

# Political Deepfakes on Social Media

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A Case-Study of user-comments to Grok  
AI Deepfakes of Ebba Busch on X

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## Abstract

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**Title:**

Political Deepfakes on Social Media: A Case-Study of user-comments to Grok AI Deepfakes of Ebba Busch on X

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**Summary:**

This study outlines the digital use of AI and the production of Deepfakes, with a focal lens on social media platform X and its integrated AI Grok. The study analyses comments through a sociological lens regarding Swedish political figure Ebba Busch in the Grok scandal, which happened in late December 2025 to mid-January 2026. It focuses on users' opinions, norms and values which reflect a deeper understanding of how AI Deepfakes are normalised.

**Key words:**

Artificial Intelligence (AI), Deepfake, Technology Facilitated Gendered-Based Violence (TFGBV), Swedish digital political contexts, symbolic violence, doing gender, political scandal

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## **Foreword**

We want to give thanks to our supervisor, Imad Rasan, who has given us insightful suggestions throughout the process of writing this study. We also want to thank our friends and family, who have throughout the process contributed with sending us interesting articles and discussions.

The process of writing this paper has been incredibly insightful and interesting, not only in studying the case itself, but also in learning general knowledge regarding Artificial Intelligence and its integration on social-media platforms and its use in political contexts.

Thank you,  
Elsa Agnell and Hampus Agartz.

# 1. Introduction

Most people use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to write emails, summarise documents, or plan grocery shopping lists (Medium, 2025; DiFelice, 2026). In late December 2025, however, thousands of users on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) had a different idea, namely, generating Swedish party-leader and deputy prime minister Ebba Busch in a bikini (SVT, 2026).

This happened after an update to X's integrated AI-tool 'Grok', which enabled users to publicly tag the model with prompts to manipulate already posted images to the platform (MIT, n.d.; CCDH, 2026). Studies after the update show that 53% of generated images during this period depicted individuals in minimal clothing, with 81% of these depictions being women (Bouchaud, 2026:2). What unfolded was a platform-enabled practice, one in which the sexualisation of a female politician's body became a casual, highly participatory and publicly visible event. The case of Ebba Busch is sociologically distinctive in this regard. It represents one of the first widely visible instances of AI-generated sexualised content being produced and circulated through a mainstream social-media platform with integrated generative AI (Ferber, 2026). Digital media, such as social-media platforms, can be highly unstable for a politician's reputation and create grounds for manufacturing scandals (Thompson, 2018). Thus, the introduction of newer technologies, such as generative AI, is distinctively important to analyse to sociologically understand how users on such media platforms respond to such content-production, especially in regards to women in politics. This case situates itself in a Swedish digital political context, where X is used as a public platform where political commentary happens, both for and in response to Swedish politicians. In this study, the term 'Swedish digital political context' is used to refer to the intersection between Sweden's institutionalised political characteristics and the digital platforms where political conversation increasingly takes place.

The practice at the centre of this study belongs to a category of AI-generated content known as Deepfakes. Deepfakes constitute synthetically produced media in which an individual's likeness is manipulated or fabricated without their consent (Haas, 2025:13). Studies show that 99% of Deepfakes are targeted at women, with the majority being sexual in nature (Haas, 2025:107; Bentzen, 2026:3). UN Women (2025) classifies

this practice as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which is a form of gender-based violence enabled or amplified by digital technologies. The EU AI Act and the General Data Protection Regulation both increasingly emphasise non-consensual Deepfake generation not only ethically problematic but legally contestable (European Union, 2024; European Parliament, 2021; Twomey, 2025). The Swedish equality authority, Jämställhetsmyndigheten (2026), also press for more regulation regarding Deepfakes, but states its implementation sometimes clashes with the law of freedom of expression. Sociologically, however, what matters most is not only the legal dimension but what Deepfake content and opinions regarding it reveals about the social norms and power-relations that govern women's presence in digital political life.

The implication for women in politics is particularly significant. Giugni (2021) demonstrates that female politicians are disproportionately targeted by Deepfake production, which can reinforce conditions under which women's authority in political life remains structurally precarious. Unlike earlier Deepfake cases Giugni outlines, Grok's integration into X's reply interface lowered the threshold for participation in TFGBV to the point where it required no technical skill, no separate platform, and no departure from the platform's ordinary social interaction (Conger et al., 2026). This signals a qualitative shift from deviant subcultural practice to normalised features of mainstream digital life, and raises sociological questions about how such normalisation is produced, justified and contested by the users who witness and participate in it. Existing research presents a gap where documented patterns of minimisation and normalisation in Deepfake and TFGBV are rarely examined in digital comment culture. Furthermore, existing research does not address how user-comments construct and negotiate attitudes toward AI-generated Deepfake production as a tool.

