

The Future of Gender and Gender Equality Online: A Scenario Analysis of Imaginaries on Gender and Social Media Platforms

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Abstract: The emergence and growth of the internet and social media platforms have engendered significant transformations in everyday life, affecting not only society's most innermost life but also its structural organization. This digital realm impacts gender equality, giving rise to spaces for feminist community building and activism, but at the same time enabling online gender harassment and violence. Our aim was to construct possible scenarios of the future, focusing on foreseeable consequences of social media on gender (in)equality in Europe. Using the Delphi+ method, we generated diverse future scenarios envisioning the intersection of gender and social media platforms. Through an analysis of these scenarios, we identified three recurring themes situated on a continuum from utopian to dystopian perspectives, including various positions in relation to the question of social media as safe or unsafe spaces. This study then provides us with possible imaginaries in relation to gender and social media platforms.

Keywords: Future scenarios, gender, gender equality, social media platform, feminism

INTRODUCTION

Technology isn't inherently progressive. Its uses are fused with culture in a positive feedback loop that makes linear sequencing, prediction, and absolute caution impossible. Technoscientific innovation must be linked to a collective theoretical and political thinking in which women, queers and the gender non-conforming play an unparalleled role. (Cuboniks, 2018, p. 17)

This quote from the manifesto "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation" entails the social shaping of technology and stresses the importance of including women, LGBTQIA+¹ people, and other non-hegemonic gender and sexual identities in thinking about technologies. Xenofeminism (XF) is a movement that explores the intersection of technomaterialism, anti-naturalism, and gender abolitionism (Hester, 2018). Xeno relates to foreign and, in this context, refers to alienated online space in comparison to today's practice of "infinite scrolling" on, for example, social media platforms. Xenofeminism embodies new political trajectories that re-engineer the world in relation to gender, which bridges ideas on the abolition of gender to the inclusion of the particularity and the blossoming of "a hundred sexes," stressing equalities (Hester, 2018; Kay, 2019).

Most authors claim that the arrival of the internet and social media platforms has changed everyday life immensely. Although some critics argue that this position leans towards technological determinism, many authors argue that the internet and social media have had an impact on aspects ranging from the most personal life of an individual (Hobbs et al., 2016; Cefai & Couldry, 2017) to the more structural and institutional way societies are organized (van Dijck, 2013). This online sphere has had consequences for gender equality, which range from creating spaces for feminist community building and activism, as the example

1 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more.

of xenofeminism shows (Kay, 2019), to many instances of online gender harassment and violence (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Ging & Siapera, 2019; Vickery & Everbach, 2018). The materiality of social media platforms not only impacts our lives, but media technologies and media platforms will surely continue to change our lives, including gender equality, even more in the future.

With the advent of the internet, various feminists (e.g., Clark-Parsons, 2018; Sunden, 2001) saw a utopian way forward by using the internet for their own purposes. They consider the internet a means for communication and emancipation and see endless possibilities to use the internet and social media as tools toward gender equality (Sunden, 2001). Today, however, the path towards utopian perspectives is tortuous and complex. The online sphere has been a place for both safe and unsafe cases related to gender equality (Clark-Parsons, 2018) and opens possibilities for increasing and enhancing emancipation, community building, and epistemic justice (Clark-Parsons, 2018). But, on the other hand, the online sphere has also generated unsafe consequences, such as harassment and sexism (Marwick & Caplan, 2018). With regard to gender and social media, the notion of safe/unsafe must be specifically addressed because it embodies the lived experiences of media users (Workman & Coleman, 2014). The notion is also part of the genderedness of media technology (Wajcman, 2010) and the gendered social shaping of social media platforms (Bivens & Haimson, 2016; Lundmark & Normark, 2014) or of media technology in general (Oudshoorn, Rommes & Steinstra, 2004; Rommes 2014). Our aim is to contribute to knowledge production and ideas about the relationship between social media platforms and gender (in)equality, and to think about the social shaping of technology in relation to gender.

To examine the foreseeable consequences of social media on gender (in)equality, we first focus on the way scholars have defined the effects and impact of digital media technologies on gender equality. Relevant theories range from cyberfeminist perspectives on the internet (for an overview, see Paasonen, 2011) as being full of possibilities, to scholars researching the dangers of social media in relation to gender equality and gender rights (see Fotopoulou, 2016). Allmer (2015) suggests theories are more optimistic about the potential of technology in relation to emancipation, equality, and inclusion. From this last perspective, social media platforms can be seen as spaces that allow women to come together and fight for their rights (Brown et al., 2017; Fabbri, 2022; Keller, 2011). However, at the same time, aspects such as anonymity facilitate online harassment (Ging & Siapera, 2019; Jane, 2016; Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021).

