing social hierarchies

(Kang & Rhee, 2025). As Kendall (1998) argued, “insufficient attention to the power differences inherent in gender, class, and racial identities leads researchers to overestimate the ability of online interactions to displace power hierarchies” (p. 133). This directly relates to the discussion in the previous section.

Digital spaces operate with a paradoxical duality: they simultaneously offer unprecedented opportunities for gender expression and exploration, while reinforcing traditional gender norms through various mechanisms (Kendall, 2002). For transgender and non-binary individuals, “social media has become a sanctuary of sorts, a space where the intricate tapestry of gender can be displayed in its vibrant multiplicity” (Li et al., 2024, p. 256). The relative anonymity and distance from physical interactions create safe spaces for gender-diverse individuals to experiment with



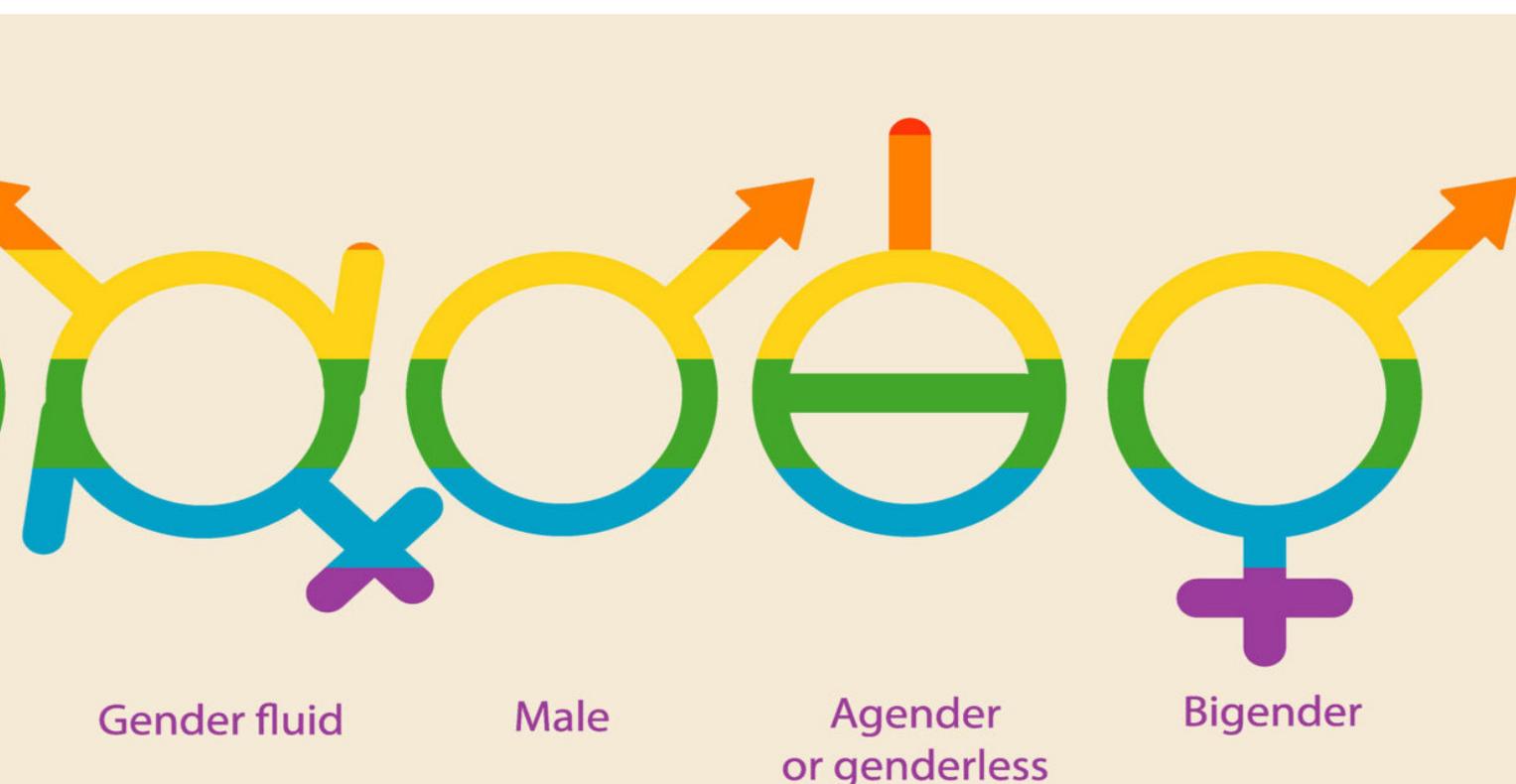
different facets of their identity (Li et al., 2024). However, these same spaces can become sites of enforcement for traditional gender expectations and open up space for people to contest gender representations that differ from the traditional ones. As Kendall (1998) observed, “several features of online interaction can result in gender identity enactments which rely to an even greater degree on stereotypical notions of identity than do offline enactments” (p. 133), suggesting that “online gendered interactions are unlikely to displace fundamentalist and essentialist ideas about gender offline and, in fact, may further perpetuate rigid gender expectations both online and offline” (p. 133).

A significant aspect of online gender dynamics is the prevalence of gender-based harassment. Studies have consistently shown gendered patterns in online abuse, with women experiencing qualitatively different forms of harassment than men (more often related to gender itself) (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2021). Online harassment toward women “tends to rely on hyperbolic and sexualized derision, and it

commonly includes charges of unintelligence, hysteria, and ugliness in combination with threats and/or fantasies of violent sex acts which are often framed as ‘correctives’” (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2021, p. 246).

While research on overall rates of harassment shows mixed results, there is consensus that “men and women experience different types of online harassment and hate” (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021, p. 247). Pew Research Center (2014, as cited in Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021) found that men experience more name-calling and physical threats, while women are more likely to experience sexual harassment, with young women facing “certain severe forms of harassment at disproportionately high levels” (p. 247).

This harassment operates not just as individual instances of abuse but as part of systemic enforcement of gender norms. For example, female journalists frequently report experiencing harassment that interferes with their work, and their articles tend to attract significantly more hostile comments than those authored by men in the same profession (Chen et al, 2020).



### 3.3 – Social role theory and online gender dynamics

Social role theory offers a valuable framework for understanding these patterns of online gender behavior and harassment. According to this theory, people expect others to behave in line with gender stereotypes, attributing “domestic, subordinate, and communal behaviors to women, while men are considered dominant and agentic” (Eagly & Wood, 2012, as cited in Küchler et al., 2023, p. 731). These expectations influence communication patterns, with women typically expected to communicate “more warmly and less aggressively than men” (Küchler et al., 2023, p. 731).

Küchler et al. (2023) review multiple studies showing that online communication follows distinct gender patterns even in anonymous environments. Their analysis indicates that female users typically express more positive emotions and communicate with greater warmth and politeness, while male users tend toward more impersonal, assertive language that often includes critical comments and profanity.

When women violate these gendered expectations online, they often face what researchers call the “backlash effect,” (source). This effect occurs when violations of gender stereotypes produce dissonance in communication partners, leading to negative responses (Küchler et al., 2023). While originally researched in professional environments, this effect extends to online communications.

Wilhelm and Joeckel (2019) argue that when women engage in uncivil communication online, they violate

two gender stereotypes: “the expectation not to (overly) engage in the field of politics and the expectation of communicating in a domestic, subordinate, and communal way” (p. 732). This dual violation could be considered “an act of double deviance” that triggers particularly strong negative reactions (Wilhelm and Joeckel, 2019, p. 732). The consequences of this backlash manifest across various forms, from people flagging content and excluding individuals from online communities to targeted harassment campaigns (Chen et al., 2020).

In this scenario, where social media spaces are not binarily related to polarization gender issues can also not be thus divided. Beyond men and women having different experiences online depending on the context, for gender-diverse individuals, much more is at stake when navigating online spaces: “Many LGBTQ+ users face high stakes in online self-presentation, due to the risk of stigmatization of their LGBTQ+ identity,” (DeVito et al., 2018).

Social media complicates this process further through features like algorithmic content curation that can obscure one’s audience, making it unclear who will see one’s self-presentation (DeVito et al., 2018). This heightens the risk of “context collapse” or unwanted conflation of different social contexts, forcing users to make “strategic choices about how to best deploy the features and affordances of their chosen social media platforms to achieve their self-presentation goals” (DeVito et al., 2018, p. 442).

## 3.4 – Beyond the paradox: toward inclusive digital spaces

**However, these positive aspects exist alongside ongoing challenges. Gender-diverse users must navigate issues of "online harassment, doxing, trolling, and cyberbullying" that are "commonplace, sometimes causing psychological harm and deterring gender-diverse individuals from engaging fully online" (Li et al., 2024, p. 259).**

On the one hand, social media offers valuable spaces for gender exploration and community building. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram “have become engines driving conversations on gender diversity”, enabling “dialogues once stifled by mainstream media, fostering advocacy and mutual support” (Li et al., 2024, p. 260).

For gender-diverse communities, these digital platforms facilitate the formation of shared stories and community support structures (Li et al., 2024). As more individuals share their experiences, this growing collection of personal accounts becomes “a guiding light for those in need of comfort and recognition, while also serving as a compelling mechanism for promoting change and fostering broader societal acceptance” (Li et al., 2024, p. 257).

However, these positive aspects exist alongside ongoing challenges. Gender-diverse users must

navigate issues of “online harassment, doxing, trolling, and cyberbullying” that are “commonplace, sometimes causing psychological harm and deterring gender-diverse individuals from engaging fully online” (Li et al., 2024, p. 259).

Moreover, the lack of transparency in algorithms can unintentionally suppress or sideline gender-diverse voices, for example through shadowbanning or demonetization (Li et al., 2024).