This study examines user comments on X in response to the Busch Deepfake scandal, analysing what themes and patterns emerge and if they reveal mechanisms which align with previous research and theories of TFGBV in a Swedish digital political context. Using netnography as a methodological approach, which allows for systematic analysis of digital traces, the study conducts a qualitative case analysis of 179 coded entries, all from different users, drawn from four posts spanning late December 2025 to mid-January 2026. The theoretical framework synthesises Bourdieu's (2001) concept of

symbolic violence at its core, extended through Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence into the digital context, West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of doing gender and Thompson's (2000; 2018) framework for political scandals in digital environments. Together these frameworks allow for analysis of how TFGBV is discussed, how female politicians are constructed in digital comments and how the scandalisation of the case is framed. This addresses the identified research gap by examining public comments around a specific incident and how users interact with AI generated Deepfake production.

### ***1.1 Purpose and Question***

The purpose of this study is to understand how AI-integration on social-media X is used as a tool to facilitate TFGBV on digital platforms, analysing user comments toward Ebba Busch on the platform after the introduction of Grok's image generative feature. This study conducts a netnographic case-study of responses towards Ebba Busch, analysing four posts. The study aims to understand the views present on X towards Deepfake production of Ebba Busch. The data collected is then sorted thematically, analysing important sociological aspects related to symbolic violence, doing gender and political scandals. Thus, the research questions are framed as:

- What themes and patterns emerge in user comments on X in response to the Grok–Busch Deepfake scandal?
- Do user responses to the Busch scandal reveal mechanisms of TFGBV and if so what do they say about gendered power structures in Swedish digital political contexts?

### ***1.2 Disposition of the Study***

The study will begin by outlining important background information in which the case and important context is introduced. Secondly, previous research is presented to gain understanding of the studies' scientific context. Thirdly, the four main theories will then be introduced, using Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence' as the core theory which permeates the framework, extended through Kelly's theory of the 'Continuum of Sexual Violence'. West and Zimmerman's theory of 'doing gender' explains how users hold Ebba Busch accountable to her specific gender and 'sex category' in relation to her political position. Finally, Thompson's theory of political scandal will highlight

important factors which illustrate how transgressions of norms lead to scandal in a digital context to understand how users navigate the scandal to take accountability for producing TFGBV or flip the narrative onto Busch as a political figure. The method follows, with a detailed explanation of how the study utilises a qualitative case-study approach with netnographic research. The analysis presents the data, starting with highlighting key observations from user content and presenting relevant themes. The discussion contextualises the findings, how it answers research questions and encourages further research.

### ***1.3 Delimitation***

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged at the outset. As a single-case netnographic study, the findings are bound by their context and do not claim to be generalisable beyond the specific phenomenon examined: the comments to AI-generated Deepfake imagery of one female politician, Ebba Busch, on one platform, X, within a particular national political setting, Sweden. This study does not seek to produce a representative account of Swedish public opinion toward Ebba Busch, nor does it make claims about the prevalence of TFGBV on X more broadly. It does not analyse the production of the Deepfake images themselves, nor does it examine platform policy or Grok's algorithmic design. These remain outside the scope of the study. The focus is instead strictly on the 178 comments drawn from different users commenting under the selected posts from late December 2025 to the middle of January 2026, and what these reveal. Furthermore, this study does not attempt to quantify the volume or frequency of particular comment types, as its aim is interpretive rather than statistical. The dataset, assembled through a combination of search terms limiting the time-frame to the given case-study time and manual selection of viral posts related to Ebba Busch and her own posts, reflects curated choices that are made transparent in the methodology chapter. The data is illustrative rather than exhaustive, meaning it does not capture every comment made in response to the selected posts but instead represents a curated selection of entries chosen to illuminate a pattern or theme in the data. The aim is not to account for all possible responses but to identify and analyse the dominant and recurring attitudes that the data makes visible. These boundaries are not presented as weaknesses but as deliberate delimitations that allow for the kind of in-depth qualitative analysis the research questions demand.

