

Gender equality between rights and resentment: Social media engagement and gender attitudes across Europe

Abstract

This study examines how gender-related attitudes are structured within contemporary cultural conflict lines and whether digital communicative engagement is associated with regressive positioning on gender issues. While support for formal gender equality has become widely institutionalized across Europe, feminist mobilization and anti-gender counter-movements have increasingly embedded gender in broader value-based divides. We conceptualize gender-related attitudes along two dimensions: rights-based support for equality and affective anti-feminist positioning. Using an original 2021 cross-sectional survey from France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Spain (N = 12,000), we analyze whether the intensity of social media use – understood as the degree to which individuals are embedded in digitally mediated communication environments – is associated with these attitudinal dimensions. Social media intensity is measured as time spent on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X, and Instagram. Ordinary Least Squares regressions with country fixed effects indicate that higher levels of social media use intensity are consistently associated with more regressive views on gender-related attitudes across both dimensions. The findings contribute to debates in political sociology and digital communication research by highlighting the association between communicative embeddedness of citizens in digital arenas and cultural positioning on gender equality.

Keywords: attitudes; antifeminism; Europe; feminism; gender equality; LGBT; social media

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1. Introduction

Gender politics has long been contested but has become increasingly politicized in recent years across many countries in the Global North, unfolding in both public

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and digital arenas (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Jackson et al., 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018). At the same time, gender disparities in the labor market, political life, and private relationships persist (Auspurg et al., 2017; Bernhard et al., 2021; Minkus et al., 2022; Waitkus & Minkus, 2021). The increasing politicization of gender issues alongside the persistence of gender inequalities suggests that gender issues are increasingly embedded in broader cultural conflicts that structure contemporary European politics and societies. While earlier research documented a long-term modernization trend and rising aggregate support for egalitarian values and women's rights in particular worldwide (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Welzel et al., 2002), more recent scholarship highlights the growing salience of cultural value divides, often conceptualized as a cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage or along the GAL–TAN (Green–Alternative–Libertarian vs. Traditional–Authoritarian–Nationalist) dimension (Bornschieer et al., 2021; de Wilde et al., 2019; Kriesi et al., 2012). Within this broader cultural conflict, gender equality has gained increasing scholarly attention as a key issue linking debates on family norms, sexual diversity, political authoritarianism, and social hierarchy (Alexander & Off, 2025; Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024; Schäfer et al., 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2024).

At the same time, political contestation increasingly unfolds within digital communication environments. Social media platforms have become routine components of everyday political engagement and information exchange (Bail, 2021; Barberá, 2020; Jungherr et al., 2020). While early debates emphasized filter bubbles and echo chambers, empirical evidence suggests that the relationship between social media use and political attitudes is small and inconsistent (Boxell et al., 2017; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Eady et al., 2019; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). This may in part reflect a research focus on digital political news consumption rather than broader forms of social media engagement. We therefore shift the analytical focus beyond the distinction between users and non-users or politically interested users toward differences in the intensity of social media use. Building on the mediatization approach (Couldry & Hepp, 2020; Hepp et al., 2015) as well as on arguments that contemporary social and value conflicts are deeply mediatized (Eigmüller & Trenz, 2020), we conceptualize use intensity as an indicator of how deeply individuals are embedded in digitally mediated communication environments in which political and cultural conflicts are articulated and publicly contested.

Against this background, this study examines whether and how the intensity of social media use is associated with individual attitudes towards gender-related issues. To address these questions, we draw on an original cross-sectional survey dataset from six European countries (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Spain) collected in 2021 (Díez-Medrano et al., 2024). This dataset uniquely allows us to study how time spent on social media platforms is associated with gender-related attitudes, using three different indicators: gender equality on the labor market, same rights for LGBT persons, and whether feminists hate men. We conceptualize these

three items as belonging to two different dimensions of gender-related attitudes: On the one hand, a normative rights-based support, referring to endorsement of equal rights and equality principles, and on the other hand, an affective anti-feminist positioning, referring to negative evaluations of feminism and feminist actors. This distinction allows us to capture both institutionalized support for gender equality and the more symbolic and contested aspects of contemporary gender politics.

The results of our Ordinary Least Squares regressions with country fixed effects indicate that higher levels of social media use intensity, measured as time spent on major social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X, Instagram) are consistently associated with more restrictive views on gender-related issues across all three indicators. These associations remain robust, controlling for socio-demographic characteristics as well as political orientations and authoritarian values, and further hold across a wide range of robustness checks. While platform-specific differences are limited, the use of traditional media such as TV and radio is either unrelated to gender-related attitudes or associated with slightly more pro-gender equality positions.

2. Literature review

2.1 Contested gender equality

Previous studies have widely demonstrated that egalitarian principles concerning women's labor market participation, political representation, and equal rights have become widely accepted normative standards (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Knight & Brinton, 2017; Welzel et al., 2002). However, recent scholarship suggests that cultural conflicts in Western democracies have increasingly crystallized around a new value-based divide, often described in terms of cosmopolitan versus communitarian orientations, universalist versus particularist principles, or libertarian versus authoritarian values (Bornschieer et al., 2021; de Wilde et al., 2019; Kriesi et al., 2012). While such analyses of this emerging conflict line focused primarily on issues such as immigration or European integration, more recent developments indicate that gender-related questions are becoming more tightly integrated into these broader cultural struggles (Off, 2024; Otteni, 2025; Schäfer et al., 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2024).