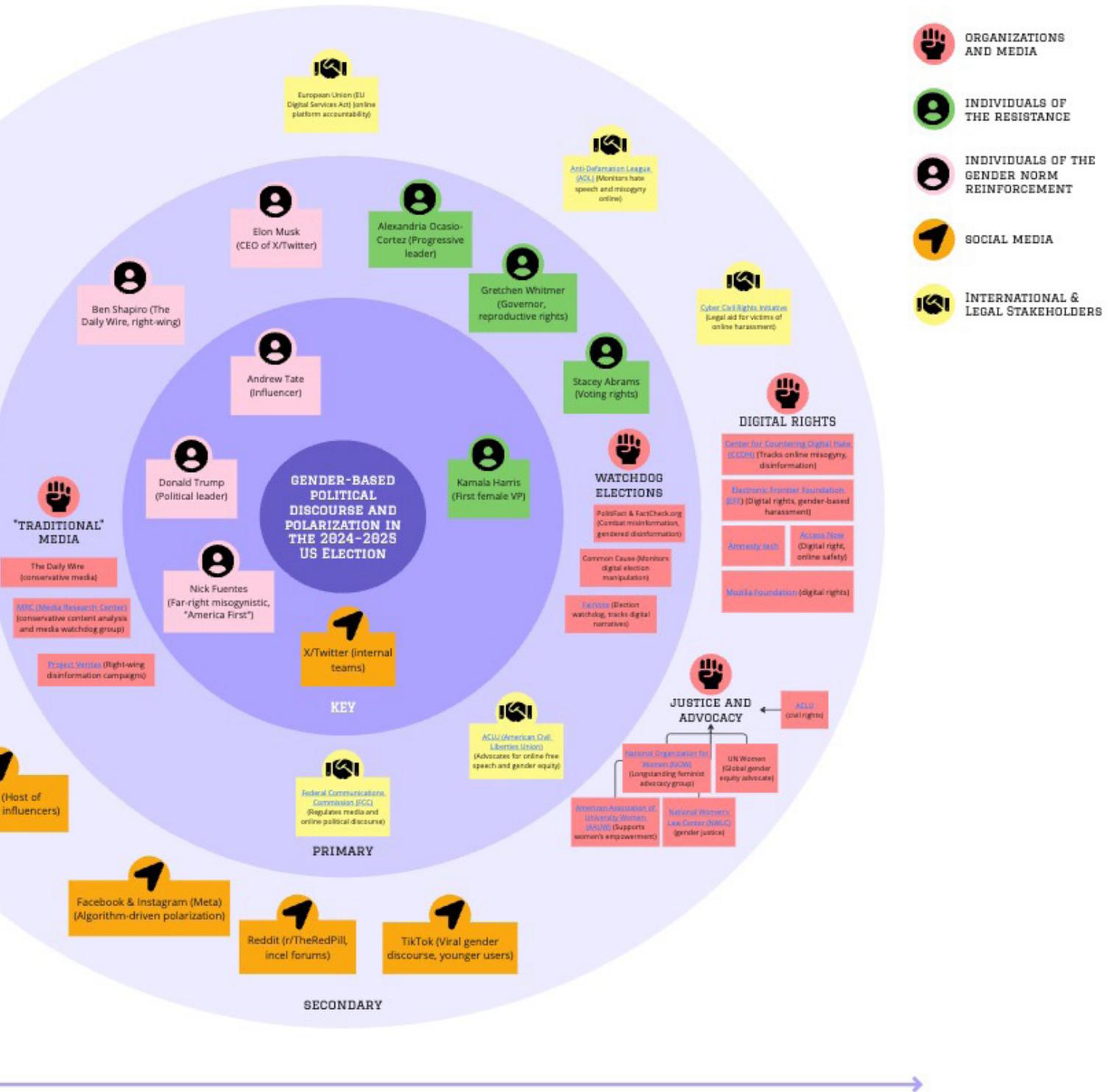
These tensions highlight the need for more nuanced approaches to understanding and addressing gender dynamics in online spaces. Rather than viewing the internet as either entirely emancipatory or entirely oppressive for gender expression, we must recognize its complex role in both reinforcing and challenging traditional gender norms, and work toward creating digital environments that promote inclusivity and respect across the gender spectrum.

# 4 – Bounding the unlimited: comprehending political gender divides in social media systems

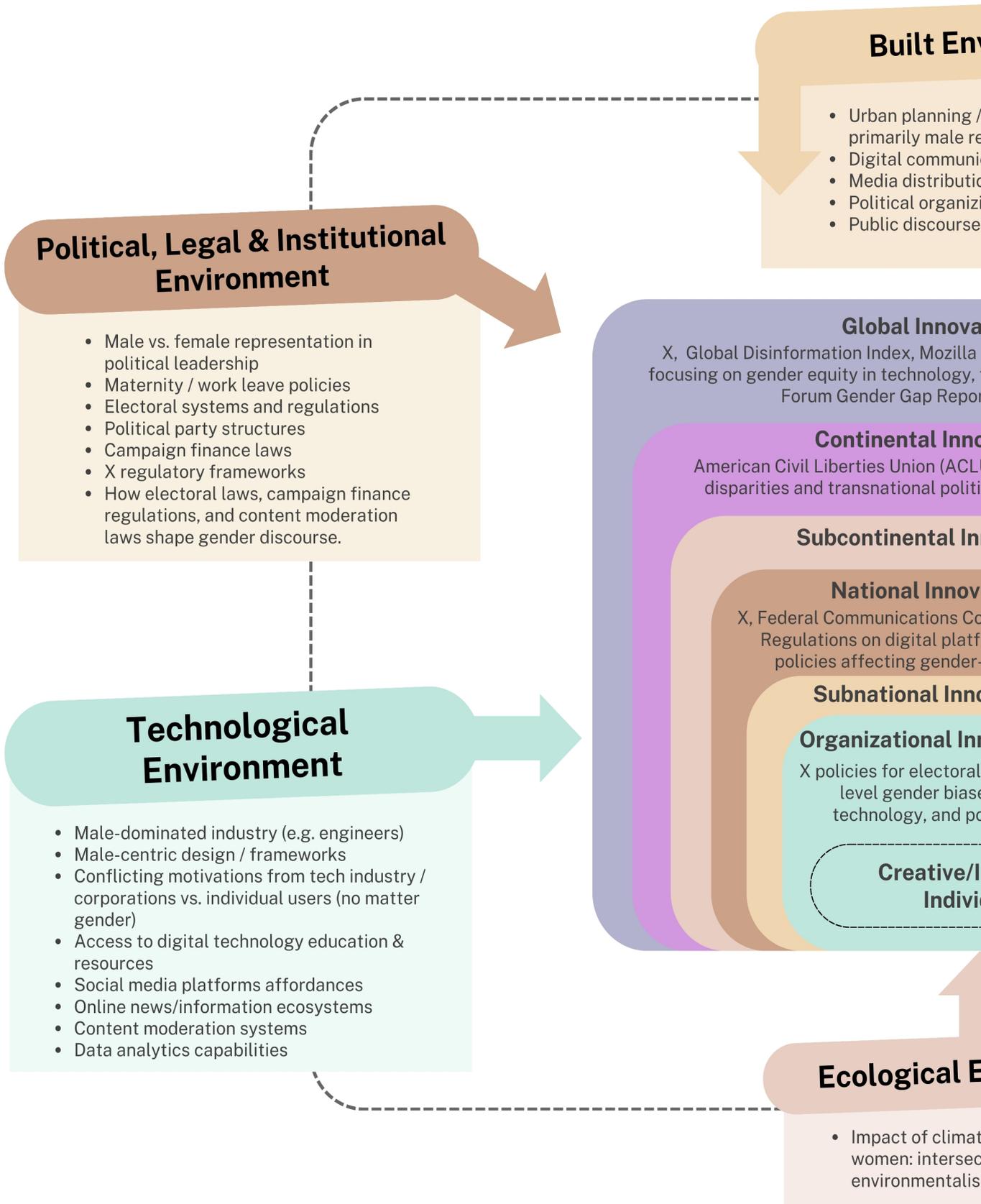
These two maps help explain how gender-based political debates and divisions unfolded during the 2024–2025 U.S. election. The first map shows the main people and groups involved in these online discussions, with X (formerly Twitter) at the center. It highlights well-known figures like Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, as well as online influencers, media platforms, and organizations working on elections and digital rights. It shows how all of these actors play a part in shaping what gets seen online and how gender is talked about. The second map looks at the bigger picture. It shows how larger systems like politics, technology, the economy, culture, and the law affect what happens online. It includes global groups, national rules, and social pressures that shape how gender issues are discussed and who gets heard. Together, these maps show that online conflict about gender isn't just random, it comes from many connected people, systems, and problems working together in both online and of-line spaces.

Image 1.  
Stakeholder map





**Image 2.**  
**System vulnerabilities**



**Environment**

architects / city gov reps  
 represented  
 cation networks  
 on channels  
 ing spaces  
 forums

**tion Systems**  
 Foundation, International organizations  
 finance, and media (e.g., World Economic  
 rt, UNESCO, UN Women).