## 2. Background

In late December 2025 to mid-January 2026, users prompted Grok to undress users on X. This event highlighted Grok on X as a tool which generated content that falls under TFGBV. According to Satter and Vicens (2026), users were also able to upload their own images and tag Grok to generate new content. This led to many users prompting the AI model to generate women in Deepfake content. The Grok AI feature was used to sexually harass influential women who participate in Swedish politics. Busch, party leader of the Christian Democratic Party (KD) and current deputy prime minister, got unclothed, generated in a bikini or sometimes completely nude by users that were prompting Grok, which garnered virality and became a large political scandal (SVT, 2026). She was one of the main Swedish politicians targeted during this time period, with the most viral tweet about her and Grok gaining almost 14 million views to date. The Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson further spoke out about the scandal, calling it ‘distasteful and demeaning’ labeling it as a more animated form of sexual violence (Thornéus and Svensson, 2026). Busch herself also responded to the scandal, saying:

[...] The problem is I was involuntarily undressed by Elon Musk's Grok on X. And let me be very clear, as a woman, I decide when, where and to whom I show myself in a bikini. [...] So, how about we think twice before using AI like this and be mindful of what we share online. The world needs more good men and women and fewer assholes. (Post 3, 2026)

Furthermore, the European Union is actively investigating X due to Grok’s Deepfakes breaking rules and regulations set out to protect the rights of women and children within their borders (European Commission, 2026). The internal algorithm for trending terms and tags pushed terms like “bikinify” or “@grok put her in...” to the trending page on X, making it easily accessible for users both to view and participate in harmful image-generation (Satter and Vicens, 2026). According to Wilson (2026) at The Guardian, Grok, and the algorithmic model on X, lacked specific guardrails to prevent this abuse from being produced, and even after restrictions were announced, users were still able to generate these sexualised images privately and then upload the edited image on X.

Sweden is internationally recognised as a leader in formal gender equality, holding among the highest rates of female parliamentary representation in the world with 45% of the Riksdag being women (World Economic Forum, 2025). This position is institutionally embedded in Swedish political culture with the principle of equality actively shaping politics and morality within the country (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021). Yet, formal representation does not always translate into equal conditions within political life itself. According to the Brå (2025) Politician Safety Survey, women disproportionately feel unsafe in their role due to victimisation compared to men. Furthermore, a larger portion of women reporting victimisation state they have received verbal, written or physical attacks of a sexual nature. As a consequence, Jämställdhetsmyndigheten (2026) reports young women are more likely than their male counterparts to consider leaving politics or reducing their digital visibility.

Busch's role as a woman in Swedish politics places her within a highly visible public position in the digital political context, where platforms like X have become central arenas for political conversation. Busch is part of the Christian Democratic party in Sweden, a politically traditional and conservative party, with their main politics focusing on heteronormative household standards (Kristdemokraterna, 2025:4-11). Furthermore, Busch has come under scrutiny previously due to her restrictive politics on religious communities. She has, most notably, faced criticism in the media and from other parties for wanting to ban the burqa in Sweden, and aligning with the state of Israel (Virk, 2025; Forsberg and Rosengart, 2025). This context is crucial for parts of the analysis, as it addresses how users mobilise her politics against her. As she is a female party leader, the breach, or overstep of norms that can be generated by users become important analytical data to account as to why production of TFGBV and its normalisation is especially harmful to female politicians.

### **3. Previous Research**

This chapter highlights previous findings that relate to our research topic. The first section highlights research related to Deepfake production by AI-models as a form of TFGBV and how it's perceived and navigated by both perpetrators and victims. The second section discusses research done on sexualisation of political figures and delegitimization.

#### **3.1 Deepfake Media: How is it Perceived and Navigated?**

This section discusses key findings within Deepfake research and studies already conducted on attitudes. They address perpetrator perspectives and how women navigate in online spaces regarding Deepfake abuse.

Flynn, Powell, Eaton and Scott (2025) researches perpetrator and victim perspectives to Deepfake production through qualitative interviews in June 2024 with participants in Australia. Their findings show that creating and sharing sexualised Deepfake media is normalised and sometimes actively encouraged among young men as peer bonding and status-building. They also note that perpetrators frequently minimise harm through victim-blaming, denying harm, trivialising or giving Deepfake-creation itself a higher status of artistic expression (Flynn et al., 2025:19). This normalisation dynamic is central to interpreting comment data, as user comments that trivialise or joke about Grok reflect documented patterns of gendered power-dynamics.