In fact, previous research has demonstrated that feminist mobilizations have contributed to making persistent inequalities visible and politically salient (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Verloo, 2018), while counter-mobilizations have framed gender equality reforms as unwanted cultural transformation as well as introduced by external forces such as the EU (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Lombardo et al., 2025; Off, 2023). Scholars have highlighted for different European countries, that varying coalitions of ultra-religious groups, conservative think tanks, right-wing populist parties, and right-leaning media actors have mobilized against what they describe

as “gender ideology,” targeting policies on abortion, gender-inclusive language, family law, and LGBT rights (Gwiazda, 2023; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018; Vida, 2022). Norris and Inglehart (2019) interpret such dynamics as part of a “cultural backlash,” whereby older cohorts, who tend to hold more traditional views, perceive rapid social change as well as intergenerational value change as threatening and respond with more conservative attitudes and support for right-wing populist parties.

2.2 Two dimensions of gender-related attitudes

Existing research suggests that attitudes toward gender equality are not uniform but consist of distinguishable components that vary in their degree of contestation (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Elder et al., 2021; Knight & Brinton, 2017; Schäfer et al., 2024). Building on this literature, we distinguish between *two dimensions of gender-related attitudes*: normative rights-based support, referring to endorsement of equal rights and equality principles, and affective anti-feminist positioning, referring to negative evaluations of feminism and feminist actors. This distinction allows for a more fine-grained analysis of how individuals position themselves within contemporary cultural conflicts over gender equality.

On the one hand, *rights-based support for gender equality* refers to endorsement of general egalitarian principles and equal rights claims, such as equal participation in the labor market or equal rights for sexual minorities. A substantial body of research shows that such principles have become widely accepted across advanced democracies, reflecting long-term processes of value change and institutionalization (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Evans, 2003; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Even individuals who do not identify as feminists frequently support concrete policy goals associated with gender equality (Elder et al., 2021). In this sense, normative support for equality can coexist with disagreement about how these claims should be framed politically or implemented in practice.

On the other hand, *affective anti-feminist positioning* refers to symbolic and emotional opposition to feminism and feminist actors. Recent scholarship shows that gender conflicts increasingly unfold at a symbolic and affective level rather than through explicit rejection of equality principles. Identifying as a feminist remains stigmatized in many contexts, and women who publicly embrace feminist identities often face negative stereotypes (Conlin & Heesacker, 2018; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Moreover, opposition to feminism often reflects perceptions of cultural or status threat and out-group hostility rather than explicit rejection of formal equality principles (Anduiza & Off, 2026; Otteni, 2025). Research on anti-feminist attitudes and hostile sexism shows that feminist movements and activists can be framed as undermining traditional social hierarchies, challenging established gender roles, or privileging women at the expense of men (Chafetz & Dworkin, 1987; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Off, 2024; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Moreover, empirical work further suggests that while majorities may endorse equality norms in

abstract terms, identification with or hostility toward feminism can remain highly contentious (Elder et al., 2021; Off, 2023; Ogletree et al., 2019). As these studies demonstrate, such perceptions are closely linked to broader orientations toward authority, hierarchy, and social order. Rather than targeting specific policy measures, affective anti-feminist positioning involves symbolic boundary drawing and the delegitimization of feminist actors (Blais & Dupuis-Déri, 2012; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Vida, 2022).

2.3 Social media communication practices

Social media platforms have become routine arenas of information and news consumption, online communication, political expression, identity signalling, and value contestation for almost all citizens (Bail, 2021; Jungherr et al., 2020). A substantial body of research shows that social media use is closely linked to partisan self-expression, selective engagement, and identity-confirming communication practices and interactions (Bail, 2021; Osmundsen et al., 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2021).

Within these digital environments, gender-related hostility and misogynistic discourse represent a recurring feature of online communication. Studies show that female politicians and journalists are disproportionately exposed to hateful comments and online harassment (G. M. Chen et al., 2020; Esposito & Breeze, 2022). At the same time, right-wing populist parties and fringe actors strategically use social media platforms to mobilize supporters and disseminate anti-gender and anti-feminist frames (Knüpfer et al., 2022; Righetti et al., 2025; Wallaschek et al., 2022). Consequently, individuals who spend more time on social media are more likely to encounter incivility, trolling, and hostile interactions and may adopt or reciprocate such communicative styles (Frischlich et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021). Exposure to uncivil and antagonistic discourse not only shapes user's perceptions of online communication – particularly for women (Sobieraj, 2022) – but can also increase negative affect toward political out-groups and reinforce adversarial perceptions (Frischlich et al., 2021; Schöne et al., 2021).

Although the extent to which these dynamics translate into societal polarization and a decline of democratic values remains debated (Jungherr et al., 2020; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022), digital communication spaces facilitate the visibility and circulation of emotionally charged and identity-relevant content. At the same time, media-effects studies frequently find small or inconsistent associations between social media use and political attitudes (Boxell et al., 2017; Jungherr et al., 2020). However, less attention has been paid to differences in the intensity of social media use and how these relate to individuals' embeddedness in digitally mediated communication environments.

Building on insights from the mediatization approach (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hepp et al., 2015) and research on networked publics (boyd, 2010), we conceptual-

ize *social media use intensity* as a multidimensional practice that reflects the degree to which individuals are embedded in digitally mediated communication environments. The mediatization perspective emphasizes that “everyday experience with media” (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 193) has become all-encompassing, as social interactions, information consumption, and cultural practices increasingly unfold across intertwined online and offline contexts. As a result, the distinction between offline and online spheres becomes less meaningful, as digital environments enable continuous participation in social, economic, and political life (Hepp et al., 2015). Social media platforms provide infrastructures for sociability and communication across contexts, while the boundary between media audiences and content producers has increasingly blurred through the co-constitution of media content by users (Baym & Boyd, 2012; Jungherr et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2015).