**novation Systems**  
 U), Amnesty Tech, economic gender  
 cal influence on gender discourse.

**novation Systems**

**ation Systems**  
 mmission (FCC), US Congress,  
 orms and campaign finance  
 -based political discourse.

**novation Systems**

**novation Systems**  
 processes, Corporate-  
 es in social media,  
 olitical institutions.

**Innovative  
 duals**

**Environment**

change on  
 tional  
 m

**Economic & Financial Environment**

- Gender wage gap / disparity across labor sector
- Job / career type segmentation based on gender
- Campaign funding patterns
- Media industry economics
- Political advertising spending
- Economic policy positions by gender

**Sociocultural Environment**

- Decline in fertility rate
- Societal pressure of parental duties for “mothers” / gender roles
- Media / entertainment - predominantly created & distributed by men (bechdel test; soap operas representing “small glamorous families”)
- Housework / relationship division (hermeneutic labor)
- Gender norms and stereotypes
- Cultural attitudes toward women in politics
- Social movements and advocacy
- Historical context of gender in US politics

# 5 – Transdisciplinary approach

This research was conducted under Transdisciplinary Field Research Training (TFRT) principles, emphasizing collaborative, context-sensitive engagement with complex societal issues to unpack how X has been used to influence gender-based political discourse and ideological polarization during the U.S. presidential elections. We not only gathered the expertise of various knowledge fields, such as computational social science, media studies, political communication, gender studies, and platform design, but also integrated stakeholders related to different sectors, such as academia, media, and industry.

## 5.1 – A mixed-method transdisciplinary approach

The research design aligns with the TFRT vision of researching “real-world problems” through multi-stakeholder dialogue, systems thinking, and participatory reflection (GFE, 2023). We followed a qualitative design, using both in-method and data triangulation. In-method triangulation was used to provide richness of information by employing a qualitative survey, social media data scraping, semi-structured expert interviews, and asynchronous collaboration with stakeholders around proposed interventions. The data triangulation validated and recognized possible data inconsistencies, as we tackled different stakeholders such as U.S. voters and experts on relevant subjects (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023, p. 8). By triangulating methods and data from multiple sources, we aimed to

develop a comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon. It is worth mentioning that during the process, integrating this triangulation in tandem with transdisciplinary approaches was complex “due to the differences in epistemology and ontology of the [...] methods” (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023, p. 8). Our methodological approach was structured around three mutually reinforcing research strands: qualitative analysis of an open-ended survey with U.S. voters, thematic analysis of social media scraping and of expert interviews with practitioners, researchers, and scholars. Each strand was designed to reflect and embrace the nonlinearity, ambiguity, and affective dimensions of ideological polarization, especially as it manifests through digital and gendered discourse.

## 5.2 – Data collection: guided by the system model and vulnerabilities

During the data collection process, every step fed into the next stage of the methodology. Firstly, we conducted in-depth desk research that reviewed election news and trends, polarization and gender literature, and a first digital ethnography with online activity on X to familiarize ourselves with the data.

### **Survey: capturing complexity through open-ended inquiry**

The desk research informed the design of a qualitative survey that understands how 23 U.S. voters experience gender-based political discourse on social media platforms, particularly X. The survey included demographic questions (age, gender, political identification), open-ended questions exploring personal experiences of polarization on social media when gender was part of the discourse, and visual triads that allowed respondents to position their experiences along key dimensions.

The survey was grounded in complexity theory (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014), as we understand that political polarization is not a binary or static phenomenon. It is emergent, nonlinear, and shaped by emotional, social, and digital feedback loops. As Cilliers (2005) emphasizes, research on complex systems must remain open-ended

to allow emergent properties to surface. Rather than imposing rigid categories, we used narrative prompts that allowed participants to share their own stories, contradictions, and feelings about political discourse online.

### **Social media scraping**

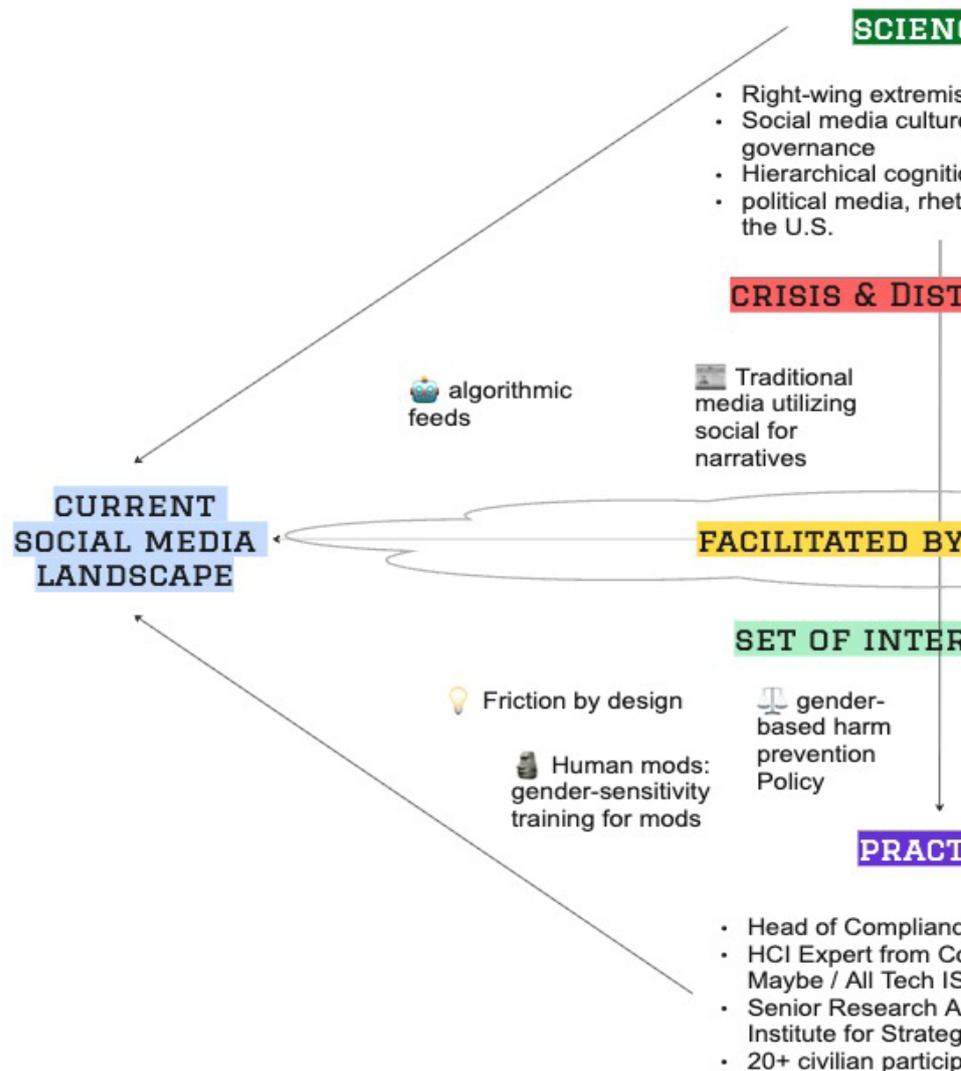
Building on insights from the digital ethnography that explored broad political hashtags such as #Harris and #Trump, desk research, and the survey, we scraped over 400 X posts using a hashtag query of #MAGA, #TW, and #YBMC between November 2024 and January 2025. We used a scraping tool called Zeeschuijmer and a tool called 4CAT for processing, visualizing, and analyzing the data (Peeters, 2023). As we acknowledge the platform affordances, for not allowing a geographical-based research, #MAGA was selected as its association with Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, provides a geographical underpinning and allows in a way to filter by place. Similarly, we picked #YourBodyMyChoice, as a viral trend related to the U.S. election period and a response to reproductive rights discourse. Finally, based on the desk research, the #TradWife allowed us to evaluate the discourse around traditional gender roles for women.

### Expert interviews

We conducted seven expert interviews with scholars, platform governance researchers, and civil society actors to contextualize our field data and expand our systemic understanding. Their names will be kept anonymous during all the publication materials, as was the agreement based on confidentiality and data protection. Interviews were semi-structured around key themes, such as polarization mechanisms, gender discourse, cognitive and psychological factors, platform architecture, and intervention possibilities. Their profiles are as follows:

1. Academia expert. Computational social scientist studying cultural trends and political transitions.
2. Academia expert. Media studies' researcher focusing on online harms and algorithmic systems.
3. Non-profit and media expert, working on safeguarding human rights and

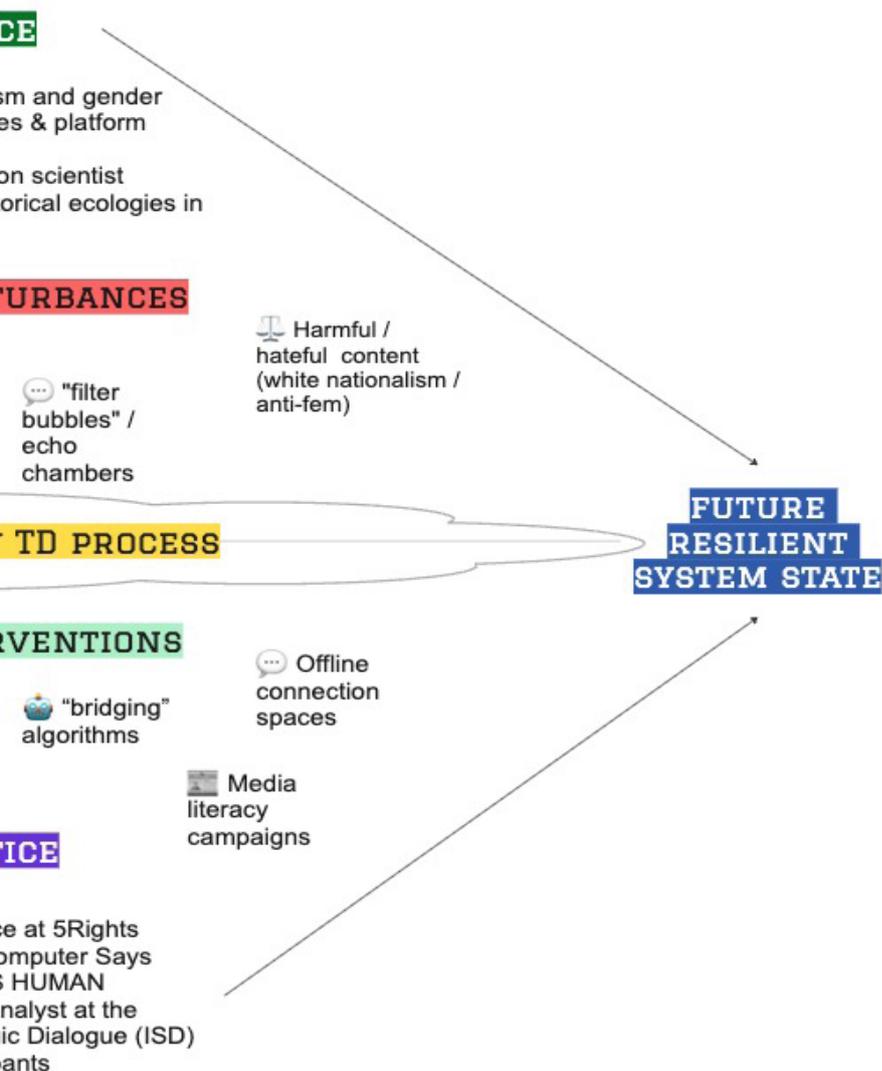
**Image 3.**  
**Transdisciplinary process**