All these perspectives on the relationship between digital media and gender give us insights into how we can think about gender and social media platforms. But to fully understand this relationship, it is also relevant to consider possible futures. In view of what we know about today's situation, how can we imagine

the future of gender (in)equality in our society? In what ways can social media platforms enhance or impede gender equality and rights? To answer these questions, we analyzed the results of a scenario-building project, where the scenarios were generated through the Delphi+ method (See the introduction of this Special Issue, and Carpentier & Hroch, 2023). Discussions conducted using this method provided our research with multiple well-reasoned possible future scenarios. We worked on the basis that grounded theory and data are conceptualized as sites of ideological negotiations, and we looked for similar discourses and recurring arguments. By analyzing them from a theoretical discourse perspective (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1975) by using thematic analysis (Dusi & Stevens, 2022), we were able to identify three main themes: (1) gender over time and space: fluidity, (un)certainly and change; (2) doing gender: embodiment and representation of gender; and (3) gender and collectivity: resilience, activism, and solidarity. All three present distinct positions in relation to gender (in)equality and social media across utopian–dystopian and safe-unsafe continuums.

CYBERFEMINISM AND UTOPIAN FEMINIST IDEAS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENDER EQUALITY

Feminism is often described as a movement that has fought for gender equality in four waves, which correspond to the specific rights that feminists were targeting, and depended on context and timeframe. They saw the escalation of the internet and the growing predominance of its use as an opportunity to spread feminist discourse more widely. The feminist perspective that grew out of this view of the internet and online sphere as having utopian possibilities is called the cyberfeminist perspective (see Haraway, 1985; Plant, 1997) or later xenofeminism (see Hester, 2018; Kay, 2019). This perspective offered a path to discussions about which experiences feminist movements prioritized. It did so by exalting the disembodiment promoted by new technologies, resulting in multiple and innovative possibilities to rethink issues of identity, subjectivity, and the (de) construction of relationships established between women and technology.

Moreover, various feminists (e.g., Batool et al., 2022; Morahan-Martin, 2000) considered the internet a platform and space for feminist discourse and activism. The internet was seen as a space where women could find a voice and organize communities to strive for equality; it is capable of empowering women and other minority groups in ways barely imaginable in the past (Morahan-Martin, 2000). The internet provides women with a space for community building and social support. Sharing their experiences with other women has become easier through, for example, social media posts (Morahan-Martin, 2000). Social media platforms

provide an outlet to spread awareness of gender rights and other feminist issues by giving equal opportunities to individuals rather than those available in offline situations of community and awareness building (Batool et al., 2022). Reading about other women's experiences is much more accessible with the worldwide connection the internet offers (Morahan-Martin, 2000).

Furthermore, for various women it has become easier to seek information online on a wide range of topics (e.g., health care). The internet has made knowledge much more accessible, and its impact on people who were previously not included in its distribution, community building, and social support cannot be underestimated (Morahan-Martin, 2000). In this way, internet access can lead to improved empowerment of disadvantaged groups (Masi et al., 2003). According to Hamid et al. (2015), social media can help women and girls improve their knowledge, skills, careers, and more. Kadeswaran et al. (2020) argue social media grants people a voice that they otherwise might not have and a way of exploring and expanding their opinions and education on specific topics. Likewise, social media allows people to work from home, contact others online, build networks, and set up businesses. Social media entrepreneurship assists people who need mobility and flexibility (Komarraju et al., 2022). Melissa et al. (2013) discuss these needs in relation to women.

Online communities and platforms provide opportunities for intellectual and emotional development. Keller (2011), for example, illustrates how blogs help girls attain a deeper understanding of community, activism, and feminism by functioning as a platform for discussion and for formulating one's thoughts and feelings. Online communities can serve as a space to safely ask questions that feel uncomfortable in the real world and to "[learn] through discussion" (Clark-Parsons, 2018, p. 2140). This can add great value in the development of people (i.e., girls and women) who are not always understood or well represented in the real world. Additionally, even though we can imagine gender as fluid, most of the research in relation to gender equality and social media platforms is focusing on women and girls.

Clearly, the internet is a space where activism is discussed and spread, thereby creating a real and often positive impact on the world around it. As Connelly (2015) illustrates, using the example of Tumblr, online platforms have the potential to raise awareness of existing issues and initiate social change. By functioning as a space where activism can be discussed, the internet also helps shape social movements.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AS TOXIC AND DANGEROUS SPHERES FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Feminist imaginaries have constructed a mostly emancipatory impact on social media, especially in relation to seeking knowledge and building communities, but it is important to shed light on the negative consequences social media can have for gender equality. After all, the internet did not evolve into the strictly utopian space that cyberfeminism had envisioned. Considering that the body has been the site of heavily charged political struggles within feminist thought and activism, the romanticized and incorporeal nature of cyberfeminist values has provoked feminist criticism (Wajcman, 2004). Social media is not only a place that fulfills certain feminist ideals of community building, social networking, and equality of knowledge production and distribution (boyd, 2011), because it also has disadvantages. Although the internet provides people a space to talk, it also comes with its own gender-related dangers and gender inequality. Various feminist concerns about the internet and the use of social media point to online topics such as harassment, false information, oppression, and the like (Morahan-Martin, 2000).