Individuals who spend more time on social media are not merely exposed to more content, but are more deeply embedded in communicative practices that include information seeking, interaction, and identity formation (Bail, 2021; Baym & Boyd, 2012; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). As Baym and boyd (2012, p. 326) argue, online environments introduce “new social dynamics, requiring people to manage invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and a blurring between the public and private.” These dynamics suggest that intensive use reflects a stronger engagement with communicative processes in which identities are negotiated and social interactions take place in partially public settings (Papacharissi, 2015). Consequently, it has been argued (Eigmüller & Trenz, 2020) that individuals who spend more time on social media are more likely to encounter, observe, or participate in ongoing social and political interactions, including conflictual exchanges about key democratic norms and values. Therefore, *we expect that individuals who are more intensively engaged on social media platforms may be less likely to support gender-related issues.*

2.4 Different social media platforms

An increasing number of scholars have voiced concerns about how social media shapes the public debate. One key mechanism that has been studied extensively is homophily as individuals are more likely to engage with others who share similar identities and preferences. While users may still encounter diverse information, such exposure does not necessarily weaken existing identities and may even reinforce them (Bail et al., 2018). In general, homophily seems to influence whether social media, offline personal networks, or both amplify or mitigate social conflicts (Van Bavel et al., 2021; Weiss et al., 2025). For instance, scholars have suggested that Twitter’s architecture encourages the formation of homogeneous groups and tends to connect like-minded individuals who reinforce existing views rather than bridging partisan divides (Jakob et al., 2023). Settle (2018) examines how users engage with Facebook groups focused on political content. She demonstrates that political interactions on Facebook often reflect negative perceptions of out-groups and

the reinforcement of positive attitudes toward one's in-group, ultimately fostering communication and exchange among like-minded individuals. This is particularly strong for those Facebook users who use the platform to confirm their political interests and tend to one side of the political spectrum (Praet et al., 2022).

Studies on the “platform effect”, understood as the influence of platform-specific features on user behavior and content circulation, yield contrasting results. For example, Verbalyte and Eigmüller (2022) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Twitter and Instagram users were less critical of lockdown measures than Facebook users – a divergence they link to differences in user composition (elite versus ordinary users). Similarly, Jakob et al. (2023) report that Facebook debates exhibit higher toxic outrage than those on Twitter, likely because the blend of public and private contexts on Facebook elicits more emotional, personal reactions. Moreover, while Kligler-Vilenchik et al. (2020) show that emotion-driven conflicts are more prevalent on Twitter and Facebook than on WhatsApp, Yarchi et al. (2021) argue that Twitter's heterophilic user structure fosters heated interactions among diverse social groups, potentially sparking broader societal conflicts.

Research on political and social conflicts often focuses on social media alone, overlooking legacy media's influence. Feezell et al. (2021) demonstrate that “non-algorithmic news consumption” – via newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio – does not appear to increase partisan conflicts or predict higher levels of partisanship, as traditional news does not seem to have become more partisan over time. Nonetheless, Boxell et al. (2017) note that in the US, older cohorts with lower internet usage experienced the largest rise in partisan views; even as social media use among adults increased from 50 % in 2011 to 72 % in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021), and in Europe from 36 % in 2011 to 59 % in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). In sum and given that the literature provides conflicting evidence on the platform effect, *we expect that different platforms are differentially associated with gender-related attitudes.*

2.5 Authoritarian preferences and party alignment

In addition to the previously discussed aspects, political orientations also play a role in explaining the current gender backlash, as studies demonstrate. One relevant dimension concerns preferences for authoritarian governance. Psychological research on authoritarian orientations shows that individuals who prioritize social order, conformity, and deference to authority are more likely to reject pluralism, diversity, and social change (Feldman, 2003; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Accordingly, authoritarian predispositions are consistently linked to more restrictive attitudes toward minority rights, immigration, and gender equality (Alexander & Off, 2025; Duncan et al., 1997; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Empirical studies further show that such orientations are linked to more traditional gender role attitudes and higher levels of hostile sexism (Duncan et al., 1997; Peterson & Zurbriggen, 2010). Political science and political sociology also focus more concretely on explaining

the support for authoritarian governance, measured through preferences for strong leaders who can govern without institutional constraints such as parliaments or courts (Anderson et al., 2022; Dahlum et al., 2024; Malka et al., 2022). In this regard, Anderson et al. (2022) recently show that, based on World Value Survey data, around 35 percent of all global respondents prefer a strong leader in their country and 45 percent of the respondents evaluate men as better leaders than women. These “strong leader” preferences are widely used as indicators of support for illiberal governance and democratic backsliding in the population (Malka et al., 2022; Sprong et al., 2019). Conversely, individuals who support gender equality and LGBTQI rights are significantly more likely to reject authoritarian leadership preferences (Alexander & Off, 2025).

Beyond individual-level orientations, political parties play an important role in structuring public debates and mobilizing for or against gender equality by providing programmatic and symbolic cues on gender-related issues (Kittilson, 2013). In recent years, right-wing populist parties have increasingly incorporated masculinity and anti-gender frames and anti-LGBTQI* rhetoric into their political agendas and strongly mobilize on these issues (Sauer, 2024; Wallaschek et al., 2024; Weeks et al., 2025). Research on cultural backlash and political divides suggests that voters who perceive rapid social and cultural transformation as threatening and who are more culturally conservative are more likely to align with such parties (Anduiza & Off, 2026; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Off, 2024; Schäfer et al., 2024).

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data

We use data from the ValCon Survey, conducted in six European countries (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Spain) in April and May 2021. The survey was administered by the public opinion research company IPSOS and is based on an online access panel (IPSOS, n.d.). The target population consists of residents aged 18 to 65 with internet access in each of the six countries. From this online access panel, 2,000 respondents per country were recruited using quota sampling for age, gender, and education (in total 12,000 individuals). The data is publicly available through the GESIS research data repository (Díez-Medrano et al., 2024).

