



Social Media

Fact Sheet 6

Gender stereotypes on social media

Social media have become an integral part of our lives. These digitally networked media technologies are used to maintain social relationships, share information, or look for jobs. The peculiarity about social media is that users not only passively consume content but can in fact actively participate in shaping them.

Social media are networks (such as Facebook, Xing, LinkedIn, Diaspora), platforms for sharing pictures and videos (such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, Snapchat, Mattermost), and messaging services (such as Twitter, Mastodon).

- » Statistically, more than half the people in Germany use social media – though not all of them equally: who uses what and, above all, how often, varies according to gender and age.
- » Girls and women use social media more often to share personal and creative content; they are particularly active on Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Boys and men use social media more often to play games and exchange opinions; they are mainly active on YouTube and Twitter.
- » People between the ages of 25 and 39 are most active on social media. Whereas Facebook is also used by people over the age of 70, TikTok is the medium with the youngest users: in 2019, there were one million users between the ages of 6 and 19.

The return of gender stereotypes

Social media open up space for diverse (self-)representations of gender and (political) attitudes towards it. Nevertheless, they do not reflect at all the wide-ranging diversity of genders but mostly convey traditional images of men and women. Existing gender stereotypes are even reinforced.

- » Body images: Picture-based platforms like Instagram (re)produce gender-normed body images. Before posting a picture, 94 per cent of women and 87 per cent of men optimise this photo at least once. This means that they edit the picture with filter apps in order to conform to a female or male ideal of beauty.
- » Gender roles: Social media has an impact on personal attitudes towards gender roles. The more intensively young people use Instagram, YouTube, etc., the more conventional and stereotypical they think about the allocation of roles between men and women. This has been shown, for instance, in a survey among 14- to 32-year-olds.
- » Opinion formation: Female YouTubers receive more negative comments to their videos (including sexist, racist, and sexually aggressive hate speech) when compared to male YouTubers. With this form of gender-based digital violence, some users push people out of social media (silencing) and prevent them from further expressing themselves and shaping public opinion.

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Social media foster and reinforce gender stereotypes.

How do social media reinforce gender stereotypes?

There has so far been little research into exactly how social media can reinforce gender-stereotypical behaviour. The Expert Commission for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government identifies four problem areas in this regard, following the expert opinion by Maya Götz and Elizabeth Prommer:



Influencers are a relatively new form of role models for children, young people, and adults. Due to their popularity, they can have great influence on how people reading and watching their posts (“followers”) shape their own lives and choose the products they use.

Recommendation algorithms

automatically evaluate large amounts of data on current user behaviour and use it to create recommendations for products, music, or films, for instance. User profiles, contacts, clicked links, “likes”, etc. are used as source data for these calculations.

Financing via advertisement

Social media have an economic motivation and are financed by advertisements and commercials. Influencers can earn money by advertising, i.e. being paid by companies to promote certain products. With these advertisement options, stereotypical representations of gender are financially encouraged. Female influencers cooperate particularly often with cosmetics and fashion companies. In contrast, women and girls find fewer opportunities to earn money in other fields such as gaming or knowledge/learning.

Male-dominated production cultures

In traditional media, male scriptwriters, directors, and producers are the norm. The “MeToo” debate has made publicly known how extremely common sexism and harassment are in this industry. Such male-dominated production cultures can be found in social media as well. They also reappear in the respective online content.

The Expert Commission recommends:

Changing production cultures

- » Individuals from underrepresented groups must be specifically promoted in order to enable them to become independent from the advertising industry. In addition, measures such as codes of conduct and procedures for equal participation must be developed and implemented in the digital media and advertising industry.

Discriminatory recommendations based on algorithms

There is some preliminary research on discriminatory recommendations based on algorithms used by social media operators. The algorithms are used to prioritise and present content to the respective user. It can be assumed that the programmers of algorithmic systems pass on sexist and racist attitudes - and that they thus replicate and reproduce them (be it consciously or unconsciously).

A well-documented example of how discriminatory recommendation algorithms reinforce stereotypes is Twitter’s image preview: it appears that white faces are displayed more frequently than faces of Black people. The Expert Commission recommends:

Assessing and regulating recommendation algorithms

- » There is an urgent need to make recommendation algorithms on social media less gender-biased and discriminatory. It needs to be examined how the use of recommendation algorithms can be labelled and how this would be implemented in practice.

Digital violence

People who do not conform to traditional, heterosexual and binary gender images, e.g. because they are feminist, homosexual or transsexual, are pushed out of the online space by digital violence. Their freedom of expression is thus impaired.

Girls often experience digital violence for the first time between the ages of 14 and 16. To protect themselves, many are careful about whether and how they post. Some leave the platforms altogether.

The Expert Commission recommends:

Holding platform operators accountable

- » Platform operators must be held accountable and be obliged to protect people from (gender-based) digital violence. This includes, among other things, setting up complaint units that guarantee swift support for victims of digital violence.



More space for diversity

Social media are to offer people a space to create diverse personal self-portrayals free from stereotypes and norms. These can in fact be found online, for example when female YouTubers make a name for themselves with topics that are considered “typically male”, such as technology and computer science. Influencers who cannot be assigned to a binary gender image can present gender and/or sexual (self-) representations to LGBTIQ+ youth and (young) adults and thus offer them opportunities for identification that they might otherwise not have experienced in everyday life. Everyone finds opportunities in social media to participate in public discourses with their respective identities and lifestyles. Most importantly, these media provide access to communities and safe spaces that facilitate exchange, provide a sense of belonging and positive feedback, and can increase self-esteem.