Looking at online harassment, we can see how gender plays a role in various ways. First, women are particularly vulnerable to falling victim to online harassment (Bartlett et al., 2014; Jane, 2014). There are many ways to harass someone online, some of which are sexual. The internet can be a space for women to discover and express their sexuality facilitated by, for example, accessible knowledge, anonymity, and less physical restraint (Morahan-Martin, 2000). However, the anonymity and accessibility of the internet do not have only liberating sexual influences. Negative consequences stem from cases of unsolicited nudes, anonymous online harassment of people, harassing comments on women's sexual content, porn that objectifies women and girls, pictures and videos of women and girls that are shared without consent, and more (Morahan-Martin, 2000). Similarly, this danger can be illustrated by recent controversies in relation to deep-fake porn (Saner, 2024). Indeed, women can receive a harassing backlash to their own exploring online due to gendered communication styles and stereotypes (Morahan-Martin, 2000).

Notably, online sexism and harassment are often portrayed as "acceptable" by framing them as humor (Drakett et al., 2018). Instead of allowing women an online space and voice, harassment framed as "jokes" oppresses them and silences their voices. Women are then "othered" and excluded through humor in technological spaces (Drakett et al., 2018). Nadim and Fladmoe (2021) explore how online harassment affects men and women differently. Women who have been harassed online are likelier to be cautious in expressing their opinions and ideas publicly (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021), and consequently, they are likelier to be excluded and silenced.

While these studies mention online harassment generally, there are also feminist concerns about specific online harassment coming from the friends and lovers of women and girls. We can see modernization and technologization in the forms of violence toward women committed by their romantic partners. Studies such as one in Spain (Martínez-Pecino & Durán, 2019) underscore how many women are cyberbullied by their romantic partners. Moreover, in cyberbullying, we can identify the influences of male sexism (Martinez-Pecino & Durán, 2019). The overall prevalence of cyberbullying is hard to estimate; however, multiple studies argue for acknowledging its high incidence among teenagers and its gendered impact on them. Cyberbullying is becoming alarmingly common among teenagers and young people, whether they are perpetrators or victims (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Garaigordobil, 2011; Martinez-Pecino & Durán, 2019).

Granted, the internet makes distributing knowledge and ideas much more accessible. While this can be a good activity to ensure that valuable and often disregarded voices are heard, it can also have negative consequences, as it opens the door to a great deal of false information (Morahan-Martin, 2000). With so much information out there, it can be hard for users to distinguish between what is and is not real. Moreover, like how oppressed people can find a community online, the internet can also be a place where people with misogynist and sexist viewpoints can find each other (Morahan-Martin, 2000). We can think, for example, about ‘involuntary celibates’ (incels) who blame women for their own discomfort in society. Their hatred for women is justified through the presence of online incel communities, because not only do these communities perpetuate these ideas of fault and responsibility, but they also exacerbate them (Hoffman et al., 2020; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). Groups like these can then create support for violent, hostile, or simply deviant behavior. Such groups ensure that people can feel justified in committing dangerous or simply inappropriate acts directed at women and others (Morahan-Martin, 2000). While it helps create communities that support women, the internet also creates communities that threaten them.

Finally, although there is truth that social media platforms can provide women and girls with a community, a voice, and a place to access knowledge, this has not always been the case. Women worldwide have been slower to find their way to the internet, making sure that unequal power relations offline can find their way online. In other words, the internet may “amplify rather than diminish existing gender social, political, and economic inequities in the Digital Age” (Morahan-Martin, 2000, p. 683). Thus, in summary, although there can be emancipatory benefits in the possibilities the internet affords us through social media, there are many negative and harmful consequences for gender equality that accompany social media as well.

Considering these insights from previous research, we aim to investigate imaginaries and the possible futures envisioning the relationship between social

media platforms and gender (in)equality. These imaginaries deal with the individual, which entails the potential of gender fluidity or hybridity, and focus on the lived experiences of individuals but also of the collective, which is embodied by solidarity between gender groups, activism, and resistance.

METHODOLOGY: A FUTURE SCENARIO ANALYSIS

In this study, our aim was to answer the question of how we might see the future of gender equality in relation to social media platforms. Drawing upon theoretical and empirical insights from previous studies, we focused on the relationship between social media platforms and gender (in)equality, analyzing possible future scenarios that we have collected. To gather and build future scenarios, the Delphi+ method—as mentioned before, see the Introduction of this Special Issue, and Carpentier & Hroch (2023)—was used. All future scenarios or imaginaries describe potential variations, in which social media platforms demonstrate their impact on gender equality in Europe. Our analysis moves beyond the mere description of the scenarios, as they are used to map various alternative futures, to reflect about desired futures and how these can shape our future-present accordingly (Carpentier & Hroch, 2023; Inayatullah, 2012). Analyzing these varying imaginaries thus allows us to form an idea of how to envision possible futures, of what the future in relation to gender and social media might be.