The ValCon Survey includes various items on people’s value orientation, socio-demographic characteristics, political participation, and media use. The survey design and questionnaire were identical across all six countries. Respondents were asked how often they used different traditional media sources such as TV, radio, newspapers (print or online) as well as the four major social media platforms Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram in the last month. Response options ranged from “never used this source” to “every day”, and a “don’t know” category. In the sample, almost half of the respondents are male, the average age is 49 years, and the

mode for education is middle education. A detailed description of the dataset and summary statistics can be found in the appendix (Table A.1.).

3.2 Variables

The central outcome of our analysis concerns individual attitudes toward gender-related issues. Since attitudes toward gender equality are latent constructs that cannot be adequately captured by a single indicator, we rely on three survey items reflecting different aspects of gender-related attitudes. Building on our conceptual distinction between normative rights-based support for gender equality and affective anti-feminist positioning, the selected indicators capture both dimensions. The first item taps affective anti-feminist positioning while the last two capture rights-based support for gender equality.

Respondents were asked whether they agree with the following statements: “Most feminists just hate men”; “Women should be treated equally to men in the labor market” as well as “Lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people should have the same rights as the rest of the population”. All three variables were measured using a four-point Likert scale without a middle category. To account for this, we recoded “don’t know” as the middle category, resulting in a five-point scale. Robustness checks excluding the “don’t know” were also conducted (see section “Robustness Analysis”). Additionally, a factor analysis shows that all three items load on a single factor (results not shown).

The central independent variables in our study relate to social media use. The data provide information on respondents' engagement with Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter. In addition, the survey includes information on the consumption of traditional media sources such as TV, radio and newspapers, which serves as an additional control group in the analysis. Respondents were first asked how often they had used different media sources in the past month (response categories: “Every day”, “Almost every day”, “Two or three times a week”, “Once”, “Never this last month”, “I have never used this source”, and “don’t know”). If respondents indicated that they had used a media source at least “Once” during the previous month, or selected “don’t know”, they were asked a follow-up question about the average time they spent actively using that source on a typical day. Response options included: “less than half an hour”, “more than half an hour but less than an hour”, “more than 1 hour but less than 2 hours”, “more than 2 but less than 5 hours”, to “5 hours or more”, as well as the option “don’t know”. The response categories for the filter question on daily usage are not fully exhaustive. Respondents who reported using a media source only once a month in the previous question were nevertheless asked to estimate their usage in hours “on an average day”. For such non-daily users, the only plausible response category was “less than half an hour (daily)”, which does not accurately reflect their actual usage patterns.

Alternatively, respondents could select “don’t know” since none of the remaining response options correspond to their type of media use.

For each platform, including TV and radio, we construct two dummy variables: The first indicates whether the platform was used at least once in the past month (ever = 1), or not used during the past month (never = 0). The second captures usage intensity. High-intensity use is defined as two or more hours per day ($\geq 2\text{h} = 1$), while low-intensity use is defined as less than two hours per day ($< 2\text{h} = 0$). Sensitivity checks were performed using alternative time thresholds.

We include several control variables. Specifically, we control for age (in categories), gender, paid employment, educational attainment (based on ISCED), urbanity, and self-assessed financial situation. To adjust the models for country-specific attributes, country fixed effects are included in all models. Note that sample sizes for high-intensity users per social media platform are too small to run regression models for each country separately.

3.3 Sample

For the subsequent analysis, we pool the six countries and use the full dataset of 12,000 respondents. Since “don’t know” responses were coded as the middle category, the outcome variables do not contain missing values. However, excluding observations with missing values on the independent variables results in a final sample of 11,318 respondents. As opposed to social media use in general, where the sample size remains consistent across platforms, the sample sizes are smaller and vary across social media platforms when examining intensity of use, since information on time spent is only available for respondents who reported using a given platform. The respective sample sizes for intensity of use models are reported in Tables A.1.–A.6. in the appendix.

3.4 Method

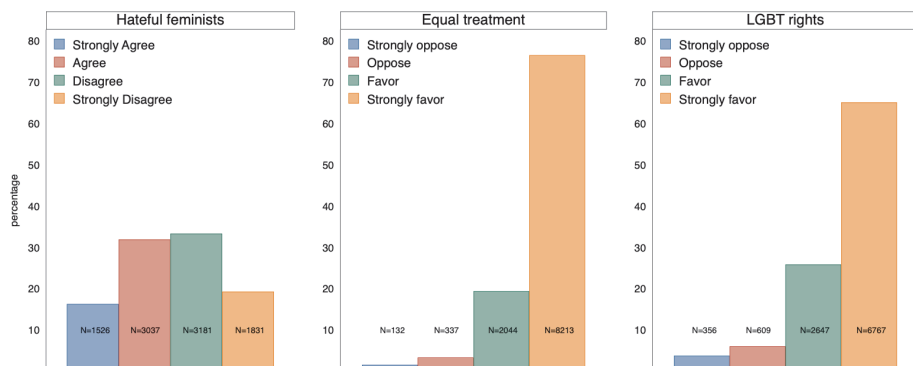
We present the results in three steps. First, we provide a descriptive overview of gender-related attitudes and social media uses. Second, we employ a multivariate analysis to examine whether attitudes toward gender-related issues differ by overall social media use and by intensity of use, while controlling for socio-demographic characteristics. More specifically, we use ordinary least squares regression (OLS) to test the association between social media use and attitudes towards gender-related issues. Firstly, we include a simple dummy variable indicating whether respondents used a given social media platform at least once in the past month, allowing us to compare users with non-users. Secondly, we focus on usage intensity, comparing high-intensity users with low-intensity users. In addition, we also estimate the association between gender attitudes and traditional media sources ("TV/Radio"). This allows us to assess whether the association between social media use and gender-related attitudes differs systematically from the relationship between gender-related

