

Care or control in times of crisis? Gendered identity narratives and democratic resilience in digital public sphere

Abstract

Crises intensify struggles over collective identity, as political actors compete to define who “we” are under uncertainty, within digital environments where algorithms shape which narratives gain visibility. While existing research shows how exclusionary identity narratives align with platform logics and contribute to democratic backsliding, less is known about how inclusive narratives that might sustain democratic resilience perform in the same settings. This article argues that democratic resilience depends on whether narratives that transform uncertainty into solidarity grounded in shared vulnerability can gain traction in the digital public sphere. Drawing on relational sociology, feminist political theory, and digital communication, it distinguishes between exclusionary identity control narratives and inclusive identity care narratives. To examine their relative performance, the study analyses 13,866 Facebook posts from Spain and Italy (2019–2021), using the COVID-19 pandemic as a quasi-natural experiment and scaling qualitative coding of identity narratives through a large language model to compare engagement patterns. The findings show that control narratives have an inherent engagement advantage across crisis periods and national contexts. However, care narratives significantly exceed their own baseline engagement during the crisis, indicating increased audience receptivity to messages of care under conditions of social vulnerability. These results shift analytical attention what erodes democracy to the narrative construction that may sustain it, highlighting the contingent potential of inclusive identity politics in digital public spheres.

Keywords: identity narratives, democratic resilience, digital public sphere, social media, natural language processing

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1. Introduction

Crises test the narratives of collective identity through which democratic communities make sense of uncertainty and mobilise response. When pandemics, economic shocks, or terrorist attacks undermine established expectations about social stability, societies confront profound uncertainty about the future (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Primig, 2025). In these moments, political actors compete to advance narratives that restore collective coherence by defining who

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“we” are, often along lines of race, nation, class, and gender (Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Wimmer, 2002; Breakwell & Jaspal, 2020; Sapiro, 2022).

In contemporary democracies, these struggles increasingly unfold within digital platforms, which have become central arenas for identity-based political contestation (Papacharissi, 2015). Within these environments, narratives circulate on a structurally uneven terrain shaped by platform architectures. Algorithmically optimised to maximise engagement through emotional arousal and cognitive simplicity, digital platforms shape which political stories gain public visibility and which remain marginal (Brady et al., 2017; Tufekci, 2018). Extensive empirical research has examined the affinity between exclusionary identity narratives and digital media affordances, showing how such alignment contributes to democratic backsliding (Ganesh & Froio, 2020; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023). Meanwhile, research on feminist digital politics has documented how inclusive identity movements struggle for visibility on the same platforms (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Edwards, Philip & Gerard, 2020; Divon, Are & Briggs, 2025).

While this body of work has produced a rich account of what erodes democratic politics, these literatures have developed largely in parallel with distinct agendas and methods (Freelon, Marwick & Kreiss, 2020), and far less attention has been paid to what sustains democracies in this media environment. Recent scholarship has called for digital political communication research to move beyond diagnosing threats toward understanding what preserves democracy (Weinhardt et al., 2024), recognising that democratic resilience is as much about the narratives a society can sustain as the institutions that protect it (Angus, 2024). Yet the narratives through which democratic resilience is built online remain empirically underexamined, and few studies compare their performance against exclusionary narratives within the same platform environment.

This article addresses this gap by asking: do digital platforms systematically privilege exclusionary identity narratives over inclusive ones during periods of crisis? The paper argues that democratic resilience depends on whether narratives that transform uncertainty into collective response can gain traction in the digital public sphere. Drawing on relational sociology, feminist political theory and digital media literatures, the study conceptualises two competing narrative strategies. Identity control narratives tighten group boundaries through exclusion, channelling anger, fear, and nostalgia for a lost social order (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023), while identity care narratives surface shared vulnerability, building solidarity across intersecting identities through hope and empathy (Tronto, 1993, 2013; Butler, 2015; Kelleher, Murphy & Su, 2022; Holdo, 2025). In reframing feminist mobilisation from “soft politics” to a strategic politics of democratic resilience (Tronto, 2013; Butler, 2015; Kelleher et al., 2022), the study contributes to an emerging research agenda on the digital conditions under which inclusive identity narratives can sustain democracies in an era of compounding crises.

To examine whether platforms structurally advantage one over the other, the study analyses 13,866 Facebook posts from Spain and Italy between 2019 and 2021, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a quasi-natural experiment. The pandemic intensified conditions favouring both types of narratives. It exacerbated care burdens through lockdowns, domestic violence, and labour market shocks for women, while generating the fear and uncertainty that exclusionary narratives exploit (Power, 2020; Smith et al., 2021; Martinsson & Ericson, 2023). Spain and Italy were both severely affected, but differ in the strength of their feminist institutional infrastructure (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2012), allowing the study to disentangle platform effects from national context. If control narratives outperform care narratives even when a crisis heightens the salience of care and even where feminist values are embedded offline, platform architecture plays an independent role in determining which identity narratives can sustain public attention.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework connecting identity narratives and digital platform logics. Section 3 describes the analytical strategy of combining human annotation with large language model classification to scale the analysis of identity narratives. Section 4 presents the results, and Section 5 discusses their implications. Section 6 concludes with contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Uncertainty, identity, and gendered political narratives in the digital public sphere

2.1 Narrative identity during crises

Relational sociology and political theory treat identities as ongoing narrative accomplishments rather than fixed categories such as “woman,” “immigrant,” or “nation”. In this view, an identity takes shape within historically embedded social networks, as actors narrate connections between protagonists (“who”), events (“what happened”), and moral evaluations (“why it matters”) (Calhoun, 1994; Somers, 1994; Emirbayer, 1997; Tilly, 2002; White, 2008).

Narratives are broadly defined as “representations of connected events and characters, bounded in space and time, and containing implicit or explicit messages about the topic being addressed” (Kreuter et al., 2007, p. 222). Somers’s (1994) concept of narrative identity proposes that to be a social actor, i.e., an individual’s or collective’s identity, is to be located and positioned in these narratives or stories. Because stories have beginnings, middles, and futures, they enable individuals and collectives to make sense of continuity and change in their social world. As White observes (2008: 222), “narrative acts in development of an [identity] regime much as DNA does in bodily development.”

During crises, collective uncertainties about group status and shared knowledge disrupt existing narratives of who “we” are, generating a need for the psychological

and collective understanding that “we are still ourselves” (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018; Hogg & Gaffney, 2023; Primig, 2025). Narratives address this need by imposing order on chaos and making sense of causality and agency (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). Crises therefore create strategic openings for political actors who deliberately craft and circulate stories that position individuals, groups, and events into competing frameworks of belonging (Gkeredakis et al., 2021; Kern, 2021).