Furthermore, Eaton et al. (2026), conducted an online survey across the United States, United Kingdom and Australia to examine how gender and cultural context shape perceptions of Deepfake abuse. Their findings demonstrate that men are significantly more likely to engage in minimising harm and attribute blame to victims of Deepfakes. They argue that Deepfake abuse is not interpreted neutrally, but through social patterns, meaning it follows systematically gendered and contextual differences (Eaton et al., 2026:2). However, they do not examine how such perceptions are produced or negotiated in political digital contexts. This study builds on these findings by analysing how this intersects between gender and political position in a digital space.

Finally, research done by Ji (2025), examines response from digital feminist activism following the 2024 Telegram scandal in South Korea, which exposed a chatroom with over 200,000 members distributing Deepfake pornography of women

and girls. Using a qualitative thematic approach, she collected posts from multiple blogs, Facebook and X posts, news testimonies and police reports to analyse how victims responded. Ji finds that victims of Deepfake sexual violence mainly withdrew from online spaces entirely by deleting accounts or removing photos out of fear of offline physical harm. Ji (2025:5-7) conceptualises this as “quiet feminism”, where victims take a less public, legal route instead of risking further backlash, such as further harming reputation or from speaking out online. The findings in Ji’s case are important to note, as it provides an empirical basis for interpreting what is at stake when speaking out as a female political leader.

These studies, when read together, establish that Deepfake abuse is normalised among perpetrators while being minimised in public perceptions but experienced by victims as threatening enough to fully withdraw from public life. Research isolates either perpetrator motivations or victim experiences as separate objects of study, and is largely concentrated on specific national contexts outside Scandinavia. This study addresses this gap using the documented patterns of minimisation and normalisation identified here as an analytical baseline against which to read the Swedish data. It analyses the full range of user responses, from the trivialisation and dismissal to solidarity and contestation, which coexist on the same platform surrounding a specific Deepfake incident.

### **3.2 Women's Sexualisation and the Erosion of Political Legitimacy**

Building on the preceding discussion of Deepfakes as a form of TFGBV, it is necessary to situate the phenomena in a broader and long-standing pattern: the sexualisation of women in political life and its consequences for the perceived legitimacy as public figures. Research into this demonstrates that the specific harm which Deepfake imagery presents to politicians like Ebba Busch is not produced in a vacuum, rather an extension of a documented dynamic across digital political contexts.

A foundational contribution to this field in a Swedish context is Håkansson’s study (2024-a), which provides the first large-scale empirical analysis of gender based political violence against officeholders in Sweden. The study draws on three waves of survey data covering circa 8000 local level political officials and finds the most pronounced gap in political violence is concentrated among those highest in the political hierarchy. Female mayors were found to experience far more violence than any other

category of politician, and there are further indications that women face a higher penalty than men for media visibility and for supporting minority groups (Håkansson, 2024-a:10-13). The study suggests that the perpetrators of gender based political violence are biased towards targeting women who are powerful and visible. Furthermore, Håkansson (2024-b) outlines specifically in the USA and Sweden through a survey done in 2022 that female politicians are disproportionately exposed to hostile interactions due to gendered interaction patterns. Her findings indicate that people are more likely to direct complaints and grievances toward female political representatives, which risks increasing overall exposure to hostile communication. She also demonstrates that this tolerance to hostility is shaped by contexts, such as interactions on social-media, highlighting that men who are frequent social media users show higher acceptance of hostile behaviour (Håkansson, 2024-b:17). The findings have direct relevance to this study because Ebba Busch, as party leader and Deputy Prime Minister, occupies precisely the kind of high-visibility, high-authority position that Håkansson's findings identify as being predisposed for gendered targeting. Furthermore, it suggests that male social-media users have higher tolerance to accepting hostility towards female politicians. Thus, the study forms the empirical baseline for why prominent female politicians in Sweden would become the focus of an incident like this study's case.

The consequences of Deepfake abuse for women participating in political life is documented both empirically and theoretically. The research compiled traces the technological evolution that made this form of harm increasingly accessible and impersonal. Flynn, Clough, and Cooke documented how Deepfake production evolved rapidly from a Reddit user's uploads in 2017 to telegram bots mass manufacturing images by 2020. The timeline highlights the erosion of the barrier between individual perpetration to mass-scale abuse within a few years (Flynn, Clough and Cooke, 2021:583). Crucially, it eliminated the need for a relationship between victim and perpetrator, which transformed what previously required interpersonal access into something which could be done anonymously (Flynn, Clough and Cooke, 2021:585). For victims, the consequences are severe: They found high levels of emotional distress, with the abuse frequently targeting women's professional and social lives as much as their personal ones (Martin, 2021:59-61).