attitudes and traditional media consumption. We estimate separate OLS regressions for each platform, including the respective platform indicator and the full set of control variables. These models are estimated for all three outcome variables. In total, the main analysis consists of thirty models (3 outcomes [feminism, labor market equality, LGBT rights] x 5 media platforms [YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TV & Radio] x 2 measures of media use [never vs. ever, low vs. high intensity]). The results are presented as graphs showing only the estimated associations between media platform use and the outcome variables. This presentation reduces each model to the coefficient of the central dependent variable. Full regression tables for each platform and outcome including control variables are reported in the appendix (Table A.2.-A.6.). Third, to examine whether the association between social media use intensity and gender-related attitudes persists when accounting for political orientations, we re-estimate our regression models by stepwise including variables capturing authoritarian governance preferences and right-wing populist party alignment. Due to the additional variables, the sample sizes here are also slightly smaller; the sample size is specified in the caption of the relevant figure. Authoritarian governance preferences are measured as agreement with the statement “The own country should be governed by a powerful leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections”. Right-wing partisanship is captured by an indicator for voting for a right-wing populist party in the respondent’s country. Lastly, we perform several sensitivity checks to assess the robustness of the results (see section “Robustness Analysis”).

4. Findings

4.1 Descriptive findings

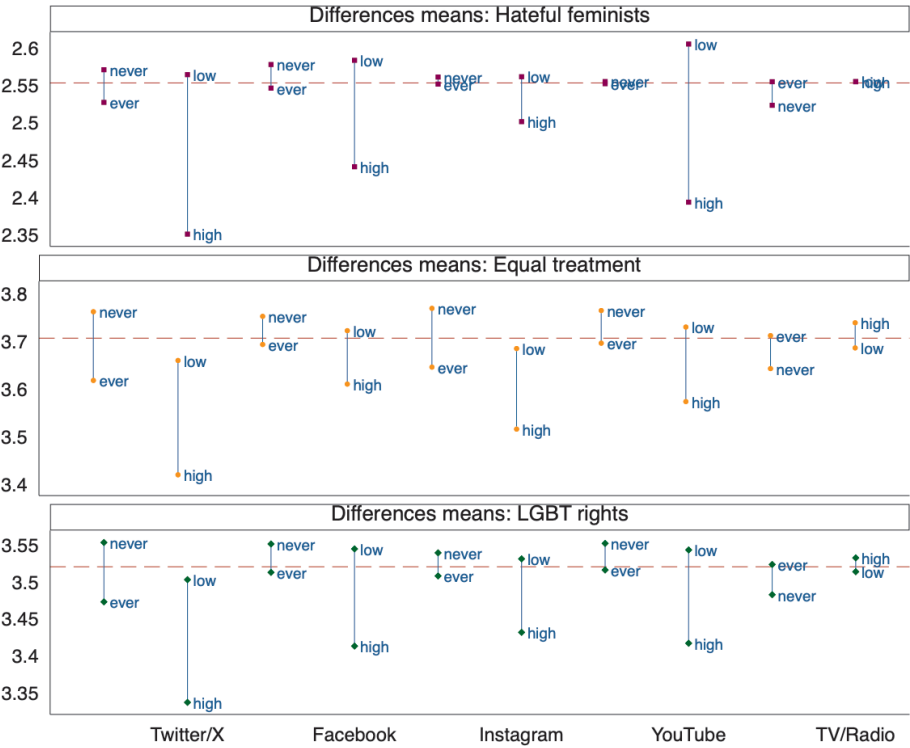
Figure 1 presents the distribution of three outcome variables. Regarding the first one on “hateful feminists”, almost 50 % of the sample agrees with the statement that “most feminists just hate men” (16 % “strongly agree”, 32 % “agree”). The other two outcome variables display considerably less variation. A large majority (76 %) strongly agree that men and women should have the same rights in the labor market, and only 4 % express disagreement. Similarly, about 90 % agree that LGBT people should have the same rights as the rest of the population while roughly 10 % disagree. Thus, there is very little variance in the normative rights-based support for gender equality items whereas the item on affective anti-feminist positioning shows greater disagreement.

Figure 1: Description of gender attitudes

Note: Frequency distribution of the three outcome variables on gender attitudes, "hateful feminists", "equal treatment" and "LGBT rights". Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

We next examine how the descriptive means of the outcomes on gender issues vary by the use of different media platforms and sources. Figure 2 shows that individuals who report using social media platforms less than once a month ("never") display slightly more progressive attitudes than those who report using these platforms at least once a month ("ever"). However, these differences in means remain relatively small. When considering usage intensity, a clearer pattern emerges. High-intensity users (≥ 2 h/day) are, on average, the least supportive of gender-related issues. This pattern appears consistently across all social media platforms and the differences in means are more pronounced. A different pattern emerges for the use of traditional media ("TV & Radio"). Here, both monthly and heavy users show attitudes toward gender-related issues that differ only marginally from those respondents who report not using these media sources regularly.