For this article, we focused on 22 scenario cards (SCs) gathered from the four Delphi+ workshops at Sofia (coded Si and Sii), Malmö (M) and Rome (R) on the theme “Gender and Gender Inequality in Societies” [g&ge] created by an aggregate of 29 experts. In addition, the members of the EUMEPLAT consortium, within the context of a topic-specific writing project wrote 11 future scenarios essays (FSEs). An overview and the in-text coding of all 33 scenarios (22 SCs and 11 FSEs) can be found in Appendix 1. In our analysis, we thematically analyzed the scenarios and organized them in relation to how people today envision the future of gender and social media. The first phase of the analysis resulted in the identification of two dimensions: a utopian–dystopian perspective and whether they are safe or unsafe. This means that all scenarios were placed on these two axes (see Fig. 1). We first checked whether the wording of the scenarios described them more as either utopian or dystopian. This classification was driven by questions such as: Are the scenarios describing ideal conditions? Are they not necessarily practical or real, but idealistic? Do they take intersectionality into account? How fully positive are they? If the answers to these questions were positive, we categorized them as utopian. However, some scenarios were inherently dystopian, meaning not necessarily realistic but negative, and with consequences that could spiral out of control.

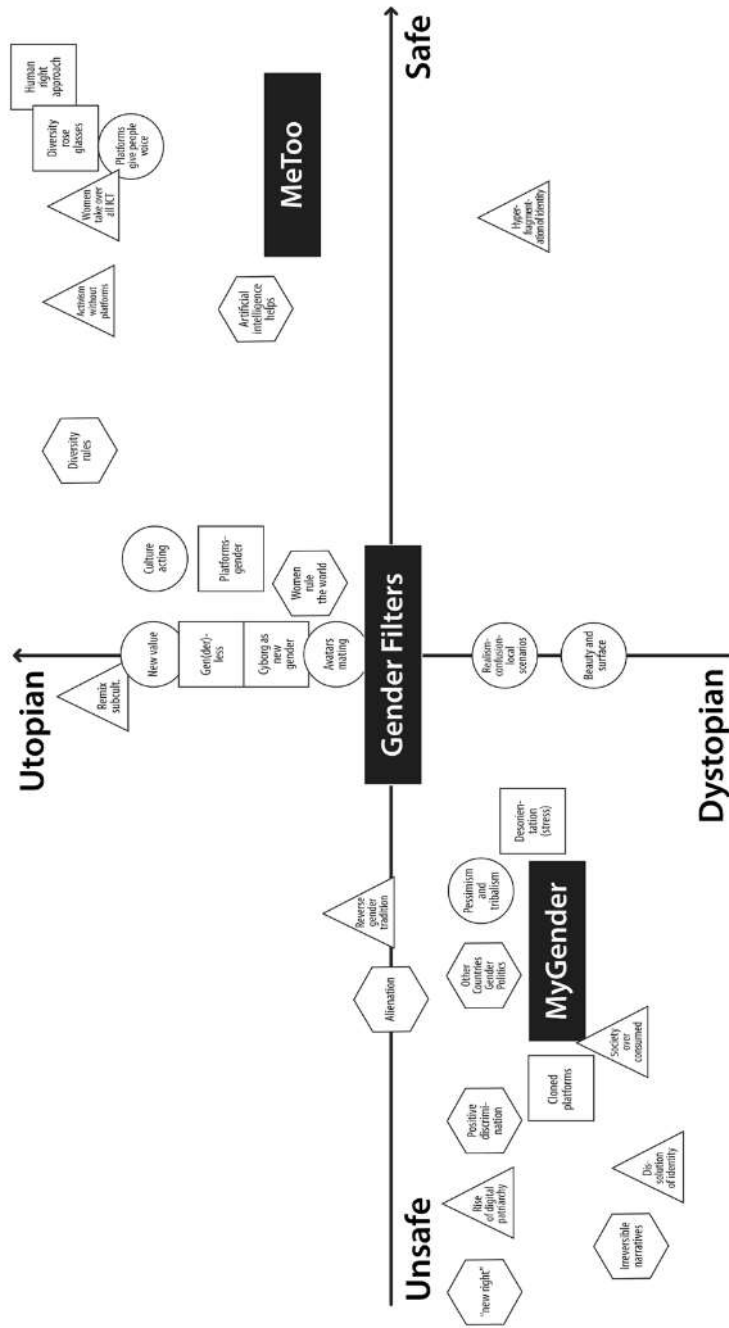
Next, we analyzed whether the wording of a scenario could be seen as safe or unsafe situations with regard to gender. The scenarios were considered safe if they described narratives moving toward gender equality and freedom of gender identity and expression. Safe scenarios can include legal frameworks and describe situations that are far from physical and psychological danger. Moreover, they do not allow discrimination, inequality, or exclusion. In contrast, scenarios were considered unsafe when their narratives moved away from gender equality and freedom. Unsafe scenarios also lacked legal frameworks for the protection of gender equality. An important note in relation to these axes is that we analyzed the scenarios based on the way how the author(s) framed them. In other words, we described scenarios as utopian/dystopian and safe/unsafe only if the author(s) of the scenarios viewed these possible futures in these ways. As such, even though at first glance utopian-dystopian and safe-unsafe can be considered two sides of the same coin, aspects such as the interpretation of the author(s) can result in differences. Indeed, our analysis demonstrated the existence of one scenario that was perceived as very safe but at the same time dystopian.

We analyzed the scenarios using a thematic analysis with a specific focus on the narratives created around social media and gender. We started our analysis by inductively and carefully re-reading our data in detail (Polkinghorne, 1995).