Giugni (2021), writing in the Palgrave Handbook, provides an in-depth conceptualisation of digital violence against politically active women that is directly relevant to this study. She draws on previously documented cases of female politicians and public figures subjected to coordinated digital abuse. Giugni highlights how the violence becomes visible on multiple levels simultaneously. She outlines the case of British MP Jess Phillips, who received regular rape and death threats to the point where she was forced to install panic rooms in both her home and constituency office. Through this, Giugni (2021:75) exemplifies how digital harassment functions as a deliberate strategy of isolation and silencing rather than spontaneous individual hostility. More central to the core of this thesis is the case of Indian Politician Rana Ayyub, whose Deepfaked pornographic video was circulated 40 000 times in 2018, leading to her personal information being leaked and her being hospitalised the following day (Giugni, 2021:76). She argues that these cases, when illustrated alongside feminist and institutional theories, become a symptom of what she describes as ‘mutually supporting institutions of patriarchy and technology’, which shape one another in ways that systematically increase women’s vulnerability in digital spaces. A pattern which functions as a deliberate mechanism through which everyday misogynistic behaviours connect individual acts of transgression to a broader pattern of male radicalisation and organised political strategy, benefitting from silencing women in public life (Giugni, 2021:82-84).

These studies present a clear thread when viewed as a whole. Women in high-visibility political positions face disproportionate gendered violence, and Deepfake technology has further lowered the threshold for producing that violence on an unprecedented scale. The consequences which follow such TFGBV production of female politicians range from severe psychological harm to hospitalisation. What remains unexplored, however, is how user-comments about Deepfakes construct and negotiate attitudes to the production itself. How comments accept, justify, or contest it once it becomes publicly visible and more accessible. Existing research rarely examines the attitudes and responses of the broader public in the wake of a specific incident. This study aims to address that gap by sociologically examining important themes which emerge from the data collected and how they connect to a broader framework to understand gendered power-dynamics in a digital political context.

## 4 Theoretical Framework

In order to bring a sociological lens to this phenomenon, this paper compiles a theoretical framework based on Bourdieu's "symbolic violence", West and Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender" and Thompson's concept of political scandals. These three theories were chosen as they highlight how normative roles are created and retained in society through gendered power-struggles in digital contexts.

### 4.1 Symbolic Violence

The study uses the theory of symbolic violence presented by Pierre Bourdieu, taken from *Masculine Domination* (2001). Rather than applying it to uncontested conditions, this study uses it to analyse specific dynamics in commentary that either naturalise, or contest Deepfake imagery and subsequently the harm caused by it.

Bourdieu argues that the social world is structured in relations of domination that reproduces itself not through explicit means, rather through what he calls *Symbolic Violence*. Bourdieu defines it as "gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition — more precisely, misrecognition, recognition, or even feeling" (Bourdieu, 2001:1-2). Under normal conditions this order sustains itself through what Bourdieu calls misrecognition, a process where the dominated group has their domination appear as natural or legitimate by basing their perception of self-subordination through the lens of the dominant group. The strength of this order is in its self-legitimation, needing no justification because it makes the perception of the domination appear neutral seeping into all forms of life, especially in language and norms (Bourdieu, 2001:9). It is sustained through socialisation and embodied practice, through which the gendered division between masculine authority and feminine subordination becomes internalised as common sense, a form of masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001).

The Grok Deepfake scandal, however, does not represent this order operating smoothly. This requires acknowledging as a limitation of the theory which other scholars have noted. Jenkins (2025) offers one of the most pointed critiques, arguing that Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence is fundamentally deterministic. It "fails to allow or account for social change" and does not adequately theorise meaningful agency

or resistance at either the systemic or individual level (Jenkins, 2025:104-105). This analysis will, thus, take Jenkins critique in mind if perspectives that show resistance to symbolic violence occur. This study applies symbolic violence as both an ambient condition which Bourdieu argues, and an active mechanism that trivialises the commentary that is actively attempting to resist subordination. It is in those defensive, naturalising moves within the data: the jokes, the dismissals, the framing of the Deepfakes as inevitable that misrecognition is analytically located, rather than in the scandal as a whole.