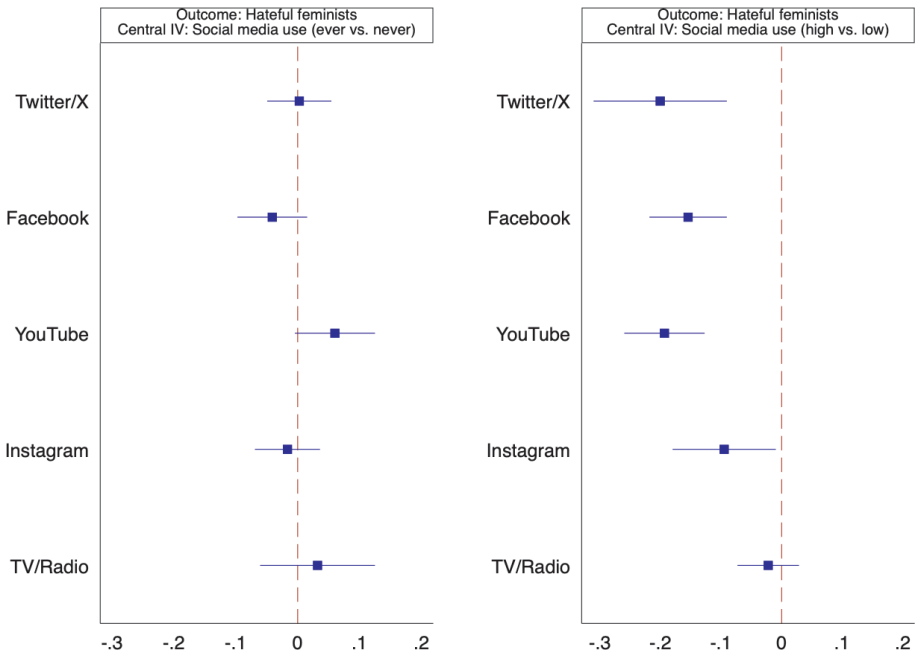
Figure 2: Media platform usage and means on gender attitudes



Note: The red-dashed line depicts the overall survey mean of the respective item on gender-attitudes. While colored markers represent varying means by general social media use (less than once a month [“never”] vs. at least once a month [“ever”]) and frequency of use (more [“high”] or less than two hours [“low”] a day). Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

4.2. Attitudes toward gender and social media

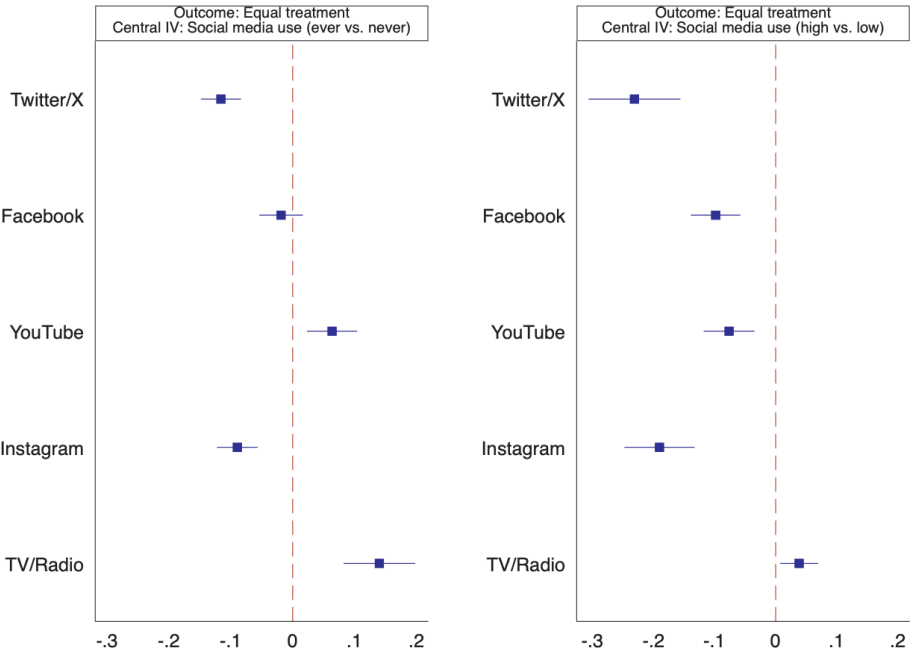
We now turn to the multivariate findings. Beginning with attitudes toward feminists, Figure 3 illustrates that using any social media platform on a monthly basis is not significantly associated with viewing feminists as hateful toward men. The same holds true for the use of traditional media (TV and radio). A different pattern emerges when considering usage intensity. Respondents who use social media platforms for more than two hours per day demonstrate significantly stronger resentment toward feminists across all platforms. In contrast, more than two hours per day of TV and radio consumption is not significantly associated with this outcome. Overall, these results suggest that higher-intensity social media use is consistently associated with resentment toward feminists, whereas such a pattern does not appear for traditional media use.

Figure 3: Media platform usage and views on feminists (OLS)

Note: Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.2.-A.6. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

The second outcome concerns attitudes toward equal treatment of men and women in the labor market (see Figure 4). Monthly use of Twitter and Instagram is significantly negatively associated with support for gender equality, whereas YouTube shows a positive association, and Facebook does not display a statistically significant relationship. When daily usage exceeds two hours, all social media platforms are associated with lower support for equal treatment. In contrast, consuming TV and radio for more than two hours per day is significantly associated with higher support for equal treatment.