tackling polarization, extremism, and disinformation. Researcher on digital extremism, conspiracy networks, polarization, and hate.

4. Academia expert on political communication, democratic theory, social movements, rhetorical ecologies and political authority.
5. Technology researcher studying digital resilience.
6. Policy expert. Specialist in digital engineering, technology safety, and AI regulation, with a focus on youth education and cyber protection.
7. Academia and civil society expert. Researcher on counter-narratives to online hate, disinformation, and incivility, focusing on protecting religious minority communities.

The final part of our methodology of co-creation with survey respondents and experts for interventions will be discussed later on in the report.



# 6 – Data analysis and findings

## 6.1 – Qualitative analysis for open-ended survey

Utilizing open-ended questions and visual triads to represent the perceptions, the survey asked the participants to articulate the emotional and ideological dimensions of their experience with gender-based political discourse on social media. The survey received 23 responses representing diverse identities with 59.1% women or female-identifying, 36.3% men or male-identifying, and 4.5% non-binary. Political affiliations were also broad, including democrats (36%), independents (27%), leftists (23%), republicans (9%), and progressive/liberal (5%). The gender and political self-identification of the participants painted an interesting representation of the evolving affiliations, contrasting the narratives around simple binaries and societal segmentation (i.e. voting blocs) presented in mainstream media (Pew Research Center, 2018). Many respondents described their shifting political ideologies, triggered by major political events such

as the 2016 election involving increasing awareness of leftist ideologies by figures such as Bernie Sanders (Lizza, 2016). Relatedly, several respondents expressed distrust and disengagement, becoming cynical towards the two-party political system, highlighting how political identity is increasingly shaped by individual experiences and emotional resonance rather than party loyalty.

A notable emotional thread across the responses was one of distress and fatigue. Participants frequently expressed emotions such as sadness, hopelessness, anger, anxiety, depression and disgust, indicating a profound amount of emotional distress and burden associated with engaging with gendered political discourse on social media.

Many of the anecdotes shared in the open-ended portion of the survey touched on how gender was a key element of political rhetorics in the 2024 U.S. presidential election.



**“Not a specific conversation, but just generally how people spoke about Kamala’s qualifications vs Donald’s (lack of) qualifications. It felt rooted in sexism and racism - idolizing unqualified, old, white men.”**

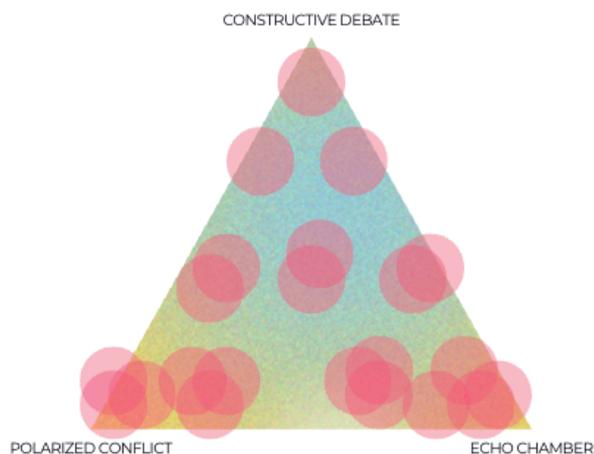
**“I want to share this workplace-relevant podcast my gf shared with me: [https://open.spotify.com/episode/OK0vETbnQcmqkwkh8PwAvG?si=1yZPza2xS-7G335mit9\\_Zsg](https://open.spotify.com/episode/OK0vETbnQcmqkwkh8PwAvG?si=1yZPza2xS-7G335mit9_Zsg). I share this because this is how one coworker i have uses machismo as a vehicle to shoe-horn in why he loves Trump - it’s laughable but nonetheless a guise for immaturity couple with lambasting the small group he’s among at a given juncture with his lowbrow humor that’s a bunch of toxic male bluster.”**

While 23 responses is not a quantitatively viable sample for generalization, the insights gathered from the survey served a crucial role in shaping the next stages of our transdisciplinary research process. Rather than aiming for statistical generalizability, this phase helped us prioritize narrative-driven insight that were invaluable in identifying thematic patterns and recurring tensions further explored in the following stages.

Specifically, the categorizations and themes of these stories shaped the selection of specific hashtags: #MAGA, #YBMC, and #TW as focal points for data scraping. These narratives explored in the analysis revealed contradictions, ambivalence, and shifts over experiences and time – affirming the need to contextualize these findings within broader concepts, leading us to our next step of expert interviews.

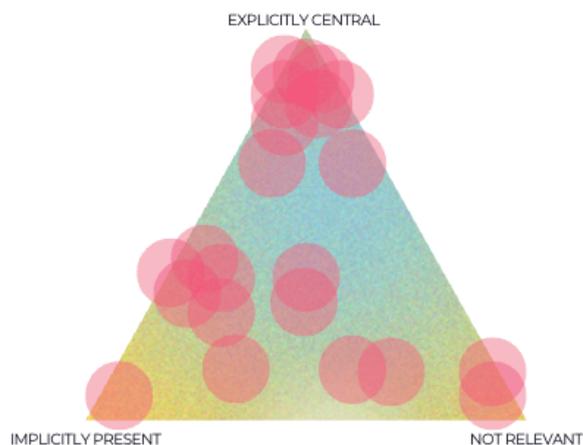
1. How would you classify the nature of your story?

- **Constructive debate:** exchange of ideas, respectful disagreement, open-mindedness
- **Polarized conflict:** clash of rigid ideologies, hostility, little room for dialogue
- **Echo chamber:** reinforcing existing beliefs without engagement with opposing views



2. How would you classify the role of gender in your story?

- **Explicitly central:** gender was the main focus (e.g., feminism, masculinity, trans rights, etc.)
- **Implicitly present:** gender played a role but was secondary to a broader issue (e.g., DEI, leadership, policy)
- **Not relevant:** the discussion was political but not specifically gender-related



## 6.2 – Thematic analysis of social media scraping

Influenced by the insights gathered in the survey, the focus of this part of the research was around the hashtags: #MAGA, #YBMC, and #TQ. We analyzed a total of 413 posts: 177 from #MAGA, 115 from #tradwife, and 121 from #YourBodyMyChoice. Through thematic analysis, we identified five key themes, which subsequently informed both the expert interviews and their analysis. The themes are: reinforcement of traditional roles, the feminism spectrum, emotionally charged discourse, offline-online ambivalence and platform architecture themes that arise from the interviews. These themes partially reflect the gender-based discourses that were viral and polarized before, during and after the 2024 US elections, also illus-

trating how they gain traction online and the strategies used to amplify them.

The data scraping was processed and cleaned using the 4CAT toolkit. We removed duplicates and non-English content, anonymized users and filtered for relevance based on collaboratively defined inclusion/exclusion criteria. The criteria included aspects such as language and relevance to the topic of study. A two-level thematic coding process was employed.

- First-level coding was employed to reduce researcher bias, where two researchers independently analyzed the same dataset of posts and images, tagging each with descriptive keywords.
- Second-level coding used a



pilot-tested codebook to capture dominant themes based on emotional tones, rhetorical patterns, and performative styles. From there, five themes emerged, which will be discussed in the discussion section.

#TD, #YBMC and #MAGA embodied very different movements and trends which relate at different levels/intensities to the gender-based election discourse. In this section, we will first briefly explain each of these movements and trends, and then we will go in depth into the themes that emerged from the joint analysis. The hashtag #YBMC was a twisted response to the feminist slogan “My body, my choice,” weaponized by far-right figures 24 hours after Donald Trump’s 2024 re-election. Promoted by extremists like Nick Fuentes, it mocks women’s autonomy and has fueled a surge in online harassment and threats against women (Donegan, 2024; Frances-Wright & Ayad, 2024). Reports

show mentions of the phrase spiked 4,600% on social media after posted, reflecting a broader rise in misogynistic rhetoric online and a backlash on women’s rights (Fernando, 2024; North, 2024).