One prevalent response to crisis-induced uncertainty is what this study conceptualises as identity control, a narrative strategy that seeks to assert control over power through exclusionary boundary-making. These narratives demarcate rigid categories of “us” and “them,” calling for the restoration of traditional gender roles and social hierarchies based on race and citizenship (Mudde, 2007; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Koenig, 2024). Radical-right political actors have been particularly effective at deploying these narratives during crises, mobilising those who perceive a loss of status amid rapid social change (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023).

Central to identity control narrative is the positioning of women as both biological reproducers and symbolic signifiers of national identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Farris, 2017). Online communities such as the “manosphere” illustrate this, promoting exclusionary nationalism through narratives that call for the protection of women from external enemies while framing feminists as internal traitors (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Gerrand et al., 2025). Through emotionally arousing content, these communities channel alienation and anxiety into collective mobilisation aimed at reasserting social control (Sugiura, 2021; Horta Ribeiro et al., 2021; Lindsay, 2022).

Control narratives are especially sustained by “restorative” nostalgia, an emotional longing to rebuild an idealised past (Boym, 2001). This nostalgia provides a cognitively simple explanation of uncertainty by morally casting the in-group as victims or defenders of a righteous order and outsiders as agents of its corruption who “broke” the social order (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2018).

In contrast, identity care narrative responds to uncertainty by surfacing shared vulnerability and building solidarity across intersecting identities through a discourse of care. Rather than seeking to restore control over a destabilised social order, these narratives frame dependency and mutual exposure as the foundation for a collective identity, leveraging the crisis as an opportunity to reckon with structural inequalities (Lugones, 2003; Carastathis, 2013; Butler, 2015; Holdo, 2025). Often advanced by feminist and decolonial movements, identity care challenges the tendency of defining an individual or society as self-sufficient and in control, arguing that the attempt to master uncertainty is a masculinist and colonial ideal (Carastathis, 2013).

Feminist mobilisations during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated how care narratives surfaced disproportionate burdens of domestic labour, frontline exposure, job losses, and gender-based violence, framing these as intersectional injustices demand-

ing collective response (Andrade, Hoyle & Burnell, 2023). This justice orientation called for resourcing resilience through more attuned services and adequate policy responses, morally positioning in-groups as agents of transformation rather than victims requiring protection (Camponeschi, 2022).

Where identity control is sustained by “restorative” nostalgia, identity care draws on “reflective” nostalgia (Boym, 2001), invoking the past not to restore it but to draw emotional resources for present solidarity. Historical memory of self-help activism in the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, mobilises hope and empathy by positioning caring for others as a core characteristic of a feminist collective identity (Quéré, 2021). Evoking past practices becomes a matter of ‘imaginative identification with the details of others’ lives, rather than a recognition of something antecedently shared’ (Rorty, 1989, p. 190).

Narratives of identity care therefore provide democratic resilience through three interconnected mechanisms. First, they seek to transform vulnerability from individual weakness requiring in-group protection into shared precarity that necessitates collective response. Second, rather than consolidating identity through exclusion, they build coalitions across groups that recognise internal heterogeneity and intersecting forms of inequalities. Third, instead of promising restoration of a past order, they promote care infrastructures that enable more robust collective responses to systemic crises.

It is important to note that identity control and identity care represent ideal narrative strategies and are not exclusive properties of any actor. A radical-right politician may appropriate care vocabulary, framing anti-immigration policy as “protection of our women”. Yet, the narrative still draws boundaries between a worthy in-group and an externalised enemy, and orients toward restoring a lost social order. Conversely, feminist actors may deploy control vocabulary when attacking perpetrators of violence or constructing sharp boundaries against “patriarchy,” and yet call for mutual recognition of women across the world. Control and care identity narratives are thus distinguished by their relational logic—specifically how each constructs boundaries of belonging, orients toward the past, and assigns moral responsibility.

2.2 Digital platforms and the structural asymmetry between identity narratives

The emotional flow of a narrative, i.e., the pattern and progression of emotional states it produces, is a key determinant of the narrative’s persuasive influence (Nabi & Green, 2015). Moral emotions have a particularly strong mobilising affect, signalling clarity and urgency by shifting the blame on “others” (Brady et al., 2017; Van Bavel et al., 2024). Control-based narratives of identity often begin with high-arousal negative emotions, containing anger at feminism, fear of national decline, and contempt of rising social groups such as immigrants, which immediately grab attention and trigger engagement (Brady et al., 2017; Salmela &

von Scheve, 2017). By contrast, care-based identity narratives emphasise long-term transformations, often through more reflective, positive emotions, which require time to unfold (Wajcman, 2007).

On algorithmically governed digital platforms, where attention spans are short and content is judged in seconds, only the beginning of the emotional arc matters most, creating a structural bias. In this environment, argues Ahmed (2004), negative emotions like fear, anger, and disgust “stick”, attaching to stereotypical identity narratives and making them politically salient. In comparison with positive emotions, negative emotions spread more widely online, conflating the relative performance of these narratives compared to their proportional content production (Schöne et al, 2023).

Radical-right actors have proven adept at exploiting this alignment between their narratives and platform affordances (van Dijck, 2013; Brady et al., 2017; Tufekci, 2018; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2023). Recent research has highlighted the spread of such narratives among men and boys, who are falling through the significant cracks of neoliberal capitalism, such as unemployment, social stigma and alienation (Lacalle et al., 2023). This creates what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls a “mediated economy of visibility” in which emotionally fast content dominates and what Noble (2018) terms “algorithmic oppression” of complex, counter-hegemonic narratives.

This asymmetry is compounded by the conditions feminist actors face online. Feminists, pro-feminist journalists, and women frontline workers encounter escalating harassment, abuse, and verbal violence, suppressing their voices and exposing them to intersectional risks (Henry & Powell, 2015; Ging & Siapera, 2019). In addition, platform content moderation policies disproportionately demote content related to reproductive health, transgender or LGBTQ rights, and sexuality (Divon et al., 2025).

However, these structural disadvantages may be moderated by offline institutional contexts. Countries with stronger gender equality infrastructures, such as dense networks of state equality bodies, civil society organisations, and institutionalised gender equality norms, may provide legitimacy that enhances the performance of care narratives online, particularly when care burdens become acutely visible. In such contexts, feminist actors can draw on symbolic and organisational capital to counterbalance the emotional-algorithmic bias toward control-oriented narrative identity (Htun & Weldon, 2010; Pain, 2020).