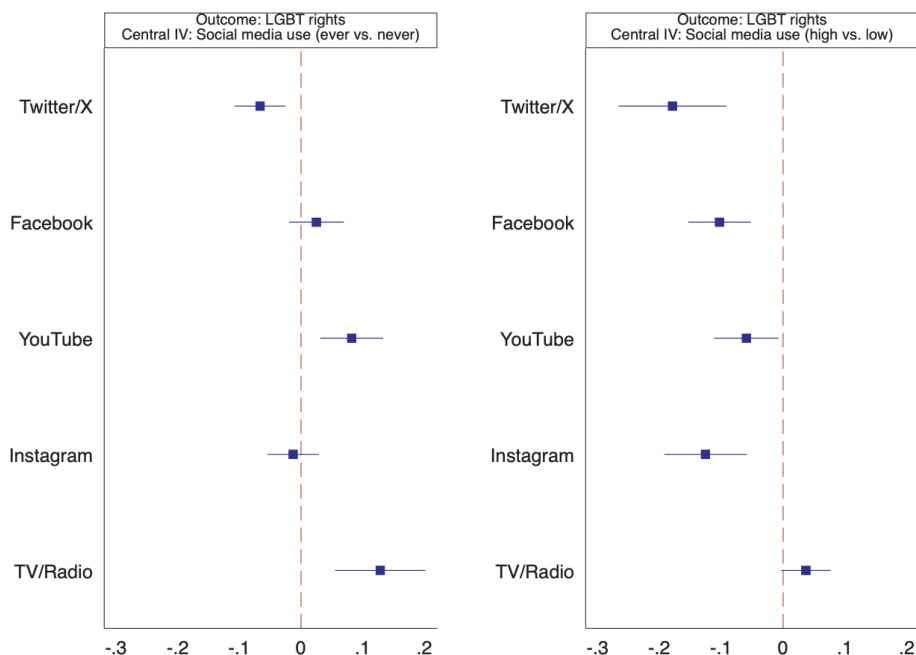
Figure 4: Media platform usage and views on equal treatment (OLS)



Note:Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.2.-A.6. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

We now turn to the association between social media use and support for LGBT rights (Figure 5). Similar to the findings for attitudes toward equal treatment in the labor market, monthly Twitter use is negatively associated with support for LGBT rights, whereas monthly YouTube use shows a positive association; Facebook and Instagram display no statistically significant relationships. Figure 5 also indicates that the use of traditional media (TV and radio) is associated with slightly higher support for LGBT rights.

In contrast, high-intensity social media use ($\geq 2\text{h/day}$) is significantly associated with lower support for LGBT rights across all platforms. TV and radio use, however, continue to show a modest positive association.

Figure 5: Media platform usage and LGBT rights (OLS)

Note: Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.2.-A.6. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

To sum up, these results support our expectation that respondents who spend more than two hours per day on social media platforms tend to express less support for gender equality across the three outcome measures. By contrast, our expectation regarding platform-specific differences receives only limited support, as we observe some differences between “ever” and “never” users, but hardly any variation across platforms among high-intensity users.

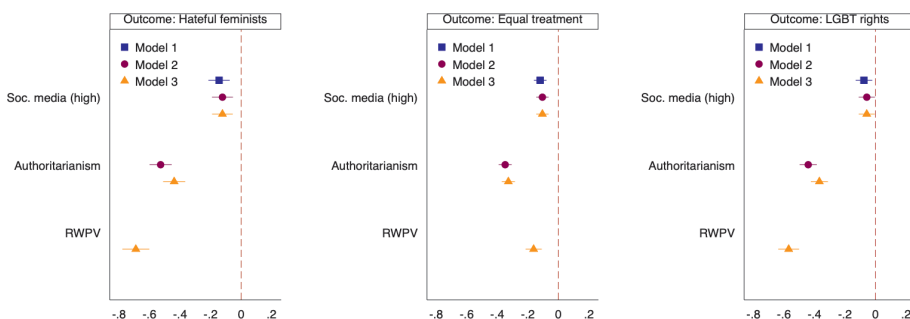
4.3 Attitudes toward gender and social media use, political authoritarianism, and right wing populist voting

In the next step, we examine whether these patterns remain robust when accounting for political orientations and alternative model specifications. Besides the variables already included in the main models, previous research suggests that political authoritarian governance and right-wing populist party voting are important predictors of gender-related attitudes. We therefore examine how these factors are associated with gender-related attitudes and whether the association with social media use persists after controlling for them.

Since the previous analysis showed that social media use is mainly relevant through usage intensity, we focus here on high-intensity social media use. To simplify the analysis, we pool all platforms into a single indicator. Namely, the variable takes the value 1 if a respondent reports using any platform for more than two hours per day, and 0 otherwise.

The additional variables on political authoritarian governance and right-wing voting are included stepwise. The results are presented in Figure 6. Model 1 includes only the pooled high-intensity social media use indicator, Model 2 additionally includes political authoritarian governance, and Model 3 further includes right-wing populist party voting (RWPV). Both, political authoritarian governance and right-wing populist voting are strongly associated with the outcome variables, with particularly large associations for attitudes toward feminists and LGBT rights. These political orientations exhibit larger coefficients than social media use. However, the coefficients for high-intensity social media use remain largely unchanged after including these variables. This suggests that while political orientation variables are relevant predictors of gender attitudes, intense social media use is independently associated with more regressive views on gender-related issues.

Figure 6: Social media use, authoritarianism, and right-wing populist voting (OLS)



Note: Control variables: age (in categories), gender, paid employment, education (in categories), urbanity, financial situation, country fixed-effects. Full models in Appendix Table A.7.-A.9. Based on ValCon, Version 1.0.0; own calculations, not weighted

4.4 Robustness Analysis

In the next step, we assess whether these findings remain robust across alternative model specifications. To this end, we conducted several additional sensitivity tests.

First, our main results indicate that it is not social media use per se but rather the intensity of use that is associated with less support for gender-related issues. To further examine this pattern, we replicated the analysis using different time thresholds. First, we compared respondents who use social media for more than one but less than two hours per day with those who use social media for less than one

hour per day. In this case, many of the previously significant associations become statistically non-significant (see Figure A.1). Second, we compared respondents who spend five or more hours per day with those who spend less than five hours. Here, the clear patterns from our main analysis reappear (see Figure A.1). These findings suggest that regressive gender attitudes appear to be more strongly associated with the amount of time spent on social media, rather than with the specific platform used.