At the same time, the #tradwife emerged globally as a movement that promotes ‘traditional’ gender roles, around being submissive towards men, homemaking practices, and the use of “feminist rhetoric to frame the movement as a choice they are making about how to live their own lives as empowered women” (Proctor, 2022). The place of #tradwife during the election period and the role of social media in shaping its discourse is also mentioned by some journalists, on how Trump’s cultural politics excelled on grabbing from tradwife ‘aesthetics’ –among other resources such as podcasts bros– to appeal and reach distant minority groups and young voters (Cottom, 2024). As describe by Cottom (2024):

**His [Trump’s] message managed to assemble a constituency of overlapping online communities that, in particular, are listening for archetypes and aesthetics, not policy. Trump gives them plenty. The sexist, racist notions about who belongs in the home, who should have a voice in public and who should be excluded from the state were ready-made to appeal to these communities.**

Finally, #MAGA was an umbrella term, where the accent of traditional values, promotion of “gender hierarchies” and the “exclusion of outsiders” (Wolf et al., 2025). Although not specifical-

ly gendered, many associations with this hashtag still employed gendered aspects. Most themes from the web scraping were relevant to these posts.

## 6.3 – Thematic analysis from expert interviews

The themes identified from the data scraping served as a foundation for the expert interview analysis, which also followed an inductive approach. Transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify core insights, contradictions, unexpected findings and links between all stages of our methodology. These conversations helped us situate our findings within a broader political, technological, and cultural infrastructure and to critically examine the role of platform design, algorithmic incentives, and societal vulnerabilities in shaping digital discourse.

The experts highlight how gendered political discourse online is shaped through emotionally charged anecdotes, algorithmic design, and the evolving spectrum of feminist ideologies. Rather than treating online spaces as isolated entities, the discussions analyzed here situate digital engagement with a broader socio-political context, revealing deep tensions around gender, identity and platform design. As a persistent theme from the survey and data scraping, we explored the reaffirmation of traditional gender roles, often promoted through curated feeds, aesthetics and algorithmic recommendations. Relatedly, the experts highlighted how feminist ideologies exist along a wide

spectrum. The blurring of boundaries between online and of-line spaces was a critical theme presented across the interviews. The internet was repeatedly described as a mediated entity, reflecting societal inequalities and amplifying them in a speedy and more visible manner.

**The term “ambivalence” captures the sentiments expressed by the interviewees as well - as the online spaces provide vital political connection and identity formation, while simultaneously presenting users to an overwhelming amount of polarization. The experts articulated how real-world political events - such as the 2024 U.S. election - were mediated through social media platforms, reshaping not just how events were interpreted but also how users felt about themselves and their communities.**

Central to these dynamics is the platform design – largely invisible but deeply influential. The experts expressed how these platforms reward content based on engagement, not accuracy, safety, or ethical alignment.

# 7 – Making sense of the complex

## 7.1 – Overview

Our analysis revealed that X is used in multiple narrative and technological ways that anchor ideological and political discourse. However, there is no clear cause or one aspect of blame; social media is neither blameless nor the cause of polarization around these issues. This nuanced understanding emerged across our methodological approach and was reinforced by expert insights, suggesting we need to move beyond simplistic attributions of blame to understand the complex dynamics at play. As the boundaries between online and offline environments increasingly blur, digital spaces both reflect and shape our social realities. An expert analyst describes this phenomenon as the internet becoming *“indistinguishable from real life and increasingly interwoven in our real lives.”* This integration means that online discourse around gender doesn’t exist in isolation but becomes part of our lived experience, influencing how we perceive and engage with political and social issues in everyday contexts.

As mentioned before, some

research suggests that platforms contribute to polarization through algorithmic amplification of extreme content, while other studies challenge this narrative. An academic expert in Political Psychology emphasizes that *“the relationship between extreme positions and consumption is not unidirectional but bidirectional”* – people both select media that aligns with their existing beliefs and are influenced by the content they consume. This complex dynamic makes it difficult to establish clear causal relationships between social media exposure and ideological positioning.

Traditional social cues continue to exert significant influence on political behavior, with platforms serving as influencers rather than originators of polarization. The expert analyst notes that *“people still largely take their cues, whether for voting or personal decisions, from the social context of their life—community leaders, pastors, friends, doctors, or personal experiences.”* These established sources of influence remain decisive factors in shaping opinions, though social media

can create “ripple effects” by exposing users to more extreme content and amplifying existing divisions. The academic expert in Political Psychology observes that *“randomized controlled trials and more controlled experiments increasingly suggest that echo chambers do not really exist in the way political scientists initially thought, indicating that concerns about social media’s isolating effects may be vastly overblown.”* This perspective aligns with Nguyen’s (2020) important distinction between “epistemic bubbles” (information filtering) and “echo chambers” (active discrediting of outside sources), suggesting different mechanisms and interventions are needed to address each phenomenon. Media narratives themselves contribute to polarization through sensationalism and binary framing. The researcher on Big Tech we spoke to notes how platforms *“reach for engagement, create stories with amplified discourse that unfortunately both overhypes benefits and overfixates on potential risks, while avoiding discussing current harms.”* These engagement-driven patterns shape how gender is discussed in political contexts, often through oversimplification and

emotional appeals rather than nuanced analysis and realistic interpretations. Simultaneously, we observe competing visions for digital governance and community building. The Big Tech researcher points to *“a fetishization of collectivism”* in spaces like Web3, with rhetoric celebrating openness and transparency. Yet *“when people expressing these values are in the room, they’re met with doubt”* about what it means to *“build a system where trust is placed in the collective versus a sole content moderator.”* These tensions between centralized and distributed approaches to information curation affect how gender discourse is regulated and amplified online. As we examine specific themes in the sections that follow, it’s essential to maintain this complex understanding of social media’s role—neither as a neutral platform nor as the primary cause of polarization, but as a dynamic space where existing social tensions around gender are played out through technological affordances, economic incentives, and emerging cultural practices. The following themes reveal how gender serves as a powerful ideological anchor in these contexts, representing not just policy differences but competing visions of American identity and values.



## 7.2 – Reinforcement of ‘traditional roles’

Thematic analysis of #TradWife (TD), #MAGA, and #YourBodyMyChoice (YBMC) hashtags from the web scraping portion demonstrated how gender serves as a proxy for broader political positions. Gender often appeared as a symbolic shorthand for competing visions of morality, power, and national identity. Feminism, masculinity, and LGBTQ+ rights were less about policies and more about cultural alignment, markers of whether one stood for “progress” or “tradition,” “order” or “chaos.” The reinforcement of traditional gender roles online aligns with Social Role Theory, which posits that people expect others to behave according to gender stereotypes, attributing “domestic, subordinate, and communal behaviors to women, while men are considered dominant and agentic” (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This enforcement manifests clearly in the #TradWife phenomenon, which predominantly promotes conservative gender roles through homemaking imagery, domestic labor, and religious framing. As one survey respondent noted: *“I think the biggest one that happened for me was seeing Harrison Butker from the Chiefs say that women need*

*to stay home and cook for their husbands and they are meant to be stay at home wives. I saw this mostly on Twitter and TikTok.”*

Our web scraping of X posts revealed sophisticated linguistic strategies where conservative gender ideas are repackaged in more palatable terminology. It revealed posts portraying feminine submission and domestic labor as aspirational and moralized: *“A marriage with traditional gender roles is based on traditional values that are sadly getting lost in these modern times. Don’t allow peer pressure to stop you from living a traditional lifestyle. There is nothing wrong with good old-fashioned values.”* As one survey respondent noted, *“Instead of saying things like red pill or like sigma male they’ll say things like the divine feminine,”* but that at the end of the day, it still portrays women as “frail” and “weak”, and men as “big” and “strong”.

What makes this reinforcement particularly effective is its reframing through choice-based rhetoric—presenting adherence to traditional gender roles as an empowered personal decision rather than social conformity. An expert on hate and extremism noted that: *“The TradWife content*

*operates differently from other online trends. It's primarily designed for an in-group audience and specifically aims to attract new followers. Frankly, despite being about women's roles, much of this content is actually created for and targeted at male audiences."*

An expert on political narratives further elaborated that "The #tradwife movement strategically presents itself as a thoughtful alternative lifestyle, encouraging us to question our priorities by asking: 'Why aren't we emphasizing environmental sustainability and traditional family values?' This framing disguises its evangelical Christian foundations behind seemingly progressive concerns." This strategic framing attempts to legitimize traditional gender roles by connecting them to seemingly progressive values like environmental sustainability.

Alongside this religious framing exists another representation. This is what Seymour (2024) calls "pornonationalism," where traditional gender hierarchies are eroticized and deployed as tools of exclusion, cultural nostalgia, and imagined moral purity. The X scraping revealed tweets that explicitly sexualized dominance and submission in relationships, often tagged with both pornographic and traditional role hashtags – creating a troubling association between sexual subjugation and conventional gender roles. What is even more troubling is this in the context of what a policy expert observed that: "Young girls are being systematically indoctrinated through online spaces, particularly via communities promoting the 'tradwife' movement," highlighting concerns about the movement's impact on developing gender identities



and self-confidence.

The reinforcement of traditional gender roles also manifests in how female political figures are evaluated. An expert in inequality through platform design highlighted: *“Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez represents another example of gendered criticism in U.S. politics. She’s frequently criticized for her appearance or the sound of her voice rather than her political message. This creates a difficult situation where we must distinguish between legitimate critique of a person in a position of power versus commentary that simply reinforces misogynistic discourses and gender stereotypes.”*

This aligns with the “backlash effect” described by Wilhelm and Joeckel (2019), where violations of gender stereotypes, such as women in positions of political power, produce dissonance leading to negative responses. When women engage in political discourse, they violate two gender stereotypes simultaneously: the

expectation not to engage in politics and the expectation to communicate in a subordinate, communal way. This dual violation constitutes an act of double deviance mentioned before (Wilhelm and Joeckel, 2019).