#### **4.1.1 Continuum of Sexual Violence**

Feminist Theory has long argued that violence against women cannot be understood as a series of isolated, exceptional events, rather needs to be analysed as a structured and normalised feature of gendered life. Liz Kelly's conceptualises a continuum of sexual violence which aids the analysis. Kelly (1988) argues that there is a basic common character underlying many different forms of violence perpetrated by men against women; abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion threat and force become controlling forces and mechanisms, which connects extreme forms of violence like rape, to more "everyday" forms such as sexual harassment (Kelly, 1988:67-68) The continuum does not imply a linear hierarchy of seriousness, but rather documents the range and extent of men's behaviour that women experience as abusive, much of which falls outside legal definitions and is therefore rendered invisible (Kelly, 1988).

Kelly argues that the observation and experience of more pervasive forms of sexual violence become socially sanctioned precisely because they are common. This distinction is meant to distinguish the small group of deviant offenders from a perceived "normal" majority (Kelly, 1988:139). Furthermore, Kelly argues that the norms which govern acceptable male behaviour in relation to women, and therefore what behaviours are punishable vary, but uniformly allow for deeply intrusive conduct (Kelly, 1988: 113). This normalisation of harm and the internalisation of that normalisation by its victim become two sides of the same gendered process.

Applying Kelly's continuum to digital TFGBV requires justification. Kelly developed this theory in 1988 through qualitative research with women about embodied, interpersonal experiences of male violence in an offline context. Deepfakes and anonymous image generation was outside of her research. This study argues that

Kelly's specific examples are historically situated but the logic behind the sexual continuum translates into digital context. This justification is further substantiated by Powell (2021), which adapts her framework to explicitly cover image-based abuse. They argue that non-consensual intimate imagery uses the same logic Kelly described: "trivialised by perpetrators, minimised in public discourse, and experienced by victims as part of a continuous pattern of gendered threat rather than as an isolated incident" (Powell, 2021:170). Furthermore Kelly (1988:133) wrote: "Defining sexual violence in terms of a continuum provides women with a means of defining their specific experience as abuse without necessarily having to name it as a particular form of sexual violence. It provides a framework in which new terms and definitions can evolve." This extension justifies the use of Kelly within the study, and when read along Bourdieu, Kelly provides the empirical evidence of what the symbolic power produces: a spectrum of gendered harm.

## ***4.2 Doing Gender***

West and Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender" offers a theoretical lens for understanding how gendered norms are actively produced and reproduced through social interaction. They argue that gender is a "routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction", something continuously performed in relation to expectations of how men and women should behave (West and Zimmerman, 1987:126). They are critical to earlier sex and gender theory frameworks and develop three categories which aim to broaden understanding of how people create and maintain their gender in society. These three categories are: sex, sex category and gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Sex is defined as the anatomic differences that define what a man or a woman is. These factors are decided at birth. In their framework, "sex category" is achieved through identificatory displays that make a person readable as "woman" or "man". Gender is the performance to achieve either category. Once categorized, individuals become accountable for their conduct as gendered (West and Zimmerman, 1987:125-127, 136-137).

Doing gender implies acting in multiple complex processes in how individuals socialise. Individuals are constantly perceived and judged through this normative lens West and Zimmerman (1987:135-140) describe, where their behaviour can be categorised as either "feminine" or "masculine". Some of these behaviours are then

“naturally”, through social norms developed in society, assigned to specific sex categories. They emphasise that these processes are connected to power-dynamics in society, since some actions are legitimised, whilst other actions are marginalised or questioned. This accountability is not symmetrical. They argue that sex category is “omnirelevant” and a person’s incumbency in a sex category “can be used to legitimate or discredit their other activities” (West and Zimmerman, 1987:145-148). They note that, in doing gender men are also doing dominance, reproducing hierarchical arrangements. As they demonstrate through examples of women in professional roles, women who occupy positions normatively coded as masculine face a double bind: they must demonstrate competence in that role whilst preserving their legibility as appropriately feminine (West and Zimmerman, 1987:139-140, 146).

In this study, their theory will be applied to understand the collective user-response as an accountability mechanism to legitimise or delegitimise Busch. It will be applied to understand the way in which users reduce and reassess her sex category as a tool to undermine her political agency as a woman. Furthermore, this concept helps understand user opinion. Users who, for example, trivialise or joke about images can be viewed as performing their gendered norms by reinforcing stereotypical ideas about how women and men are “supposed” to be framed socially. Thus, this theory allows the study to analyse comment data as a collective of gendered interaction.