Second, we re-estimated the models excluding respondents who answered “don’t know” to the three gender-related items (on equal treatment, LGBT rights, hateful feminists). In the main analysis, “don’t know” responses were treated as the middle category of the four-point Likert scale. The revised results, shown in Figure A.2, closely resemble those of the main analysis. The estimated effects appear slightly stronger, with more statistically significant associations. This pattern is not unexpected, as “don’t know” responses may capture both respondents who lack a clear opinion and those who selected the category due to the absence of a neutral response option. Including the former in the analysis may have also introduced some ambiguity to the results presented in the main models.

Third, we estimated ordered logit models to account for the ordinal nature of the outcome variable. The results largely replicate those of the main OLS models (Figure A.3), suggesting that the findings are not model-dependent.

5 Conclusion

This article examined the relationship between social media use and attitudes toward gender-related issues across six European countries. Rather than distinguishing only between users and non-users of social media or looking exclusively on digital news consumption, we focused on the intensity of engagement. By conceptualizing social media use intensity as a form of embeddedness in digitally mediated communication environments, this study contributes to research on mediatization and digital political communication (boyd, 2010; Couldry & Hepp, 2020). Our key findings indicate that high-intensity social media use is consistently associated with more regressive attitudes toward gender-related issues across all three outcome measures. While platform-specific differences appear when comparing “ever”- and “never”-users, these differences largely disappear when focusing on high-intensity use. Hence, the relevant distinction is not between users and non-users of social media, but between low- and high-intensity users.

Importantly, this pattern emerges across two dimensions of gender equality attitudes. On the one hand, we examine normative rights-based support for gender equality captured through attitudes toward equal treatment in the labor market and equal rights for LGBT individuals. On the other hand, we analyze affective anti-feminist positioning, measured through attitudes toward feminists. Across both dimensions, individuals who spend more than two hours per day on social media

platforms show significantly lower support for gender equality. In contrast, the use of traditional media such as TV and radio is either unrelated to gender-related attitudes or associated with slightly more pro-gender equality positions.

At the same time, the descriptive findings show that support for rights-based gender equality is broadly shared across the sample, while attitudes toward feminists display substantially greater variation. This pattern aligns with recent research highlighting that contemporary conflicts around gender increasingly unfold at the symbolic and affective level (Anduiza & Off, 2026; Díaz Fernández et al., 2023; Otteni, 2025; Schäfer et al., 2024). In this sense, gender equality seems less openly opposed on the level of formal rights but instead contested through anti-feminist identity constructions, sexist narratives and delegitimizing frames. Future research could further examine this conceptual distinction across national contexts and with more fine-grained measures.

Importantly, the association between intensive social media use and gender-related attitudes remains visible after accounting for political orientations. Both authoritarian governance preferences and right-wing populist party voting are associated with more regressive gender attitudes. However, the relationship between high-intensity social media use and gender-related attitudes remains largely unchanged after including these variables. Taken together with the robustness checks conducted in this study, these findings suggest that on the one hand intensive social media engagement represents an additional factor associated with contemporary gender conflicts that should be further examined in future research on political attitudes and gender conflicts. On the other hand, we contribute to research on the asymmetric polarizing effects of social media use depending on political orientation (Bail et al., 2018; Barberá, 2020), while highlighting that intensive social media use is strongly associated with regressive – but not progressive – gender-related attitudes, spurring future research to examine this relationship more closely.

The mechanisms underlying the observed association remain an open question. Nonetheless, several mechanisms appear plausible but are beyond our study design and dataset. One possibility, as previous studies have shown, is that emotionally charged or moralized content tends to spread particularly rapidly on social media platforms (Schöne et al., 2021). Individuals who spend substantial time on social media could be more frequently exposed to such content. Other scholars have demonstrated that online communication environments often exhibit high levels of homophily and selective exposure, meaning that users are more likely to encounter content that aligns with their existing views and networks (Bail et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2025). Consequently, intensive social media use may reflect greater involvement in online discussions and identity-driven communication, where political attitudes are expressed and reinforced through both intensive content consumption and social interaction. Algorithmic curation systems may further amplify such dynamics by prioritizing engaging or controversial content on social media platforms.

At the same time, recent research suggests that recommendation algorithms may not be as influential as often assumed in systematically promoting extremist content (A. Y. Chen et al., 2023). Because our data do not allow us to test these potential mechanisms, future research should examine more directly how different forms of digital engagement such as content consumption, online social interactions, and network composition, shape exposure to gender-related debates and attitudes.

Our study has several limitations. First, the data is based on an online access panel which means that the sample is non-probabilistic and may therefore overrepresent individuals who are more digitally engaged. Second, causal inference remains limited with cross-sectional survey data (Gattig & Minkus, 2021). Although our robustness checks consistently show that intense social media use is associated with more regressive attitudes toward gender equality, future research would benefit from longitudinal designs and panel data to better examine how changes in social media use relate to changes in attitudes over time. Third, our measures rely on self-reported estimates of time spent on social media platforms, which may be subject to reporting bias. Future studies combining survey data with digital trace data or qualitative approaches could provide more precise insights into how individuals encounter, interpret, and respond to gender-related conflicts in everyday communication environments.

Overall, our findings highlight the importance of considering the depth of individuals' engagement with social media platforms when studying contemporary gender conflicts. Understanding how individuals engage with these environments – and how deeply they are embedded in them – may therefore be crucial for explaining how gender attitudes are shaped and contested in contemporary societies.

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Appendix

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