2.3 Hypotheses

This integrated theoretical framework thus yields hypotheses at four levels. At the actor level, radical-right actors will be more likely to construct identity control narratives (H1a) and generate higher negative emotional engagement (H1b), while

feminist actors will be more likely to adopt identity care narratives (H2a) and generate higher positive emotional engagement (H2b).

At the crisis level, the onset of crisis will increase radical-right actors' reliance on control narratives relative to the pre-crisis period (H3a), and these narratives will outperform their other content in engagement (H3b). Feminist actors will similarly increase their use of care narratives during the crisis (H4a), but these narratives will perform the same or worse in engagement relative to their other content (H4b).

At the platform level, the engagement gap between identity control narratives and identity care narratives will widen during the crisis period relative to the pre-crisis baseline, regardless of which actors deploy them (H5).

Finally, at the country level, the engagement gap between control and care identity narratives will be narrower in national contexts with stronger feminist infrastructure than in contexts with weaker feminist infrastructure, particularly during crisis periods when gendered care burdens are acutely visible (H6).

3. Research design

3.1 Quasi natural experiment and comparative design

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a crisis that simultaneously disrupted healthcare systems, economic structures, and care infrastructures while intensifying ideological boundary-making (Smith et al., 2021). On one hand, feminist movements and some female world leaders attempted to advance care narratives that challenged the traditional divide between the (feminine) private sphere of the home and the (masculine) public sphere of politics, performing protective femininity by valuing traits of affection and empathy, in stark contrast with “strong-man” approaches (Johnson & Williams, 2020). Radical-right actors, meanwhile, pivoted public anxiety from health to issues of gender equality and threat from minorities, instrumentalising protests around women's day as super-spreader events and portraying feminism itself as a societal disease, transforming the crisis into a boundary-making struggle between “true” citizens and the “others” (Osuna & Rama, 2021; Labio-Bernal & Manzano-Zambruno, 2023; Majumdar & Tewatia, 2024; Levi, 2025).

Thus, the pandemic was endogenous to gendered structures of care, exposing and intensifying pre-existing inequalities (Power, 2020). However, the timing and intensity of the pandemic were uncorrelated with pre-existing political mobilisation around gender equality. Early waves in Italy were shaped by contingencies such as population density, first-case timing, and initial response gaps, while Spain followed a broadly comparable trajectory (Mathieu et al., 2020). Both countries faced severe impacts, which created a quasi-experimental window. They were exposed to similar shocks, yet differed in their pre-existing institutional and cultural support for gender equality.

This contrast between Spain and Italy motivates the “most similar” comparative design. First, both belong to the Southern European gender regime characterised by familialist welfare states, strong Catholic influence on gender policy, and historically late but accelerating feminist mobilisation (Alonso, Ciccio & Lombardo, 2023). Second, both countries experienced intense anti-gender mobilisation in the 2010s, with radical-right actors running campaigns that explicitly contained anti-gender frames (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Ramis-Moyano, Pasadas-del-Amo & Font, 2023). Third, Facebook penetration is comparable with 55 % of Spanish adults and 61 % of Italian adults use the platform monthly (Meta Transparency Report, 2024), making it a relevant arena for political discourse in both contexts.

However, Spain and Italy exhibit different gender policy frameworks and feminist organisational strengths. Spain ranks among the top performers in the EU Gender Equality Index (2021 score: 73.7/100, 6th place), whereas Italy scores lower and occupies a mid-range position (2021 score: 63.8/100, 14th place) (EIGE, 2021). Spain features a progressively consolidated gender machinery, including a General Secretariat for Equality Policies, a dedicated Ministry of Equality and a robust network of feminist organisations, providing strong institutional support. Italy’s gender institutions, like the Ministry for Rights and Equal Opportunities (1996), are weaker and more vulnerable to government shifts (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2012).

This design allows testing of whether digital engagement with identity narratives is shaped primarily by offline contexts or by platform effects. If national context dominates, care narratives should achieve higher engagement digitally in Spain during crisis, benefiting from stronger institutional support and cultural resonance. If platform algorithm dynamics dominate, engagement patterns should be similar across countries during crisis, with exclusionary narratives maintaining a structural advantage regardless of offline context.

3.2 Data

The analysis draws on publicly available Facebook posts from Spain and Italy, collected using keywords (Appendix A1) related to debates on gender equality from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2021. Data is collected via CrowdTangle API, a now-defunct data collection tool for researchers, which captures the content, its metadata such as timestamp of posting, and the reactions it receives (“Love”, “Wow”, “Haha”, “Sad”, “Angry”, “Care”).

A total of 4,10,321 posts are collected over the three-year span. These are filtered in three stages. First by geolocation, assigning posts to Spain or Italy based on account administrative location to exclude Latin American and diaspora accounts; second by follower threshold, retaining only accounts with 100,000 or more followers after testing multiple thresholds, as these accounts generate disproportionate engagement despite representing only one-third of total posts (see Appendix A2 & A3 for sensitivity tests justifying this threshold); and third by topical relevance, using a

lexicon-based function that scans for co-occurrence of gender-related keywords (e.g., woman, feminism, gender violence, abortion) and politics-related keywords (e.g., political party names, laws, government, policy names) (Appendix A4). From these posts, a stratified 10 percent random sample is drawn from each of three time periods (pre, during, and post pandemic) for each country. A final sample of 5,410 Spanish posts (pre crisis = 2,375 posts, during crisis = 1,452 posts, post crisis = 1,584 posts) and 8,456 Italian posts (pre crisis = 2,505 posts; during crisis = 3,038 posts; post crisis = 2,913 posts) is retained for analysis.

3.3 Operationalisation of narrative identity and classification with LLMs

Identifying the narrative identity of an online post presents distinct methodological challenges, compared to coding its discrete discursive features such as keywords, topics, issue position, emotions, or actors. Narratives of identity are not reducible to lexical markers as they emerge from the relational-temporal-moral organisation of actors, events, and meanings, linked across time through specific causal logic. Hence, an analysis of discursive features alone would be an unreliable indicator of the narrative. For example, a control identity narrative may deploy care motifs (e.g., “protection of vulnerable children,” portraying concern for children but still emphasising threat from corrupting forces of “gender ideology” and restoration of natural family order), just as a care identity narrative can invoke control like claims when confronting policy neglect or gender violence (e.g., “judges protect abusers,” expressing outrage against institutional accountability but emphasising shared vulnerability of women and societal change).