We searched for narrative and discursive patterns in our data and connected and clustered similar codes into three major themes. We identified these themes as the most significant topics in the narratives of the scenarios. We thematically coded their narratives according to the themes: (1) gender over time and space: fluidity, (un)certainty, and change; (2) doing gender: embodiment and representation of gender; and (3) gender and collectivity: resilience, activism, and solidarity. All scenarios fell under those three recurring themes. Therefore, we decided to focus on these three themes as an analytic framework. Secondly, we analyzed how these were related with the dimensions (or axes) such as safe/unsafe and utopian/dystopian. With this methodological frame, we aimed to gain insight into the discourses on the imagined futures of gender and social media. The themes all cover safe, unsafe, utopian, and dystopian scenarios.

We explain the themes by focusing on excerpts from future scenarios. These excerpts were chosen because they can be seen as diverse in relation to the two utopian/dystopian and safe/unsafe axes. In this way, aside from illustrating the three general themes (which contain scenarios at various points on the axes), these examples can give an idea of what might happen in utopian, dystopian, safe, unsafe, or rather neutral future worlds. The scenarios are illustrative because they clearly show the relationship between social media and gender (in)equality. Below is a graph depicting all the scenarios (see Fig 1). The themes are not visible since all three cover scenarios on various points of the axes.

Figure 1. Graph of future scenarios on gender²



2 The four types of shapes only serve to make the scenarios distinct.

THE THREE THEMES IMAGINING THE FUTURE OF GENDER AND GENDER EQUALITY ONLINE

■ THEME 1: GENDER OVER TIME AND SPACE: FLUIDITY, (UN)CERTAINTY, AND CHANGE

This theme concerns individual experiences of gender over time and space. Scenarios under this theme discuss the feelings, understandings, and experiences of gender that people may have. They illustrate how ideas of gender can vary, depending on the countries, in which people live or the communities that surround them. With the authors of the scenarios being mainly European, mentioned countries were found to be European as well. Gender, in this sense, is a cultural factor. The scenarios also show how gender identities and our perceptions of them can fluctuate over time. One scenario, for example, imagines a future when there will be even more gender identities distinguished (SC[g&ge]26_R). This is seen by the author(s) as very safe but rather dystopian. Addressing gender identities has fluctuated and most probably will continue to fluctuate over time. Moreover, not only is this non-fixedness of gender identities seen in relation to their conceptualization, as it can also be found when looking at people's individual and lived experiences. People's gender identities can fluctuate over their lifetimes. Both gender identities and own gender journeys can be fluid and not necessarily fixed. However, this aspect is not necessarily fully recognized by contemporary societies and their legislations. Future scenarios may therefore solidify the idea that gender is fixed, or they may move away from this misconception (an example of the latter is SC[g&ge]19_Sii, which the author(s) considered as neutral with regards to safe-unsafe but rather utopian). The future scenarios we collected focused on these topics, partly related to social media. These latter scenarios focused, for example, on not only future ideas of gender but also on the way these ideas would be distributed and find a place on social media.

To illustrate this theme in more depth, we focused on one of the future scenarios, entitled: "What if there would be a social media platform that quantified the certainty of how people feel about their gender identity?" (FSE[g&ge]25). This scenario imagines a world in which expecting certainty of one's gender identity is taken even further than it is today. It refers to a social media platform, MyGender, where people give information about their gender. However, it is also used as a surveillance app to decide whether people can take certain medical or legal steps in their transgender journey (FSE[g&ge]25). It is classified as an unsafe and rather dystopian scenario.

Societies today expect certainty from people about their gender identities. This is notable in the future scenario on MyGender. Indeed, societies are generally not

compatible with the fluidity and malleability that can be inherent in gender. This is reflected in the legislation of various countries in relation to, for example, transgender care.

When looking at legislation regarding transgender care, we see a variety of laws and legislation across European countries. Whereas some countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Albania, North Macedonia, and Hungary) have no legislation regarding the recognition of transgender people, others do, but with numerous conditions that transgender people must meet to be eligible. (Transgender Infopunt, 2023, cited in FSE[g&ge]25)

These requirements are in place in recognition of the certainty with which transgender people are expected to experience their gender identity. This future scenario takes the idea of the necessity of certainty further by describing a future when everyone (starting from the moment a child leaves kindergarten) must have an account on the surveillance social media app MyGender. The future scenario describes the app and its use as follows:

Every day, MyGender asks you to fill in a questionnaire. This questionnaire is made up of different questions aimed to understand one's current gender identity and expression. For young kids, questions are asked like "do you feel like a boy today?" or "which outfit do you prefer wearing?" together with five outfits ranging from very masculine to androgynous to very feminine presenting. The questions change with the users' ages. ... Each day, people's answers are turned into percentages. These show how much you felt like a woman, a man, a non-binary person ... during that day. The percentages then get saved on your identity card. ... If transgender people want to start certain procedures in their trans journey (like hormone therapy), they must receive a green light from the specialists in question (like doctors). These specialists are legally obliged to consult the saved percentages on the identity cards. Only when for 10 years their patients have had a sufficiently high percentage of the gender they say they are, can the specialists start thinking about allowing the requested procedures. The exact percentages vary from 70 to 100%, depending on the procedure. (FSE[g&ge]25)