### ***4.3 Political Scandal***

Thompson’s theory of political scandal is a useful addition to this study’s theoretical framework, as it provides understanding of how the incident functioned as a public, politically significant event. Thompson (2000:13) defines scandal as “actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response.” This section then discusses how he develops this idea further by introducing the concept of mediated online interaction, an interaction design present on social-media platforms such as X (Thompson, 2018:4-5). In addition to this, his theory of scandal reversal helps explain how tactics within political scandals can be used to shift the narrative of the scandal.

In Thompson’s framework, a scandal begins when an action or event involving a transgression of recognised norms or values, which previously has been concealed, becomes exposed to the public and is met with disapproval. He stresses that scandals are

always tied to visibility, and that it can trigger shame, embarrassment or reputational harm to the individual(s) involved (Thompson, 2000:12-24). This is especially important in political contexts, as political power in modern democracies depend heavily on symbolic power, which draws on resources like prestige and trust. Political leaders are incentivised to maintain these resources and avoid scandals, as they constitute risk for real reputable harm (Thompson, 2000:102-106). A central concept to this theory is the concept of mediated visibility, as before the development of media a politician's reputation often depended on face-to-face interaction with a limited audience. However, the development of media expanded the scope of visibility to spaces and contexts which were no longer controllable. Thus, audiences might see exposed parts of previously private life which can be seen as transgressing norms or social boundaries. Thompson (2000:108-110) describes that this visibility caused a central shift in political operations, where controlling public appearance became a daily task of political life. These scandals can, furthermore, be actively pursued by political actors, particularly in competitive political environments, where actors may actively seek to amplify or further the scandal if it involves a political opponent (Thompson, 2000:90-94).

Thompson (2018) develops this further in his later work on mediated interaction in the digital age. He explains this interaction, instead, as one which happens many-to-many as opposed to face-to-face. He argues that the digital revolution creates a permanently unstable political arena, which means that political life is now saturated with digitalised content that outstrips any individual or organisation's ability to maintain (Thompson, 2018:22). Anyone with a platform account can now make things visible to a plurality of distant others, which means the media can no longer be gatekept by traditional media institutions or governments to the same degree as before.

An important concept in relation to this, is what Thompson (2000) calls second-order transgressions. He defines this as a second stage in the scandal: "where attention is shifted from the original offence to a series of subsequent actions which are aimed at concealing the offence." (Thompson, 2000:17). He writes that once original offence is disclosed, the scandal may move onto denying, justifying, lying or covering up parts of the scandal to reframe the narrative, which can create an escalating cycle of claims, and counter-claims where the scandal becomes a game of "cat-and-mouse",

which shifts the focus away from the original offence (Thompson, 2000:23-25). This is a form of scandal reversal, in which the focus shifts away from the transgressor onto the victim.

For this reason, Thompson is especially useful for analysing a digital political scandal such as the Busch case. His framework allows treating the scandal as an interpretation of Busch's political legitimacy. How users talk about the transgressions, her response to the situation and reply to other users, all become analytically relevant to apply to this theory. In a comment section, users are not only reacting to the scandal but actively defining what constitutes a transgression and what counts as acceptable behaviour. Thus, analysing comments as second-order transgression which reverse the scandal narrative is also useful, as it can highlight the way in which users justify, oppose or redirect reputational damage to Busch within the digital discussion on X.

#### ***4.4 Theoretical Synthesis***

The three theoretical frameworks compiled in this study are applied as an analytical lens. They provide a framework for understanding how the Grok Deepfake scandal produced the commentary it did, why that commentary takes the forms it does, and what those forms reveal about the gendered dynamics of digital political life in Sweden.

Thompson established the conditions of the case. The Grok Deepfake scandal is a digitalised political scandal, a publicly co-constructed transgression in which users, media and political actors negotiate meaning for Deepfake media production and its implications for Busch. Crucially, the transgressor in this scandal is not Busch but the users who prompted Grok and the platform that enabled them, which inverts the typical scandal logic through second-order transgressions. The comment-sections this study analyses are therefore not peripheral to the scandal but constitutive of it: they are where the meaning of the transgression is actively negotiated, contested and assigned.

Bourdieu's symbolic violence then provides the structural explanation for the dynamics. The androcentric symbolic order, which women's authority in political life is structurally precarious, and subordination naturalised. As Jenkins (2025) identifies, Bourdieu's framework must be applied with awareness of its deterministic limits: the scandal made the symbolic order visible and generated genuine contestation. The study therefore locates symbolic violence not in the scandal as a whole but in the trivialisation

of it. A defensive misrecognition of the harm Deepfakes causes gendered groups. Kelly here extends the androcentric symbolic order and defines the interactional moves seen in the comments. What presents itself in the comments as humour, common sense or legitimate cultural debate occupies the lower end of a spectrum that is structurally connected to more explicit forms of violence, sustained by its social sanction and framing as trivial or inevitable. They analyse the same phenomenon from complementary angles: Bourdieu explains the structural order that makes trivialising commentary feel natural, and Kelly documents the spectrum of harm that order produces and the definitional struggle at its centre.