The study thus develops a human annotated dataset (n=100 posts per country) using a codebook that operationalises narrative identity through five constitutive dimensions (Somers, 1994): relationality (how actors position themselves and others within networks of belonging and exclusion), causal plot (the temporal logic linking past, present, and projected future), selective appropriation (which events, actors, and emotions are foregrounded), moral evaluations (justification of inherent “right” or “wrong”, moving discourse from policy to ethical grounds) and temporality (whether the narrative orients toward restoration or transformation). The full codebook (Appendix A5) provides operational definitions and examples from the dataset that illustrate the classification.

Following this codebook, sample posts are assessed for whether they employ a narrative of identity control or identity care. Specifically, posts are coded as identity control narratives if they appropriate crisis as a temporal rupture from the power order in society, position an endangered in-group against enemies, orient temporally toward recovering a lost hierarchical society, and morally frame the group as victims or defenders of tradition. Posts are coded as identity care narratives if they appropriate crisis as exposure of structural inequalities, position actors as interconnected and vulnerable, orient toward reconfiguring power relations and

changing the social order, and morally frame the group as agents of transformation. Posts lacking this relational-temporal-moral structure are coded as “none.”

Next, the study uses Large Language Models (LLMs) to scale classification of narrative identity from the human-annotated sample (200 posts) to the full dataset (13,866 posts). LLMs are computational tools trained on massive text corpora whose billions of language parameters are adjusted to predict contextually appropriate language, achieving high proficiency in understanding and producing human-like text (Argyle et al., 2023; Chae & Davidson, 2025). These computational tools have recently and rapidly gained traction, a phenomenon that scholars describe as super-charging social sciences research, especially in language processing of textual data, through their accuracy-enhancing and time-saving capabilities (Bail, 2024; Chen et al., 2025).

Model selection proceeded through comparative testing of available free, open-source LLMs suitable for multilingual annotation of posts in Spanish and Italian. I initially evaluated models with large parameters, Qwen 8B and Llama-2 13B, but both proved computationally prohibitive on available hardware, with processing time exceeding practical limits for the full corpus. Smaller models, Llama-2-7B-Chat and Qwen3-4B, struggled at distinguishing narrative logic from surface vocabulary, over-relying on lexical cues, classifying posts mentioning “family” or “protection” as control narratives regardless of relational structure and producing inconsistent and made up output schemas, indicating unstable comprehension of the coding task. Mistral 7B (Jiang et al., 2023) achieved strong contextual reasoning at 7 billion parameters, offering the best balance of speed and performance. On the 200-post human-coded sample, Mistral achieved highest agreement with the human coder (99.2 % on narrative identity classification), substantially outperforming Qwen3 4B (88.1 %) and Llama-2-7B-Chat (76.4 %).

The Mistral model is deployed locally via Ollama (2025), an open-source tool for running LLMs offline, ensuring full data control without reliance on external providers. The model is trained in Python using few-shot prompt engineering, where it learns to label data according to the codebook from examples of human-coded inputs and outputs (Chen et al., 2025). The prompt is iteratively refined on small training sets until satisfactory performance is achieved. Full classification took five days on an Apple M1 chip (8GB RAM).

Classification proceeded in two stages: first classifying who is speaking, i.e., the actor’s political orientation toward gender, and then classifying what narrative strategy each post employs. Importantly, these two classifications operate independently and actor type does not determine narrative coding. In the first stage, each unique Facebook account (N=6,927) is classified by its overarching orientation toward gender politics. The distinction between “feminist” and “anti-gender” actors follows established operationalisations in the literature on gender politics and anti-gender mobilisation. Feminist actors are defined as those advocating for gender equality

and challenging patriarchal structures, encompassing diverse organisations from institutional feminist organisations to grassroots collectives (Htun & Weldon, 2010; Pain, 2020). Anti-gender actors are operationalised as those who oppose feminism, gender equality policies, or LGBTQ+ rights, encompassing actors who explicitly reinterpret gender equality as “gender ideology”, a perceived ideological indoctrination of youth and women, as well as traditional conservative or religious actors opposing feminism (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Farris, 2017; Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

The LLM is prompted to analyse a random sample of 10 posts from each unique account alongside the page’s metadata (name, description, category) to determine primary purpose (Appendix A6). The model labels each actor as a feminist actor (Spain: N=1,377, 34 %; Italy: N=975, 33 %) or anti-gender actor (Spain: N=275, 7 %; Italy: N=415, 14 %). Any page that does not clearly and primarily fit into one of the two groups above is coded as other (Spain: N=2,349, 58 %; Italy: n=1,536, 52 %) (Appendix A7). Feminist actors substantially outnumber anti-gender actors across both countries, reflecting the broader organisational coalition that feminist actors draw on compared to the narrower ideological formation of anti-gender actors concentrated around radical-right parties, certain media outlets, and influencers. Crucially, the theoretical framework does not predict that anti-gender actors will be more numerous, but that their control narratives of identity will achieve greater engagement due to alignment with platform architectures.

In the second stage, the narrative strategy at the post level is classified by the LLM against the codebook categories, with the human-coded 200-post sample serving as few-shot training examples (Appendix A8 and A9). This stage operated independently of actor classification, so that the model assessed each post’s relational-temporal-moral narrative structure without reference to the posting account’s categorisation. Following automatic classification, a human audit of randomly sampled posts confirmed approximately 99.9 % accuracy, with rare errors limited to over-coding of topics or misinterpretation of satirical posts (such as those containing irony).

3.4 Analytical strategy

The analysis employs a series of regression models to test each hypothesis. All models include country (Spain vs. Italy), number of followers (logged) and post length as a control variables, unless otherwise specified.

To capture the pandemic’s effects on narrative strategies and engagement, the study divides the observation window into three periods: pre-crisis (January 2019 to February 2020), during crisis (March 2020 to February 2021), and post-crisis (March 2021 to December 2021). The onset date reflects the World Health Organisation’s declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and the near-simultaneous imposition of national lockdowns in both Spain and Italy in

early March 2020. The post-crisis period begins in March 2021, coinciding with the acceleration of vaccination campaigns in both countries, which marked a shift from acute crisis management to recovery.

The actor-level expectations about narrative strategies (H1a, H2a) are tested through a multinomial logistic regression where the dependent variable is narrative type (control, care, none) and the independent variable is actor type (anti-gender, feminist, other).