What emerges is a paradox wherein social media simultaneously offers unprecedented opportunities for gender expression and exploration while reinforcing traditional gender norms through various mechanisms. This paradox reflects broader tensions between progressive and traditional forces in American society, with digital platforms serving as battlegrounds where these competing visions of gender and social organization clash.

The reinforcement of traditional gender roles online thus represents not merely aesthetic preference or nostalgia, but a strategic political project aimed at reshaping social attitudes toward gender, power, and authority at a moment of significant cultural transformation.

## 7.3 – Feminism spectrum

Our analysis of gender-based political discourse on X revealed not just a binary opposition between traditional and progressive views, but a complex spectrum of feminist positions with their own internal contradictions. The “#TradWife,” “#MAGA,” and “#YourBodyMyChoice” hashtags demonstrated how contested understandings of feminism serve as powerful anchors for ideo-

logical alignment and political identity. The survey respondents, though mainly identifying as female, also seemed to externalise gender issues; rather focusing on the way trans-rights have been narrated in the 2024 election. Choice feminism – the perspective that any choice a woman makes is inherently feminist – emerged as a dominant framing in the #tradwife post scraping.

This framework is often deployed as a defense of the trad-wife movement, positioning adherence to traditional gender roles as simply another valid feminist choice. However, this framing contains significant contradictions, particularly in how it selectively applies the principle of choice, being trans-exclusionary (Bassi & Lafleur, 2022). One survey respondent critiqued this trend: *“I think generally feminism has been contorted to mean ‘women should do whatever makes them happy’ when historically that was not the sole goal of the movement. So I think feminist discourse would improve if actual theory is presented with cited sources.”*

A significant tension within the feminist spectrum concerns bioessentialism—the belief that gender is determined solely by biological sex. Our analysis revealed how choice-based rhetoric around feminism is often selectively applied, excluding transgender individuals from this framework of autonomy and self-determination (Bassi & Lafleur, 2022). Religious justifications frequently reinforce this exclusion, as one survey respondent described: *“I saw an Instagram post quoting Trump and the Bible and God’s affirmation of a child’s beauty ‘as they are born to be’ as it pertains to gender affirming care for minors. The post was very right wing and it felt appalling and dismissive and oppressive of other individuals lived experience.”*

This exclusionary framework sharply contrasts with more inclusive feminist perspectives that view transgender rights as

central to feminist concerns. Another survey respondent expressed: *“I have seen many discussions on Facebook and X! I have seen people post about the joy they feel regarding the removal of rights against the trans community, among many other things. It makes me feel sad and angry! Angry that so many people are bothered by the LGBTQ community when all they want is the right to exist like everyone else.”* The expert research analyst highlighted how transgender issues have become a particular focus of ideological contestation: where “transgender people, transgender women specifically” fit in society with binary roles for men and women. Our expert on hate and extremism noted that this contesting of definitions is central to political discourse:

***“Engagement around trying to promote different definitions of gender itself... and pressures to define what each idealized role looks like... reverberates across all kinds of politics, even sometimes in places you wouldn’t expect. But when it comes to political extremism, it’s really a core tenet and premise.”***

A particularly complex dimension of the feminist spectrum is the active participation of women in movements that advance anti-feminist ideologies. Jared observed that “women in ex-

*tremist movements have played pretty like core and crucial roles in those movements, and women that support their ideologies are often, you know, bolstered by them both to be objectified and also to try to legitimize the ideas.”* This phenomenon relates to what Jared describes as “*internalized misogyny, right? Where it’s like women might like internalized misogynistic views, and like certain men internalize misogynistic views and that sort of thing to a point where they’re like, not even conscious of it, and it has long affected, you know, people, workplace, people, socially, people, whatever.*” This presence of women in anti-feminist movements serves a dual purpose: it provides these movements with a veneer of legitimacy (“see, even women support this”) while also reinforcing traditional hierarchies through a performance of female submission and support. This dynamic was particularly evident in #TradWife content, where women creators promoted highly regressive gender roles while framing this as an empowered choice.

Other respondents highlighted the intersecting systems of discrimination facing women in politics: “*Not a specific conversation, but just generally how people spoke about Kamala’s qualifications vs Donald’s (lack of) qualifications. It felt rooted in sexism and racism - idolizing unqualified, old, white men.*” This perspective emphasizes how instead of narrowing the spectrum of who feminism in-

**The feminist spectrum thus represents a key battleground in America’s cultural and political divide—not simply over policy choices but over fundamental conceptions of identity, autonomy, and social organization. Social media platforms like X provide spaces where these competing visions collide and evolve, with algorithmic amplification often favoring the most polarizing and emotionally charged narratives.**

cludes through bioessentialism, a more broad and intersectional approach is needed.

What emerges from our analysis is not a simple binary between feminist and anti-feminist positions, but a complex spectrum of competing feminist visions that serve as proxies for broader ideological alignments. From choice feminism to trans-inclusive feminism, from intersectional critique to traditionally-oriented femininity, these positions function as identity markers that signal one’s broader political orientation.

The feminist spectrum thus represents a key battleground in America’s cultural and political divide—not simply over policy choices but over fundamental conceptions of identity, autonomy, and social organization. Social media platforms like X provide spaces where these competing visions collide and evolve, with algorithmic amplification often favoring the most polarizing and emotionally charged narratives.

## 7.4 – Emotionally charged discourse

Our analysis revealed that gender-based political discourse on X is predominantly emotional rather than analytical, with sentiment often superseding substance in shaping engagement and impact. This emotional dimension isn't merely incidental but appears central to how gender functions as an ideological anchor in online political spaces, with algorithmic amplification favoring content that provokes strong affective responses. A key finding was the strategic deployment of humor as a rhetorical device for advancing polarizing gender narratives while maintaining plausible deniability. An expert in inequality through platform design explained this dynamic: *“Humor, like ridiculing political figures, especially women in politics, is quite common. And when you ask these people, they say, ‘well, this is just a joke, tough enough.’ This kind of content is not illegal per se... it’s really easy to defend what you’ve uttered saying, ‘well, this is just a joke. It’s not serious.’”* This use of humor creates a shield against accountability while

enabling dehumanization. The expert further emphasized that *“harmful content is being mediated through this more covered expression or problematic humor that is not necessarily illegal... we have to take humor seriously, because it’s been used for a long time, even by hate groups, to recruit people and to really dehumanize certain collectives, one of which is women.”*

Content analysis revealed numerous examples of this pattern, from memes mocking feminists to satirical posts reinforcing gender stereotypes. One post in our scraping dataset mockingly stated: *“Goes from can’t cook won’t cook, to cooking for boyfriend #TradWife”*—using humor to ridicule feminist positions while normalizing traditional gender expectations.

Particularly concerning was the prevalence of violent rhetoric in response to gender-based provocations. Following Nick Fuentes’ viral “Your Body, My Choice” video, our analysis captured numerous posts advocating violence as a form of resistance or retribution:



***“See when you say #YourBodyMyChoice & #WomenAreProper-ty, I think you’re going to rape me & stomp my head in. Without consequences. However, there will be consequences boys. Bang. Bang.”***

***“I think #women need to carry a knife, gun or any weapon. The sissy lil #MAGA boys who say #YourBodyMyChoice need a harsh lesson in reality.”***

***“Was talking to a friend and realized punching a misogynist in the face is a perfect way to illustrate to them the concept of #YourBodyMyChoice.”***

As journalist Jia Tolentino (2024) observed, “Right-wing men are compiling these tearful videos into supercuts. People on the left are posting vengeful rape fantasies involving Fuentes. The immediate theme is violence.” This rhetoric demonstrates how gender discourse online quickly escalates to threats and fantasies of harm, both as expressions of ideology and as reactive responses.

The emotional intensity of gender discourse appears deeply connected to perceptions of status and social hierarchy. The academic expert in Political Psychology highlighted how changing gender relations trigger status anxiety: *“White working-class men, they were very close to the bottom of the hierarchy. Oh, but below them, you still had women... And now that we gladly see a change in the gender relations, men lost that. And so they now are closer and closer to the bottom of the hierarchy in absolute. And this creates a lot of resentment.”* This anxiety manifests as anger—which the ex-

pert identifies as *“an important emotion... if you are confronted with an adverse environment, what do you do? You can have depression, sadness and despair, or you can have anger... But if you are angry, you go out in the streets and protest. You are more driven to action.”* This anger becomes particularly powerful when tied to status perception: *“You feel angry when someone is stepping on your toes and is about to steal your status or someone is doing something that you feel like is not consistent with the status relationships between you and them.”*

Our expert on political narratives observed how victimhood narratives drive emotional engagement: *“#YourBodyMyChoice is a more obvious example within the MAGA circle to showcase the counter opposite of movements like #MeToo. When Brett Kavanaugh was up for the Supreme Court, a lot of men heard these parties Kavanaugh was framed to having SA’ed Christine Blasey Ford and thought ‘this could be me’ I could be victimized*

*like Brett Kavanaugh.’ This is one of many examples in mainstream discourse that a lot of white men used to victimize their own position and experience.”*

The expert on hate and extremism elaborated on how gender issues become incorporated into broader narrative frameworks: *“Battles over gender, women particularly, are sort of incorporated into the stories they tell about why it’s so important for people to support their cause... that their opponent is attacking women or destroying the correct idea of women’s place in society and that that is part of some grand plan, or is posing like an existential risk to their in-group... affecting birth rates, or causing chaos in the homes... So it’s a big part of storytelling, especially on the more like existential threat kind of side of things.”*

The academic expert in Political Psychology offered a nuanced perspective on why emotionally charged content spreads: *“Different reasons why people might share things on*

*social media—for example, it’s entertaining. If you read an outrageous post that is politically incorrect, and kind of entertaining... because it takes you out of the comfort zone. So you’re going to share... It does not necessarily mean that you are a very strong supporter of what is there... You just think about the effect that other people are going to have, or even you might even derive pleasure out of the fact that you’re annoying people that don’t agree with that opinion.”*

This entertainment value of political outrage helps explain why extreme content proliferates despite representing views that may be minority positions. As the expert observed, *“language is getting more emotional, syntactically simple, and lexically less”* rich, optimizing for engagement rather than nuance.