This is an example of a scenario in which the idea of certainty in relation to gender identity has been radicalized. The scenario is an illustration of how contemporary societies and possible future variation fail to leave room for the very normal doubt transgender people can experience (since lack of representation, etc., is the perfect fuel for doubt) and the fluidity that can be inherent in certain gender identities. Moreover, it is an example of how social media can

not only allow people to gain gender-related knowledge and find communities (boyd, 2011; Kadeswaran et al., 2020), but can also take this too far by surveilling them. In short, scenarios under this first theme talk about gender in relation to certainty–uncertainty, fluidity, and change over time and space.

■ THEME 2: DOING GENDER: EMBODIMENT AND REPRESENTATION OF GENDER

This theme covers scenarios addressing ways of doing gender. Again, these scenarios express themselves on an individual level. However, while the first theme considers the way people experience, feel, and conceptualize gender, the second looks at gender's representation and embodiment. Scenarios under this theme discuss what representing one's gender and gender identities looks like, and others cover topics such as believability e.g., FSE[g&ge]4 and FSE[g&ge]24. Whereas the former is considered neutral (including positive and negative elements) the latter is negative on both axes. Both FSE[g&ge]4 and FSE[g&ge]24 discuss the relation of gender embodiment with being believed by others or not focusing on authenticity. That is, alongside embodiment and representation, the scenarios also discuss the perception of these representations and images. One scenario does this by imagining a deep fake-inspired future in relation to gender (FSE[g&ge]24). Most scenarios also discuss these topics of representation, embodiment, and perception in relation to social media. As discussed, social media can be a place for people to find a community and themselves (boyd, 2011), but also for others to perceive people and their (gendered) representation online and respond to it. This can result in online harassment, gendered backlashing focusing on stereotypes, cyberbullying and more (Bartlett et al., 2014; Jane, 2014; Martínez-Pecino & Durán, 2019; Morahan-Martin, 2000). To better illustrate this theme, we focused on a scenario that covers all aspects of the theme and presents them in relation to social media. This scenario is entitled: "What if filters on social media allowed users to believably change their secondary sex characteristics in pictures and videos?" (FSE[g&ge]4), which describes filters that can believably change one's secondary sex characteristics in pictures and videos. The scenario is described by the author(s) as having both dystopian and utopian, and safe and unsafe aspects (FSE[g&ge]4).

The future scenario discusses authenticity in online spaces in relation to gender and mentions how people on social media "try to show their most 'authentic self' to be either or both relatable and real to their followers" (Banet-Weiser, 2021 cited in FSE[g&ge]4). However, as the scenario mentions, "this self is always influenced by culture and social norms" (Banet-Weiser, 2021 cited in FSE[g&ge]4). Likewise, this self is constructed by cultural and social norms regarding gender representation, as the essay explains:

When users try to show their most ‘authentic self’ online, they can be confronted with online gender norms. These norms raise the question of what to do with one’s gender identity and expression online (Kondakciu et al., 2021). Can one’s gender identity and expression be shown, and how? Is it safe for people to do so, and are they inauthentic if they don’t? There is a tension between those two aspects. (FSE[g&ge]4)

In this context, the scenario anticipates that a certain kind of social media filter will be invented. These filters could believably change one’s secondary sex characteristics in online pictures and videos. By doing this, the filters allow users to represent their gender in a way that feels true to themselves. Alternately, filters can be used by people who believe that their voices might be taken more seriously if others imagined them to be another gender and embody a voice of authority. Aside from possible results in gender euphoria or a voice of authority (depending on the reason for using them), these filters can also have a negative impact. Online euphoria could make people more dysphoric offline (using the filters could lead to a backlash if followers, friends and family knew about the filter and called the users “fake”, in line with more pessimistic theories on the impact of social media). We could question whether real sustainable gender equality in relation to the voice of authority could be reached without any diverse gender representation (FSE[g&ge]4). Moreover, we can imagine this to differ depending on the locations and situatedness of people, such as for example whether or not they live in Europe. We can thus both envision utopian and dystopian outcomes of the scenario, which is therefore rather neutral in relation to the dichotomies safe/unsafe and utopian/dystopian. The scenario also illustrates both the various ideas of gender embodiment and representation online and the relation of these representations to credibility and the perceptions of others.