The emotional engagement expectations (H1b, H2b) are assessed with two linear mixed-effects models accounting for posts nested within actors. The dependent variables are the Negative Emotion Ratio ($NER = [Angry + Sad] / \text{Total Reactions}$) and Positive Emotion Ratio ($PER = [Love + Care] / \text{Total Reactions}$), with narrative type as the independent variable.

Whether each actor group shifts toward its respective narrative strategy during the crisis (H3a, H4a) is estimated via two logistic regression models with standard errors clustered by page. The first predicts identity control narratives (1 = control, 0 = other posts), with feminist actors as the reference category; the second predicts identity care narratives (1 = care, 0 = other posts), with anti-gender actors as the reference category. In both models, the independent variables are actor type, a binary crisis indicator (1 = during crisis, 0 = otherwise), and their interaction.

Engagement efficacy of the narrative shifts (H3b, H4b) is captured through linear mixed-effects models for each actor type. The dependent variable is the overperformance score, which compares a post's engagement (likes, shares, comments) against the average of the previous 100 posts from the same page, expressed as a multiplier (e.g., 3x means three times the page average). The independent variable is the interaction between time period and narrative type, testing whether identity narratives resonate more with an actor's audience during the crisis.

The platform-level expectation that the engagement gap between control and care narratives widens during the crisis regardless of who posts them (H5) is tested with a linear mixed-effects model. The dependent variable is total interactions per post and the independent variable is the interaction between time period and narrative type.

Finally, whether national context moderates this engagement gap (H6) is tested by extending the previous model with a three-way interaction: narrative type $\times$ time period $\times$ country.

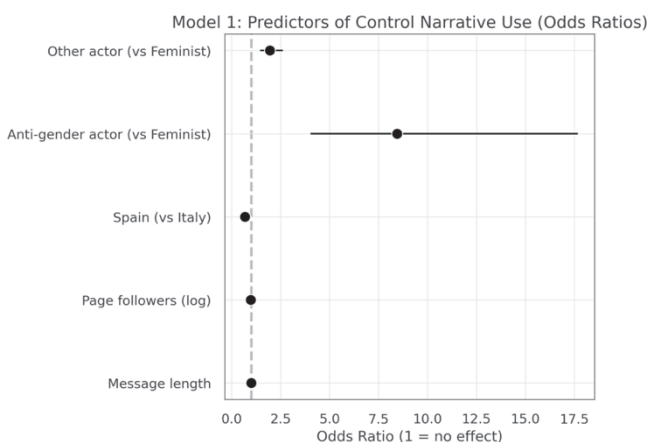
4. Results

This section presents regression results from the seven models outlined in the analytical strategy (for descriptive analyses, see Appendix 10). Coefficient plots are presented in the main text to visualise key effects, while full regression tables with

all coefficients, standard errors, and model diagnostics are reported in Appendix A11.

Model 1 (Fig. 1, Appendix A11.1) tests whether actor type predicts the use of identity control versus care narratives in gender-political Facebook posts. Consistent with H1a, anti-gender actors, including radical-right politicians, anti-feminist media outlets, and influencers, have over eight times the odds of posting control narratives compared to feminist actors (OR = 8.44, 95 % CI [4.03, 17.68], $p < .001$). Other actors (neither explicitly feminist nor anti-gender) also show elevated odds of control narrative use relative to feminists (OR = 1.96, 95 % CI [1.46, 2.62], $p < .001$), though the effect is considerably smaller. The inverse supports H2a. Feminist actors are substantially less likely to use control narratives, indicating a preference for care-based framing in their gender-political communication. Both H1a and H2a are supported, confirming that identity control and care function as actor-aligned narrative repertoires. Posts from Spain showed significantly lower odds of containing control narratives than those from Italy (OR = 0.68, 95 % CI [0.51, 0.91], $p = .008$), suggesting baseline cross-national differences in narrative prevalence. Page follower count had no significant effect, while longer messages were associated with marginally lower odds of control narratives (OR = 1.00, $p = .006$).

Figure 1



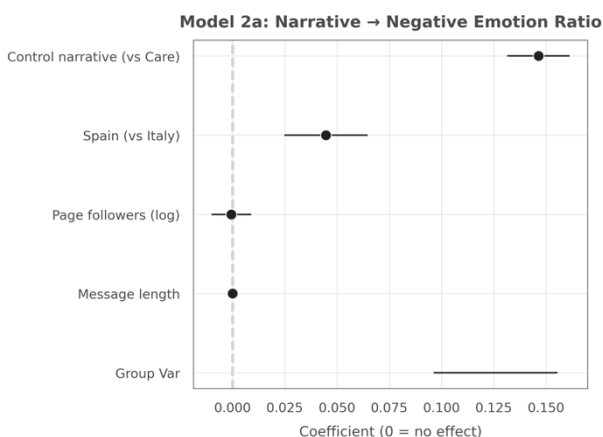
Source: Odds ratio from logit model predicting narrative identity of control by actor type

Models 2a and 2b (Fig. 2 & Fig. 3, Appendix A11.2 & 11.3) test whether identity control and care narratives evoke distinct emotional responses from audiences, measured through the composition of Facebook reactions. Supporting H1b and H2b, posts employing control narratives were associated with a higher negative emotion ratio ($\beta = 0.146$, 95 % CI [0.131, 0.161], $p < .001$) and a lower positive emotion ratio ($\beta = -0.035$, 95 % CI [-0.040, -0.029], $p < .001$) compared to care narratives.

This represents a substantial effect with control narratives eliciting a 14.6 percentage point increase in the share of negative reactions and a 3.5 percentage point decrease in positive reactions relative to care narratives.

The intraclass correlation of Model 2a (ICC = 0.112) indicates that approximately 11 % of variance in negative emotions is attributable to differences between pages. The higher ICC in Model 2b (0.273) suggests that positive emotional engagement varies more substantially across pages than negative engagement. Posts from Spain showed higher negative emotion ratios than those from Italy ($\beta = 0.045$, $p < .001$), though no significant cross-national difference emerged for positive emotions. Log-followers had no significant effect in either model. Message length was statistically significant in both models but with negligible substantive effect.