Our survey data indicated that engagement with gender-based political content primarily reinforced emotional responses rather than changing beliefs, with 73% of respondents positioning their experiences

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## 7.5 – Offline-online ambivalence

A significant finding was the collapse of boundaries between online and offline spaces. Data scraping, interviews, and surveys showed how it's no longer possible to distinguish between the two realms. This ambivalence reveals how digital interactions can turn into physical threats, reinforcing the idea that, as Tolentino (2024) argues, "posting now creates political reality." Across all stakeholders, there were shared concerns about how online rhetoric translates into real-world harm. One post of #YourBodyMyChoice YBMC reflects this:




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***"This is not a joke, it is a threat and should be treated as such. Report it immediately. Far-right radicalized young men feel emboldened now to threaten young women. Their school, employer, authorities should know to protect the women there."***

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This phenomenon was echoed in the context of YBMC, where media outlets and users expressed alarm over how boys in school repeated the trend's slogans without understanding their meaning (Tolentino, 2024). Survivors of sexual assault also shared how the trend triggered retraumatization, as reflected in this tweet:

***"Any other victims of sexual assault and/or sexual abuse being triggered by #YourBodyMyChoice? Because I certainly am and my assault occurred 50 years ago"***

This online-offline ambivalence also translates into traditional media dynamics. An expert pointed out that traditional media frequently highlight isolated tweets to support broader narratives. While these posts may not be statistically representative, they contribute to the mainstreaming of movements originating online. "We then ask whether social media mirrors the business model of major media conglomerates like CNN, which, as one expert pointed out, have learned to survive by hammering down "one particular message and staying consistent with it."

This simplification extends beyond social media to broader cultural production, and has ties to the previous mention of linguistic methods. As one expert noted, the complexity of movie plots and music

lyrics has been declining. One hypothesis is that people are becoming less willing—or less cognitively able—to engage with complexity:

***“Either people are getting less willing to engage in complexity, or it could be that IQ is dropping, which seems to be the case.”***

With the previous reflection, we highlight how the issues observed in #TradWife, #YourBodyMyChoice, and #MAGA “exist well beyond the confines of the internet,” as one expert phrased it. For example, in the case of #MAGA, the narrative is rooted in nostalgia—a desire to return to a time when gender roles were “defined” and static, and when the U.S. was perceived as an undisputed global superpower. That nostalgia feeds into regressive gender discourses both online and offline.

Along this line, another expert noted growing resentment among young men, driven by perceived social disadvantage and intensified competition with women. In the expert’s words:



***“This collective narcissism that your perceived status is very, very low. And I think that shapes all these regressive social views about the position of women in the world. It’s like a reaction to that. It’s like an attempt by the people at the bottom to recover their position in the hierarchy. It’s very problematic.”***

In addition, this same expert said that he personally knows many teachers that have observed a growing trend of right-leaning attitudes among boys in high schools, which may be linked to later developmental maturity, academic underperformance compared to girls, and difficulty keeping up in a highly competitive educational environment, but certainly from the content they are seeing online. As the internet becomes more deeply embedded into everyday life, the line between online and offline experiences becomes increasingly blurry. Based on expert insights and the various methods we employed, we suggest there is a bilateral correlation: the affordances and logics of social media influence offline spaces in myriad ways, and vice versa.

We will come back to this topic during the interventions part, to stress the importance of promoting physical communal spaces to share experiences and conversation, mentioned both in the surveys and interviews, where dialogue and collective reflection can occur.

## 7.6 – Platform political architectures

From policy and big tech to platform design, hate, humor, and extremism, the experts, in dialogue with our observations and analysis of social media posts, emphasized the need to focus on platforms' responsibility, design, and even politics. In this section, we will examine how social media dynamics, particularly on X, contribute to this issue, addressing aspects such as algorithmic design and the implications of its profit-driven business model following Musk's acquisition. The platform's responsibility and governance are further explored in the interventions section of this white paper.

### Algorithmic design politics

The role of algorithmic design in amplifying gender-based political discourse emerged consistently across the survey and expert interviews. We believe studies of polarized online trends such as #YBMC and #TW cannot be separated from the infrastructures that amplify, reward, and sustain these discussions. Therefore, we turn back our gaze to the platforms' infrastructures. The goal is not just to confirm whether they contribute to polarization, but to think about them as complex systems where algorithms, platform design, business interests, social behavior, and context all interact (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021). In this section, we will touch upon some key aspects discussed in algo-

rithm design, as a means to reflect on our case study. Social media architecture, particularly X's design, was a recurring theme in both expert interviews and survey participants. Survey participants reported a strong sense of algorithmic determinism—the feeling that social media feeds, especially on platforms like X, were pushing them toward more extreme content, even when they were not actively seeking it. Experts emphasized the need to make visible the platform's backstage design, showing, for instance, how recommendation systems nudge influencers toward creating more emotionally provocative content to satisfy algorithmic recommendation preferences. As one expert summarized:

***“If you have algorithms designed to optimize for viral content, most of the viral content will likely be problematic, violent, or polarizing. But algorithms could be optimized differently, too.”***

The engagement metrics of platforms like X reveal how provocative content is incentivized. An expert also noted, X’s structures reward attention-grabbing and cynical content rather than thoughtful discourse. This is evident in the rise in adult content creators exploiting virality by posting provocative material under trending news events. The aspect of adult content was also evident in the social media scraping results, especially on #tradwife and #maga analysis. Algorithm design reflects how X is not a neutral platform: its architecture privileges engagement over reflective or nuanced discourse. Experts also showed this issue: *“Twitter (X) tends to favor short, provocative statements designed to catch the attention of media, politicians, or other users.”* In some cases, even experts reflected on X’s design affordances, such as the creation of bot accounts, which could impact the proliferation of disinformation campaigns and network harassment. Furthermore, on the platform’s design, it was also evident the cross-platform dynamics, where it is easy for users to share content across platforms, which in the expert’s words *“facilitates the amplification of this type of*

*discourse”*.

Thus, algorithmic systems should not be understood as isolated issues and the harms associated with them are not directly caused by their application (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021). The relationship between algorithm design and harm is very dynamic. The typology of algorithmic harm they present to us, for instance, talks about user manipulation to achieve algorithmic incentives, how the design reinforces “pre-existing harm and inequalities in society”, and “the enablement of harmful practices that are opaque and discriminatory” (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith (2021, p. 222). Thus, as we said before, social media can be additive to pre-existing conditions. Finally, we stress an urgent conversation around what kind of algorithms we want to shape our online experience. As an expert in online harm mentioned, some platforms have attempted to return control to users, for example, by offering a chronological feed option (as Twitter once did). However, this is rarely the default setting and requires users to first be informed and then navigate to their settings to change it. This reflects a broader debate where civil society organizations and scholars advocate for platforms to be more responsible in their default algorithmic designs. Yet because platforms are fundamentally structured to monetize user engagement, it is unsurprising that they prioritize controversial and polarizing content that drives traffic and profit.

### **Platform capitalism: what happened after the X acquisition of Elon Musk?**

A recurring theme in the expert interviews was the significant transformation of platform ethics and governance following Elon Musk’s acquisition of X (formerly Twitter). One of the early signals of this shift was the dissolution of key internal teams, such as the Ethical AI unit – described as “a group working to make Twitter’s algorithms more transparent and fair” (Knight, 2022). Experts also emphasized Musk’s intent to restructure the platform’s economic model, notably through the introduction of revenue-sharing

mechanisms. Under this model, content creators on X can monetize their posts—creating a financial incentive structure that prioritizes views, virality, and emotional provocation over factual accuracy or social responsibility. As one expert warned:

***“This initiative encourages creators to be inflammatory and gain as many views and as much engagement as possible.”***

Thus, we ask how the platform’s design logic rewards controversial or polarizing content, further amplifying gender-based and political extremism. Alongside monetization, Musk’s policy decisions have guid-



ed a more laissez-faire approach to content moderation, which one expert described as a “*laid-back attitude*”. Under the guise of promoting free speech, the platform has moved away from proactive regulation, only worrying about tackling illegal content, but not directly addressing its responsibility and transparency seriously. Lately, as the expert shares, X seems to be fostering a “*culture of a permissive environment where targeted harassment, disinformation, and algorithmic amplification of harmful content thrive unchecked. Musk advocates for an idea of free speech where we can say everything we want on this platform. But that also creates a culture—and that’s what we’re seeing now.*”

Further concerns were raised about community moderation tools, such as Community Notes. An expert reflected on how these tools, while well-intentioned, often fail to capture the broader sociopolitical implications of certain content and struggle when confronted with polarized online controversies:



**“Some public community notes were displayed under satirical tweets that were part of larger gender-based campaigns targeting women in politics. But the notes didn’t reflect on that. They just marked them as misleading or altered media—without acknowledging the harm or intent.”**

In summary, Elon Musk’s acquisition of X marks a critical inflection point in the evolution of platform capitalism, where algorithmic design, monetization, and moderation policies intersect with broader societal harms. The shift from ethical oversight to virality-based incentives reinforces a platform environment increasingly hostile to vulnerable communities — especially women and marginalized political actors. Understanding this transformation requires attention not only to the technological architectures but also to the discursive, financial, and cultural shifts surrounding them.