■ THEME 3: GENDER AND COLLECTIVITY: RESILIENCE, ACTIVISM, AND SOLIDARITY

In the third theme, gender topics related to collectivity were articulated in various scenarios. That is, these future scenarios discuss activism in relation to equal opportunities and gender rights. They mention, for example, topics like “what if women ruled the world” or situations in which only women would run certain fields (for example, ICT) (SC[g&ge]16_R and FSE[g&ge]23). Of these two scenarios, the former is perceived as very safe and very utopian and the latter as slightly safe and slightly utopian. They also discuss possible futures when gender equality has reverted to a state reminiscent of several years prior (e.g., FSE[g&ge]14, which is seen as very unsafe and slightly dystopian). Most scenarios speak from a European perspective as most of their authors are European. Some scenarios discuss these topics in relation to social media, as this can also allow for activism,

community building and solidarity (e.g. Connelly, 2015; Kay, 2019; Keller, 2011). One scenario, for example, portrays a future in which activism would be fully offline and not rely on online platforms (SC[g&ge]27_R), which is seen as safe and very utopian. The scenarios under this theme illustrate possible futures, either with or without both resilience toward gender inequality and solidarity for victims of gender issues. An example is the following: “What if #MeToo would be turned into a social media platform?” (FSE[g&ge]15, which is seen as safe and rather utopian). This scenario imagines a future in which there would be more safety from gender violence due to the installation of a specific social media app, *MeToo*. The author(s) of the scenario portrays it as safe and rather utopian. This scenario is also one of the examples that connect possible future ideas of activism with social media (in line with examples of Connelly, 2015; Kay, 2019; Keller, 2011). Indeed, it situates a world in which #MeToo is turned into a safety and informational social media app, *MeToo* (FSE[g&ge]15).

This app is a positive future scenario as it extends the positive impact of #MeToo with regard to representation, recognition, and knowledge of sexual violence. By posting their own experiences, people break the taboo around sexual violence and further the effect of #MeToo. By sharing information on sexual violence and help for victims, people create needed knowledge. This knowledge is being shared on a social media app, making it accessible for a very broad audience. Lastly, the map can be seen as an archive and a useful tool about safety and unsafety. People can consult the map to gain space- and time-specific information about sexual violence and (un)safety. Whereas some of the app’s features already exist in different forms today, in 20 years from now, the app *MeToo* enriches the possibilities of these existing features by broadening them and bringing them together in one platform. To conclude, this app can be seen as a positive extension of the hashtag. The app breaks taboos and creates recognition, representation, and acknowledgment of sexual violence and its impact. (FSE[g&ge]15)

The scenario, like others under this theme, starts by looking at current forms of activism. In this example, current forms of dealing with sexual violence, such as #MeToo and Meldet (<https://meldet.org/>) (FSE[g&ge]15), continue to imagine ways, in which these forms of activism could be strengthened, held back, or remain unchanged. This particular scenario (FSE[g&ge]15) looks at the first way, and more specifically is an illustration of strengthening current activism by using social media (comparable to examples discussed by Connelly, 2015; Kay, 2019; Keller, 2011). The other scenarios in this third theme work in similar ways and range from safe to unsafe and utopian to dystopian.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the future scenarios demonstrated in many ways what gender (in)equality on social media might look like in 20 or 30 years. By clustering the scenarios into three main themes, we were able to construct an idea about the various ways in which social media can relate to gender (in)equality. Some future scenarios are more or less desirable and articulate a utopian and safe vision. All of them show where we, as a community of European citizens, might find ourselves. Understanding future scenarios and possibilities in relation to gender is meaningful because it pinpoints what must be done in the present to prevent potential future scenarios from happening. The internet and social media are ever evolving and impact our daily lives, and by extension, they impact gender equality. We identified positive impacts regarding feminist issues that reflect some of the aspirations formulated in existing cyberfeminist (Sunden, 2001; Plant, 1997) and xenofeminist theories (Hester, 2018; Kay, 2019). Social media provides a platform to gain knowledge that might not otherwise reach those who need it. Moreover, it provides opportunities for women and girls to create communities. People suffering from gender inequality can find each other on social media platforms by sharing their stories. This can then, in turn, lead to offline activism.

Current social media and internet possibilities in general seem rather hopeful with regards to feminism and gender equality. These imaginaries can be linked to the strand of cyberfeminism, in which the term “stands for feminist analyses of human–machine relations, embodiment, gender, and agency in a culture saturated with technology” (Paasonen, 2011, p. 340). However, on the flip side of the coin, social media is also responsible for the negative consequences diminishing gender equality. Women and girls are frequent victims of online harassment. This online harassment and sexism are often accepted by disguising them as “humor.” The anonymity of social media can also turn the idea of the internet as a feminist utopia upside down. It ensures that those who commit acts of online harassment or sexism are not held accountable. Thus, although the internet and social media have a positive potential regarding feminist issues (Squires, 2000), they come with threats to gender equality. These critical thoughts on media technology in relation to gender are linked to the strand in cyberfeminist theory that “points to critical analyses of cyberculture in relation to feminist thought, where cyberfeminism becomes a critical feminist position for interrogating and intervening in specific technological forms and practices” (Paasonen, 2011, p. 340).

By grasping the various ideas people have about possible futures in relation to gender and gendered othering, particularly on social media we can think about what kind of society, including the online spaces, we want in our future. This can, in turn, fuel

questions about what we, as a society, can do now. What can we do to prevent the dangerous and encourage the desirable possible future scenarios?