Some websites and social media campaigns aim to break down gender stereotypes and encourage and empower people of different gender and sexual identities:

- » **Mein Testgelände (My testing ground):** The gender magazine www.meintestgelaende.de invites and encourages young people to produce their own contributions on gender issues.
- » **Genderdings (Gender thing):** The portal www.genderdings.de addresses young people and offers a self-empowerment approach.
- » **Erklär mir mal (Explain to me):** The Instagram account “erklärmiral” explains terms from the fields of queer and feminism, (anti-)racism, politics and society from a (post-)migrant and queer perspective.

There’s another way

Social media often have a negative impact on satisfaction with the own body, emotions, and mental health of the users. Studies show that especially girls and young women who use picture-based platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok become more critical and dissatisfied with their own bodies. Hashtags under which people post pictures of their seemingly optimal bodies, such as #fitspiration or #thinspiration, can lead to damage to mental and physical health and promote eating disorders or addiction to muscle development, for instance.

Some influencers help their followers overcome an eating disorder – for example by deliberately uploading photos without filters. Other critical approaches to such phenomena include hashtags like #nofilter, #bodypositivity, or #fatpositivity.

Organisations that deal with issues such as feminism, diversity, anti-racism, and homophobia also use social media as central communication tools and thus set a critical tone and accents. Examples include www.maedchenmannschaft.net, missy-magazine.de, or www.pinkstinks.de.

The Expert Commission recommends:

Promoting role models and positive examples

- » Young people in particular need diverse representations of gender, body types, and lifestyles to orient themselves. Therefore, projects and campaigns that convey such diversity should be promoted.

Increasing media literacy and education

- » Young users in particular need media literacy. Corresponding offers should include a reflection of gender roles and convey bodypositivity, i.e. a positive relationship to one’s own body. Since many users of social media are pupils, particularly schools, teachers, and parents must be addressed.

Expanding protection mechanisms

- » Tight legal guidelines for platforms are needed in order to better regulate social media content that has been proven to contribute to illness, e.g. movements that promote anorexia. The legal protection of children and young people in the field of media must be geared towards today’s digital media reality. To this end, appropriate structural prerequisites are needed.



The abbreviation

LGBTIQ+ means lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, inter* and queer people.



No space for digital violence



The digital space has become an essential prerequisite for freedom of expression and democratic participation. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter offer the possibility to express oneself publicly, to network with like-minded people, and to act politically. At the same time, (voluntary) activists in particular experience digital violence. Every second local politician has already experienced digital violence themselves. Hate speech is a particularly widespread form of such violence. Women are particularly affected in this regard: they receive hateful comments more often than men. These comments do not attack their opinion but them as a person and often include threats of sexual assault. In addition to individuals against whom the hatred of women is directed, equal rights and equal capabilities for all genders as political goals are often attacked and discredited. In these cases, also people are targeted who usually do not use the internet professionally, or only rarely. Among these people are for instance women's and gender equality officers. Are you affected by digital violence or want to protect yourself from it? You will find support and help here:

Contact information to initiatives against digital violence:

- » **Stark im Amt (Strong in Office):** This portal for municipal/local politics against hate and violence offers information, advice, and training for local politicians so that they can protect themselves against hate and violence, both on- and offline. www.stark-im-amt.de
- » **HateAid:** The counselling organisation HateAid gGmbH offers counselling and support to victims of digital violence through a litigation cost fund. www.hateaid.org
- » **bff – Frauen gegen Gewalt e. V. (Women against violence):** The project “bff - active against digital violence” offers information about as well as advice for action against gender-based digital violence such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying, or doxing (publication of personal data online). <https://www.frauen-gegen-gewalt.de/en/what-is-it-569.html>
- » **Hilfetelefon “Gewalt gegen Frauen” (Violence against women support Hotline):** The helpline offers confidential and free help and support in cases of digital violence on the number 08000 116 016 and via email or chat - 24/7, anonymous, multilingual, and easily accessible. www.hilfetelefon.de/en.html

The Expert Commission recommends:

- » Expanding initiatives and projects on the topic of gender-based digital violence and promoting their work with the aim of building sustainable structures and preserving the expertise gained on a long-term basis.

More information on this issue as well as further (policy) recommendations by the Expert Commission can be found in the Fact Sheet “Digital Violence”.



Further reading

- » Chapters B.IV.1 and B.IV.2 in the Expert Opinion part of the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government. The Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government is available (in German) at: <https://www.bmfsfj.de/gleichstellungsbericht>
- » Agency for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government (2021): Shaping digitalisation in a gender-equitable way. Summary of the Expert Opinion of the Third Gender Equality Report of the Federal Government. Berlin: Agency for the Third Gender Equality Report. Download at: <https://www.dritter-gleichstellungsbericht.de/de/topic/50.english.html>
- » Götz, Maya/Prommer, Elizabeth (2020): Geschlechterstereotype und Soziale Medien. Expert opinion for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government.
- » Frey, Regina (2020): Geschlecht und Gewalt im digitalen Raum. Eine qualitative Analyse der Erscheinungsformen, Betroffenheiten und Handlungsmöglichkeiten unter Berücksichtigung intersektionaler Aspekte. Expert opinion for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government.

Both expert opinions are available (in German) at: www.dritter-gleichstellungsbericht.de/de/topic/62.expertisen.html

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