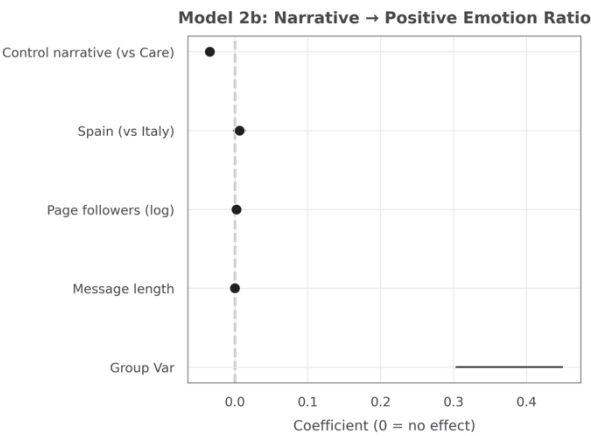
Figure 2



Source: Coefficients from linear regression predicting negative emotional reactions by narrative identity type

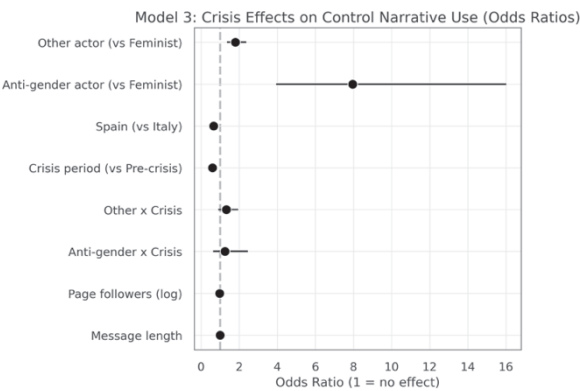
Models 3 and 4 (Fig. 4 & Fig. 5, Appendix A11.4 & A11.5) test whether the onset of the COVID-19 crisis altered actors' narrative strategies. For the use of identity control narratives, Model 3, the main effect of actor type remains strong with anti-gender actors having nearly eight times the odds of posting control narratives compared to feminists (OR = 7.95, 95 % CI [3.95, 16.01], $p < .001$), replicating the baseline alignment found in Model 1. However, the Anti-Gender Actor $\times$ Crisis interaction is not statistically significant (OR = 1.25, 95 % CI [0.64, 2.46], $p = .512$), indicating that anti-gender actors did not significantly increase their use of control narratives during the crisis relative to their pre-crisis baseline. Thus, H3a is not supported. Interestingly, the main effect of crisis period is negative and significant (OR = 0.61, 95 % CI [0.44, 0.84], $p = .003$), suggesting that across all actors, the proportion of control narratives actually declined during the crisis.

Figure 3



Source: Coefficients from linear regression predicting positive emotional reactions by narrative identity type

Figure 4

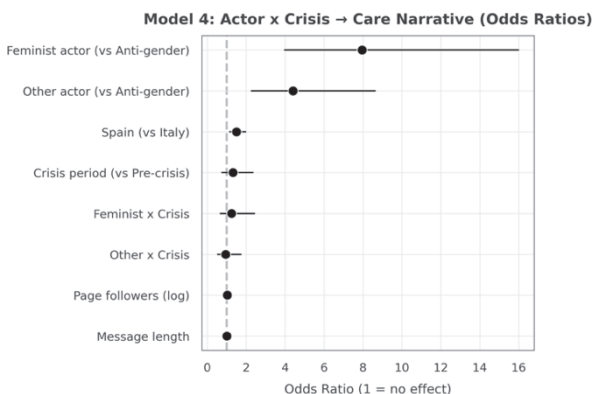


Source: Odds ratios from logistic regressions predicting narrative identity of control by actor and crisis period

For the use of identity care narratives, Model 4, feminist actors have substantially higher odds of posting care narratives compared to anti-gender actors (OR = 7.95, 95 % CI [3.95, 16.01], $p < .001$). However, the Feminist Actor $\times$ Crisis interaction is not statistically significant (OR = 1.25, 95 % CI [0.64, 2.46], $p = .512$), indicating that feminist actors did not significantly change their use of care narratives during the crisis. Thus, H4a is not supported. Posts from Spain showed higher odds of care narratives (OR = 1.50, 95 % CI [1.13, 2.00], $p = .005$) and correspondingly

lower odds of control narratives compared to Italy, consistent with Spain's stronger feminist infrastructure.

Figure 5

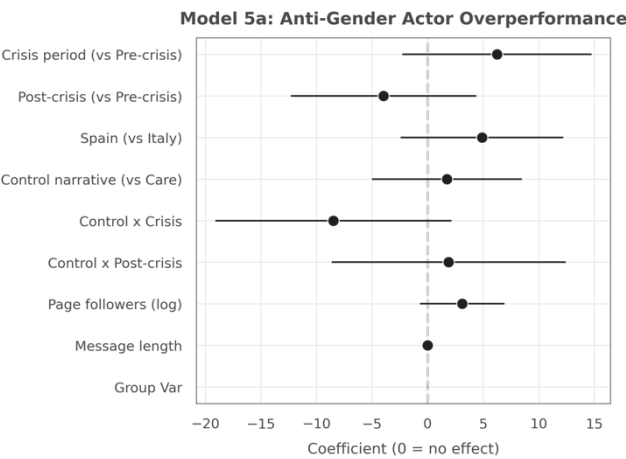


Source: Odds ratios from logistic regressions predicting narrative identity of care by actor and crisis period

Models 5a and 5b (Fig. 6 & Fig. 7, Appendix A11.6 & A11.7) evaluate whether identity control and care narratives overperformed or underperformed relative to each actor's typical content during the crisis. For anti-gender actors' control narratives, neither the direct effect of the control narrative and crisis period, nor their interaction (control narrative $\times$ crisis period) reached statistical significance. H3b is not supported since anti-gender actors' control narratives did not gain an engagement advantage during the crisis relative to their typical content.

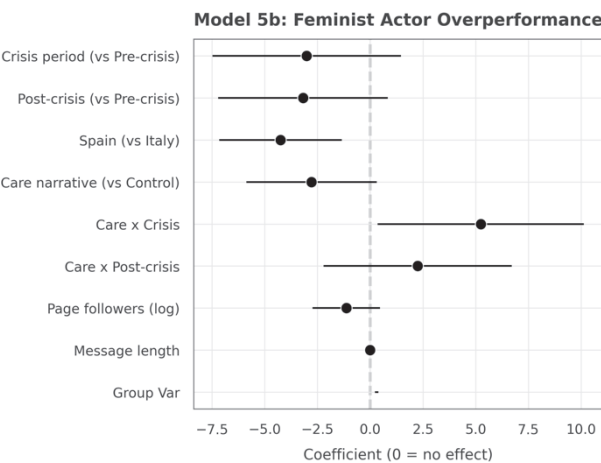
Model 5b examines feminist actors' posts. Here, an unexpected pattern emerges. The Care $\times$ Crisis interaction is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 5.24$, 95 % CI [0.36, 10.13], $p = .035$), indicating that care narratives posted by feminist actors during the crisis outperformed their baseline content by approximately 5.2 points on the overperformance scale. The main effect of care narrative is marginally negative ($\beta = -2.78$, $p = .078$), suggesting that outside of crisis periods, care narratives slightly underperform relative to feminist actors' other content. However, this pattern reverses during the crisis, although does not persist into the post-crisis period (Care $\times$ Post-Crisis: $\beta = 2.25$, $p = .323$). Thus, H4b is not supported in the expected direction. Rather than performing the same or worse, feminist actors' care narratives gained a significant engagement boost during the crisis. Additionally, feminist actors in Spain showed lower overperformance scores than those in Italy ($\beta = -4.25$, $p = .004$).

