Discursive Polarisation and the (Non-)Binary Spectrum: Social Media Debate on Gender Diversity

Andressa Costa

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

E-mail: andressa.costa@kit.edu

Abstract

The role of social media platforms in amplifying debates around gender binarity and non-binarity has become increasingly evident in recent years. Indeed, these platforms have been shown to have an effect on ideological and affective polarisation. The gender binarity characterises gender as inherently dichotomous and perpetuates social hierarchies, including patriarchy and cisnormativity. Non-binary identities challenge this binarity, exposing its constructed nature and reframing gender as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. Through their technological structure and interaction dynamics, social media intensify psychological mechanisms of opinion formation, consolidating attitudes and increasing polarisation (Könneker, 2020). This study aims to investigate discursive polarisation in the gender debate in social media by addressing two fundamental questions: How do ideological and affective polarisation manifest in social media discussions on gender diversity? Which rhetorical strategies are used to create or reinforce polarisation? Combining discursive polarisation frameworks (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023) with computational text analysis, this study analyses the KoKoKom corpus of German social media comments (YouTube, Reddit, Instagram, X, Facebook) on the Gender debate. This addresses the gaps in operationalising polarisation through both linguistic patterns and affective discourse. Biterm Topic Modelling (BTM) (Yan et al., 2013) was used to identify latent topics, with concordance analysis and manual coding employed to classify the topics as ideological framings and detect polarising rhetorical devices (Fortuna, 2019). Three central frames were identified through topic modelling and qualitative analysis: the binary gender model, biological versus social concepts of sex/gender, and epistemic frameworks and controversies in sex and gender discourse. Concordance analysis revealed rhetorical strategies, including derogatory language, references to moral or scientific authority, overgeneralisation and simplification through dichotomies. Subsequent analyses will concentrate on affective polarisation to examine how groups are communicatively constructed in the debate. The present study contributes methodologically to language-centred research on polarisation by employing computational and discourse-analytic methods.

Keywords: discursive polarisation, gender debate, social media corpus, topic modelling, rhetorical strategies

References

Brüggemann, M., & Meyer, H. (2023). When debates break apart: Discursive polarization as a multi-dimensional divergence emerging in and through communication. Communication Theory, 33(2–3), 132–142. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad012

Fortuna, A. (2019): Polarization: Rhetorical Strategies in the Tea Party Network. De Gruyter.

Könneker, C. (2020). Wissenschaftskommunikation und Social Media: Neue Akture, Polarisierung und Vertrauen. In Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft: Ein vertrauensvoller Dialog. Positionen und Perspektiven der Wissenschaftskommunikation heute (S. 25–46). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-59466-7

Yan, X., Guo, J., Lan, Y., & Cheng, X. (2013). A Biterm Topic Model for Short Texts. 1445–1456. https://github.com/xiaohuiyan/xiaohuiyan.github.io/blob/master/paper/BTM-WWW13.pdf