Based on the analysis of the future scenarios, it became clear that there are many contexts across Europe and these contexts are important in the way future scenarios relating to gender are formulated and seen as somewhat utopian or dystopian and either safe or unsafe. A broader development of European values reflected in legislation is one of the arguments that seems to be present. Media, and more particularly social media platforms, are seen as an important material place and space where gender is perceived and articulated. The idea of fluidity of gender identity is related to the material aspect of social media platforms and what these technologies can do. The materiality of the media technology becomes important and as Niels Van Doorn (2011) argues gender, sexuality and embodiment “come to ‘matter’ in digital environments” stressing the fact that we need to rethink the materiality of the digital. The fluidity of gender identities seems often articulated as part of the performativity online but does not seem as inscribed in the materiality of the technology although there is a concern about the social shaping of technology.

In the scenarios, the idea that social media spaces need to be safe spaces, especially in relation to expressing gender identities, is prominent. Despite the general concern about polarization online, including the backlash in some European countries, media platforms are seen as a place of “action”—from a place for individual expressions of gender identity to a place of collectivity and gender activism.

Although there is much reflection on the pitfalls of social media and a plea for safe spaces is present, the imagined futures are mostly quite hopeful in seeing all kinds of opportunities into technology. We can question if – related to gender and social media technologies or media technologies in general – we can and do look into the future with an optimistic lens (Dickel & Schrape, 2017) and how did this come about? As a result of our digital everyday lives, are we increasingly intertwined in media technologies to the extent that we are not even capable of thinking detached from these technologies? And are future scenarios about gender and social media alternative constructions of reality?

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APPENDIX

FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY-FSE (N=11)

SCENARIO CARDS—SC (N=22)

IN-TEXT CITATION FORMATS:

FSE[thematic code]n

SC[thematic code]n

THEME AND CODE:

GENDER AND GENDER EQUALITY [G&GE]

FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 1. FSE[g&ge]1 What if differences in views on gender – and depictions of this in media – escalated; resulting in deepened polarization and alienation, further fueling increased division between countries, cultures and groups of people?	FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 2. FSE[g&ge]2 What if worldwide media organizations were mostly run by women and LGBTQ+ people, positioned at top managerial posts? How would this condition impact the diversity of (journalistic) content?	FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 3. FSE[g&ge]3 What would happen if artificial intelligence helped us to design more integrated populations by applying feminist urbanism and promoting women in rural areas?
FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 4. FSE[g&ge]4 What if filters on social media allowed users to believably change their secondary sex characteristics in pictures and videos?	FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 12. FSE[g&ge]12 What if the ‚new right‘ in Europe, in 20 years, were to increasingly use feminist discourse to discriminate against those who are not receptive to feminist values?	FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 13. FSE[g&ge]13 What could happen of countries were not affected by other countries' gender politics?
FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 14. FSE[g&ge]14 What if all positive discrimination and affirmative action--the measures to achieve effective parity between, and equal opportunities for, women and men--were eliminated?	FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 15. FSE[g&ge]15 What if #MeToo would be turned into a social media platform?	FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 23. FSE[g&ge]23 What if women ruled the world?
FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 24. FSE[g&ge]24 What if platforms produce irreversible narratives of gender identities?	FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY 25. FSE[g&ge]25 What if there were a social media platform that quantified the certainty of how people feel about their gender identity?	
SCENARIO CARD 5. SC[g&ge]5 Reverse gender tradition	SCENARIO CARD 6. SC[g&ge]6 Running in circles (the rise of digital patriarchy)	SCENARIO CARD 7. SC[g&ge]7 Rebirth and remix of subcultures
SCENARIO CARD 8. SC[g&ge]8 Human rights approach	SCENARIO CARD 9. SC[g&ge]9 Disorientation	SCENARIO CARD 10. SC[g&ge]10 New Values
SCENARIO CARD 11. SC[g&ge]11 Pessimism	SCENARIO CARD 16. SC[g&ge]16 Women take over all ICT	SCENARIO CARD 17. SC[g&ge]17 A society overconsumed by gender Identities

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SCENARIO CARD 18. SC[g&ge]18 Cloned platforms	SCENARIO CARD 19. SC[g&ge]19 Gen(der)less	SCENARIO CARD 20. SC[g&ge]20 Platforms – gender intersectionality with youth
SCENARIO CARD 21. SC[g&ge]21 Realism	SCENARIO CARD 22. SC[g&ge]22 Kardashianisation	SCENARIO CARD 26. SC[g&ge]26 Hyper fragmentation of identity
SCENARIO CARD 27. SC[g&ge]27 Activism without platforms	SCENARIO CARD 28. SC[g&ge]28 Dissolution of identities	SCENARIO CARD 29. SC[g&ge]29 Diversity rose-tinted glasses
SCENARIO CARD 30. SC[g&ge]30 Cyborg as a new gender	SCENARIO CARD 31. SC[g&ge]31 Platforms give people voice	SCENARIO CARD 32. SC[g&ge]32 Dealing with and counteracting hatred towards women, vulnerable groups, etc.
SCENARIO CARD 33. SC[g&ge]33 Avatars mating		

KEY:

FUTURE SCENARIO ESSAY (FSE): written by EUMEPLAT consortium researchers.

SCENARIO CARDS (SC): created and written by participants of the four Delphi+ workshops.