Figure 6



Source: Coefficients from linear regressions predicting the overperformance of identity narratives in terms of engagement during crisis by anti-gender actor

Figure 7

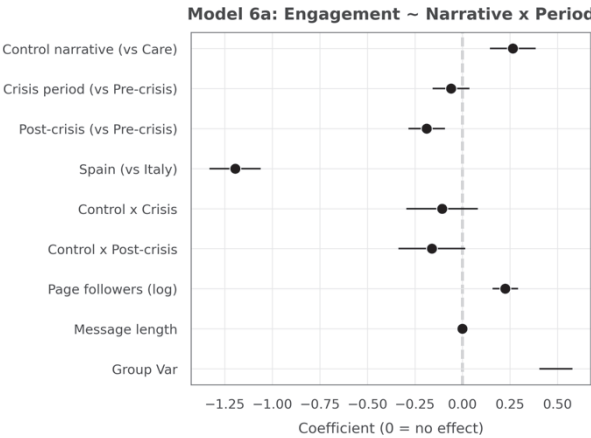


Source: Coefficients from linear regressions predicting the overperformance of identity narratives during crisis by feminist actor

Model 6 (Fig. 8, Appendix A11.8) tests whether control narratives gain a growing engagement advantage over care narratives during the crisis, regardless of who posts them. The results reveal a baseline advantage for narrative of control, receiving significantly higher engagement than care narratives ($\beta = 0.265$, 95 % CI [0.145, 0.385], $p < .001$). However, this engagement gap did not widen during the crisis. The Control $\times$ Crisis interaction is not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.107$, 95 % CI

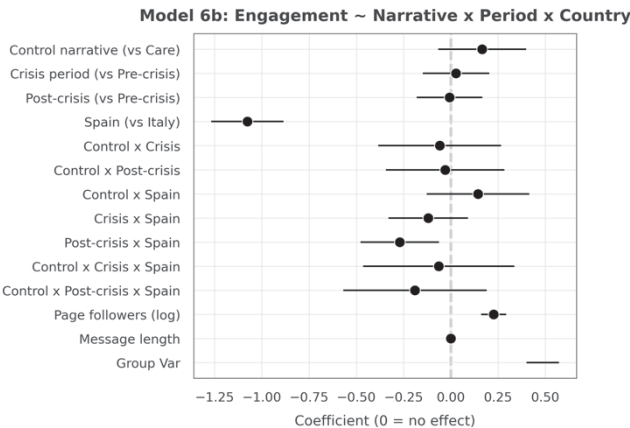
[−0.296, 0.081], $p = .265$), indicating that the relative advantage of control over care narratives remained stable during the pandemic period. The negative coefficient suggests a slight narrowing of the gap, though the effect is not significant. In the post-crisis period, there is marginal evidence of convergence (Control × Post-Crisis: $\beta = -0.161$, 95 % CI [−0.337, 0.015], $p = .072$). Thus, H5 is not supported because while control narratives consistently outperform care narratives, this advantage remained stable rather than widening during the crisis.

Figure 8



Source: Coefficients from a linear regression predicting log-total interactions patterns across narrative type and crisis period

Figure 9



Source: Coefficients from a linear regression predicting log-total interactions patterns across narrative type, crisis period and country

Model 7 (Fig. 9, Appendix A11.9) extends this analysis to test whether national feminist infrastructure moderates the overall engagement dynamics, introducing a three-way interaction between narrative type, time period, and country (Spain vs. Italy). Posts from Spain showed significantly lower overall log-engagement than those from Italy ($\beta = -1.077$, $p < .001$), and engagement in Spain declined further in the post-crisis period (Post-Crisis $\times$ Spain: $\beta = -0.270$, $p = .011$). However, the triple interaction terms were all non-significant (e.g., Control $\times$ During $\times$ Spain: $\beta = -0.063$, $p = .758$; Control $\times$ Post $\times$ Spain: $\beta = -0.190$, $p = .327$). Thus, H6 is not supported. While control narratives consistently outperform care narratives, this asymmetry does not vary significantly between Spain and Italy, suggesting that platform-level dynamics override national institutional differences.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the strategic deployment and engagement performance of identity control and identity care narratives in gender-political discourse on Facebook across Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal a more complex dynamic than the theoretical framework initially anticipated, confirming some expectations while challenging others in ways that strengthen our understanding of how platform architectures interact with crisis politics to shape democratic resilience.

The analyses strongly confirm actor-aligned narrative repertoires. Anti-gender actors were significantly more likely to employ identity control narratives characterised by exclusion, victimhood, and traditional hierarchies, while feminist actors predominantly drew on identity care narratives emphasising solidarity, transformation, and shared vulnerability. This division holds across both Spain and Italy, suggesting robust ideological grounding for these communicative strategies. Importantly, the crisis did not alter these repertoires. Neither anti-gender actors nor feminist actors significantly shifted their narrative strategies during the pandemic. Rather than indicating a lack of crisis responsiveness, it suggests that narrative identity operates as a durable repertoire embedded in actors' relational networks and organisational cultures. Actors do not switch narratives when crisis strikes; they continue narrating from within the frameworks already available to them.

Furthermore, the study found compelling evidence for the affective asymmetry of these narrative strategies. Narratives of identity control consistently generated higher negative emotional engagement, aligning with theoretical expectations about how such narratives social mobilise status loss and threat perception (Mercer, 2014; Brady et al. 2017; Salmela & von Scheve 2017), while identity care narratives were associated with greater positive emotional resonance.

Regarding actor adaptation to specific narrative identity online during the crisis, anti-gender actors did not significantly increase their use of control narratives during the crisis, contrary to expectations. One possible interpretation is a saturation effect.