# 8 – Interventions

Informed by insights gathered throughout the research process, we also initiated a collaborative feedback process with the survey participants and interview experts. A shared digital board via Padlet was developed to surface and refine the identified intervention ideas. This participatory space allowed our research stakeholders to engage with the proposed interventions using two mechanisms: 1) ranking top three preferences and 2) contributing open-ended commentaries. The six interventions explored are outlined here:

## 1 - Friction by design

This intervention responds to the emotional aspect of online discourse as explained by the participants. It aims to reduce the proliferation of technology-based gender-based violence in politics and break impulsive posting loops that fuel polarization. In short, it intends to add pop-up friction mechanisms on platforms like X to slow down impulsive posting, especially around gender and politics. Users would receive friction-based prompts such as “are you sure you want to post this?” when content is flagged by a pre-trained model as potentially harmful. These nudges could be coupled with opportunities for labels (e.g., opinion, satire) to promote more conscious self-regulation and reduce contributions to polarization.

## 2 - Human moderators with gender sensitivity training

Throughout the interviews and surveys, there was a recurring desire to reinstating human moderation as a critical intervention point - especially for addressing nuanced forms of harmful content such as humor (e.g. sarcasm, memes, coded language). This proposal emphasizes the need for human intervention and clearer communication around content mitigation decisions -- restoring a sense of accountability and trust.

## 3 - Introducing 'bridging algorithms'

Experts mentioned the problem and the need to rethink algorithmic power in democracy and political settings. Based on expert input and on polis, as part of The Computational Democracy Project, "a real-time system for gathering, analyzing and understanding what large groups of people think in their own words, enabled by advanced statistics and machine learning" (2025). This intervention promotes conversations by 'bridging' dividing perspectives, to shift engagement incentives from outrage to understanding. It consists of redesigning platform algorithms to prioritize empathy and common ground instead of outrage. Algorithms would highlight posts and users that bridge divides, especially in political and gender discussions, promoting understanding rather than polarization.

## 4 - Offline connection spaces

A common topic in the survey results was the need to inform the public through community engagement in offline spaces. This intervention aims to reduce the dehumanization that thrives online and helps people reconnect face-to-face. Invest in real-life hubs, cafés, and forums where people from different backgrounds can talk safely about gender, politics, and rights. Make sure these spaces are trauma-informed and inclusive.

## 5 - Media literacy campaigns

From the desk research, we saw how a couple of civil society organizations built campaigns fostering awareness among the public to rethink algorithm power in political contexts, along the lines also of informing the public. This intervention, then, is thought to equip users (especially young people) to resist manipulation and polarization. Launch relatable campaigns, like TikTok challenges or memes, to teach people (especially youth) how to spot gender stereotypes, fact-check viral content, and recognize emotional manipulation in political messaging. It was based on a campaign by the United Nations Population Fund called “The Virtual is Real”, which showed 16 testimonies of women survivors of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (2022).

## 6 - Stronger policies

Another common topic mentioned during the interviews was the role and impact of policies. Then, we proposed an idea to improve government-led policies to combat gender-based harassment, focused on the digital space, aiming to create a safer environment for all users, enforce legal standards, and promote awareness of gender-based discrimination in political settings. Therefore, this idea seeks to strengthen government policies to combat online gender-based violence and online harm – especially in political spaces and during election periods—as it is essential for building inclusive, democratic digital environments where everyone can participate safely and freely.

Rather than positioning these as definitive solutions, we offer them as evolving frameworks for imagining more accountable, inclusive and sustainable future interventions for the social media ecosystem. In the collaborative feedback process, top three interventions emerged: 1) “Bridging algorithms” with 63% choosing it as their first choice 2) Offline connection spaces with 43% and 3) Friction by design with 33%.

“Bridging algorithms” aim to reconfigure digital engagement incentives by algorithmically amplifying voices and content that foster empathy and cross-perspective understanding, rather than outrage. One participation noted:

***“I think our politics have gotten too polarized. I notice the same tendency in myself: I listen to certain channels or podcasts because I know what I am listening to will be agreeable to me. I am likely missing out on important perspectives (that I may disagree with) because I don’t quite care to listen to the other side. I think having algorithms that promote commonality vs divisiveness could be a step in the right direction.”***

Algo-democracy, a concept that captures the paradox of a democracy that is increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems (Tsiavos, 2019), is discussed with the participants in this process. While online spaces were once seen as potential vehicles for open participation and democracy, they are now often seen as mechanisms that reinforce echo chambers, polarization and surveillance capitalism. This realization has fragmented public discourse and diminished democratic practice. Relatedly, we share with the participants Pol.is, a real-life example of how the concept of algo-democracy captures the leveraging algorithms not to polarize or monetize attention but to facilitate inclusive and collaborative public conversations. Pol.is uses data visualization and machine learning to identify consensus and divergence within large-scale conversations. Participants can submit short statements and vote on others' contributions but are unable to directly reply via comments. This approach counters the echo chamber effect by elevating larger consensus across a diverse spectrum of perspectives. "Offline connection spaces" addresses the participants' fatigue with digital discourse, proposing in-person forums for dialogue and community-building. One participant highlights this fundamental infrastructure for building trust and community across the political spectrum:

***"I think it's really important to fix the aspect of trust that is missing in these information channels- this would be a key part of community building. It's something different from just providing more information, it deals with the root cause of why people don't even want to hear views that oppose their own. Community spaces will enhance conversations, humanize issues, and work on rebuilding trust."***

Lastly, "Friction by design" introduces intentional notifications - such as reflective prompts and content labeling - to disrupt impulsive posting and mitigate harmful or inflammatory speech. Importantly, it does not rely on content removal or censorship. Instead, it cultivates a digital culture of intentionality, emphasizing self-regulation over platform-imposed restrictions. The design is context-sensitive, recognizing that marginalized users may experience content moderation as a restriction of free speech. Thus, friction prompts can be personalized or adjusted for sensitivity. All together, these interventions reflect a multifaceted approach to

cultivating more reflective, relational, and inclusive public discourse in our online spaces.

Additionally, we explored a scenario building exercise based on the top intervention choice amongst our stakeholders: 2030 - Rebuilding digital dialogue through bridging algorithms

The new feature focused on the concepts discussed in “bridging algorithms” is coined “Common Ground.” This feature is embedded into the comment and discussion threads of public posts that are flagged by the system as trending as a polarized topic. When users engage with these posts, the platform’s algorithm does not show the most viral or extreme comments. Instead, it uses clustering techniques inspired by Pol.is to identify patterns of agreement and disagreement across the spectrum.

The algorithm also de-emphasizes comments that are fundamentally polarizing – those that tend to be supported within one cluster and provoke negative reactions in others – without censoring them. Instead, these posts are contextualized and the platform highlights the polarization in these posts by tagging them as “high disagreement - shared mostly within one group.” To further the “bridging” effect, the platform offers side conversations facilitated by trained human moderators where users from various clusters are invited to co-create statements or explore potentially debatable topics in a more collaborative and focused setting.



An abstract background image featuring a vertical crack running down the center. The surface is covered in a dense pattern of small, colorful speckles in shades of red, yellow, cyan, and magenta, set against a greyish-blue base. The overall texture is grainy and layered.

**Gender serves as a powerful ideological anchor around which political identities form, with platform design, emotional incentives, and societal fragmentation working together to influence political discourse. Any effort to mitigate polarization must therefore address not only the freedom of speech but also the architectures of visibility, trust, and emotional safety that structure our digital public sphere.**

# 9 – Conclusion

This transdisciplinary research has demonstrated how X (formerly Twitter) functioned as a critical arena for gender-based political discourse during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. Through our multi-method approach—combining desk research, qualitative surveys with 23 U.S. voters, thematic analysis of over 400 X posts across three hashtags (#MAGA, #TradWife, #YourBodyMyChoice), and seven expert interviews—we established that while social media’s relationship to polarization is not straightforwardly causal, X can serve as an accelerant to existing societal tensions.

Our findings revealed five interconnected themes that characterize gender-based political discourse on X. First, as demonstrated in our hashtag analysis and expert interviews, traditional gender roles were actively reinforced through sophisticated rhetorical strategies, including the repackaging of conservative gender ideas through choice-based rhetoric and religious framing. Second,

we identified a complex spectrum of feminist positions beyond simple binary oppositions, with choice feminism often selectively deployed to exclude transgender individuals while celebrating “traditional” women’s choices. Third, our analysis confirmed the predominantly emotional nature of gender-based political discourse, with humor and violent rhetoric functioning as powerful tools for advancing polarizing narratives while maintaining plausible deniability. The fourth theme—offline-online ambivalence—emerged consistently across all data sources, highlighting how the collapse of boundaries between digital and physical spaces has intensified the real-world consequences of online engagement. Finally, our examination of platform political architectures revealed how X’s algorithmic design and post-Musk governance changes have created an environment that rewards inflammatory content and weakens protections against harassment. The stakeholder collabora-

tion phase of our research yielded important insights into potential interventions, with “bridging algorithms,” “offline connection spaces,” and “friction by design” emerging as the most promising approaches based on participant feedback. These interventions move beyond simplistic blame narratives to address the structural conditions that enable polarization. Our transdisciplinary approach has demonstrated that X functions not merely as a site of political expression but as an infrastructure that shapes feeling, identity, and conflict. Gender serves as a powerful ideological anchor around which political identities form, with platform design, emotional incentives, and societal fragmentation working together to influence political discourse. Any effort to mitigate polarization must therefore address not only the freedom of speech but also the architectures of visibility, trust, and emotional safety that structure our digital public sphere.

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