Anti-gender actors might already operate at a high level of employing narratives of identity control, such that a crisis does not necessitate a further statistically significant increase in their rate of use. Similarly, their audiences might be accustomed to these narratives, meaning that control posts during the crisis do not inherently overperform their already established engagement patterns. The novelty required for increased engagement during this period might diminish if a narrative style is already pervasive.

The most striking finding is that feminist care narratives significantly outperformed their baseline content during the crisis, directly contradicting the hypothesis, despite no significant increase in their rate of use. As domestic labour, frontline care work, and gendered precarity became acutely visible (Power, 2020; Smith et al., 2021), audiences responded to care narratives with engagement levels exceeding what these actors typically achieved. This implies that while care narratives may be structurally misaligned with platform mechanics under ordinary conditions, crisis moments can temporarily amplify their resonance, perhaps due to increased care burdens.

However, the care narrative boost did not persist into the post-crisis period, and it did not close the overall engagement gap between control and care narratives. Control narratives continued to attract significantly higher levels of overall engagement, indicating a persistent baseline advantage, although this advantage did not increase during the crisis period, nor was it driven by a corresponding rise in their strategic use by anti-gender actors. Thus, care narratives of feminist actors gained traction during the crisis, yet not to an extent sufficient to significantly alter the overall hierarchy of engagement.

A central hypothesis of this study was that the crisis would widen the engagement gap between control and care narratives at the platform level, regardless of who deploys them. The results partially support and partially complicate this expectation. Control narratives do hold a significant baseline engagement advantage over care narratives. However, this asymmetry did not widen during the crisis, as the interaction between control narratives and the crisis period was non-significant.

Two factors may contribute to these patterns. First, the analysis defines the crisis period temporally rather than thematically. While all posts fall within the pandemic timeline, many may have continued to address gender politics without direct reference to COVID-19, potentially diluting crisis-specific amplification of narrative strategies. A more granular analysis filtering for posts explicitly engaging with the pandemic might reveal what the temporal approach could not capture. Second, social media platforms dramatically increased content moderation measures to combat misinformation and harmful content during the crisis (Facebook Community Standards Enforcement Report, 2020). Control narratives, particularly those using uncivil discourse to emphasise exclusion and impose traditional order using xeno-

phobic and sexist framing, could have overlapped with flagged content, potentially removing the most inflammatory control narratives.

Rather than undermining the platform architecture argument, this null finding deepens it. The structural alignment between control narratives and platform affordances does not require crisis activation; it operates as a standing feature of the digital environment, rewarding exclusionary identity construction under ordinary conditions as much as during exceptional ones. For democratic resilience, this persistent asymmetry may be more consequential than a crisis-specific surge, precisely because it is not contingent on external shocks.

Regarding the role of national context, the results indicate Spain's stronger feminist infrastructure did not translate into a differential engagement advantage for care narratives during the crisis relative to Italy. Platform dynamics imposed a relatively uniform logic of visibility regardless of institutional differences. While national contexts shape which narratives are more prevalent, with care narratives appearing more frequently in Spain, they do not substantially alter which narratives are most rewarded with engagement. However, this finding should be interpreted at the aggregate level of analysis. The models do not include a four-way interaction with actor type, and it is possible that more fine-grained differences in engagement performance across countries emerge within specific actor groups.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the strategic deployment and engagement performance of identity control and identity care narratives in gender-political discourse on Facebook across Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis presented here suggests that the threat to democratic politics does not primarily stem from crises amplifying exclusionary narratives, as control narratives neither increased in frequency nor gained more engagement during the pandemic. The more fundamental concern is that platform architectures sustain persistent engagement asymmetry, disadvantaging care narratives.

Yet this disadvantage is not absolute. During the pandemic, care narratives significantly outperformed their own baseline engagement, even without increased deployment by feminist actors. However, this temporary boost did not close the overall engagement gap with control narratives, nor did it vary across national contexts.

This advances understanding of digital political communication in several ways. First, the study demonstrates that care narratives can break through platform constraints during crisis. This matters because it reveals that digital publics are not uniformly unreceptive to inclusive identity narratives. Audiences responded when shared vulnerability was salient, showing that democratic resilience exists within digital public sphere and can be activated under specific conditions.

Second, the results reveal how national discursive infrastructures and platform affordances intersect. In Spain, where feminist institutions are stronger, care narratives are more prevalent, confirming that offline infrastructure shapes digital narratives. Yet platform mechanisms govern engagement, such that the relative engagement performance of control versus care narratives does not significantly vary across countries.

Finally, these findings address a scholarly and methodological gap left by studies focusing on backsliding and radicalisation. By documenting both persistent disadvantage and crisis-activated potential of care narratives, as well as focusing on narratives of identity politics as unit of analysis and using LLMs to scale human annotated data, this study provides an empirical foundation for research on sustaining democracies in digital environments.

The study also comes with important limitations. The keyword-based sampling focused on salient gender-political vocabulary, likely undercounting care-related pandemic discourse that did not engage with explicitly political terms, such as posts discussing school closures, care exhaustion, or work-life conflicts without feminist or anti-gender framing. Consequently, the findings do not capture all possible crisis-related gender political discussions. Second, the reliance on Facebook restricts generalisability to platforms with different affordances, and relatedly, the 100,000-follower threshold prioritises visibility over representativeness, excluding smaller influential actors and their narrative repertoires. Third, automated classification struggles with narrative classification and cannot operate without supervision, thus requiring manual coding, and while larger language models may improve on this, they demand computational resources that raise their own ethical and practical concerns.

These limitations also point to promising avenues of research. Extending this inquiry to platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or Telegram, each with distinct content distribution mechanisms, would clarify whether the structural disadvantage of care narratives is a general feature of engagement-driven digital architectures or specific to Facebook. Future research should also examine how care narratives perform when they intersect with other axes of identities, such as race, class, sexuality, and citizenship, given an extensive body of research that argues that intersectional feminist actors negotiate algorithmic biases while building solidarities across diverse communities (Jackson, Bailey & Welles, 2020; Evans & Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021). Third, extending this framework beyond Europe to Global South contexts can show how different political cultures and digital governance regimes create conditions under which care narratives can more effectively challenge control narratives. Finally, a more refined exploration of identity control narratives should acknowledge the complex social marginalisation that draws vulnerable groups into these networks, moving beyond a framework that treats control narratives solely as instruments of power to examine the genuine uncertainties they address. This

mixed-method, comparative and interdisciplinary work is crucial for understanding identity politics through political communication research and, ultimately, to strengthen democratic resilience by building more inclusive digital public spheres.

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Appendix

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