West and Zimmerman's 'doing gender' specifies the interactions which allow for the reassertion to happen. Users in the comments are not just simply expressing opinion but also performing gender and applying those gender norms to Ebba Busch, holding her accountable to feminine norms which her position of political authority already transgresses. When combined with Thompson's framework, this adds a second layer to how transgressions are recognised as transgressions. Incumbency in a sex-category can be seen as a transgression of norms, causing scandal. Similarly, following normalised gendered practices within one's sex category can dissolve the sense of a transgression happening at all.

Together the synthesis of theories allows this study to move through the scandal, analyse the symbolic order it ruptures and how users interact within that rupturing. This can then highlight specific patterns of gendered harm in which those mechanisms participate. The comment data is read not as a collection of individual opinions but as a structured, contested, and politically significant negotiation of what counts as harm, who gets to define it, and what it means for a female politician to speak in public life.

## **5. Methods**

This study follows a netnographic case-study of Ebba Busch and the user comment attitudes in response to the Grok Deepfake scandal which happened in late December 2025 to mid-January 2026. This study applies a qualitative netnographic approach to investigate the online attitudes that emerged on the social media platform X. This study adopts a social constructivist ontological position, treating user comments not as reflections of objective reality but where meaning, norms and gendered power are actively constructed through interaction. This position aligns with the study's theoretical framework and was chosen due to its concern with how social reality is reproduced through discourse and interaction, rather than existing independently of it. A social constructivist lens is therefore not simply compatible with qualitative research but is the epistemological foundation from which the study's analytical questions are posed (Bryman, 2016:374). Qualitative research lends itself to more detail and context driven analysis, which further aligns it with the paper's research question. Context becomes important because one can not understand a behaviour or action without placing it in the context of its origin (Bryman, 2016:394-396). Furthermore, production and reproduction are process related phenomena, where context allows one to see how behaviours interconnect. The paper excludes a quantitative approach due to the paper using a primarily non-positivist outlook, aiming to understand the trends through induction rather than deduction. Furthermore, the mentioned detail and aim for context driven analysis strays further from the more generalisable quantitative approach (Bryman, 2016:61)

### ***5.1 Netnography***

This study employs netnography as the main methodological tool for examining user comments on social media, specifically on the platform 'X', around Deepfakes within the timeframe of late December 2025 to mid January 2026. Netnography as a term was coined by Robert V. Kozinets in 1995 but has since been adapted with the development of the internet to include specific frameworks that help digital research in newer spaces such as social media (Kozinets, 2020:4-6). Kozinets (2020:14) defines this as "a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social

media”. As a tool, it specifically adapts ethnography to online environments and is particularly suited for analysing mediated interactions, including inhabited cultures and communities. It allows observation of how users interact with each other and negotiate meanings of terms and tools. Unlike traditional ethnography, which focuses on being physically immersed, netnography focuses on researching digital traces left by people in public, online spaces, such as discussion threads or comments (Kozinets, 2020:16). This can either be done through participatory or non-participatory observations. As this study focuses on events which have already unfolded, it will take on the non-participatory form of netnographic observation. Furthermore, netnography aims to analyse the meaning of patterns in digital content, through examining what values, norms, power-struggles and ideals they reflect (Kozinets, 2020:147). This distinction matters for this study as the Grok scandal is contextually loaded with norms and underlying power-structures, creating loaded online discourse. This discourse can then be analysed based on symbolic meaning derived from latent tone, such as sarcasm, defensiveness, solidarity or arguments that require interpretation.

### **5.1.1 X as a Research Site**

This study analyses the social media platform X (formerly twitter). The reason for choosing this site was mainly due to the fact that the scandal happened internally on the platform. It would provide insight into how users interacted inside of the platform, as it can generate understanding of content that other outside sources may not have been able to do. Whilst this was the main reason for choosing to investigate X, Kozinets also highlights why X is a suitable research site for netnographic studies. Kozinets (2020:18) describes social media as “applications, websites, and other online technologies that enable their users to engage in a variety of different content creation, circulation, annotation and association activities.” For the purpose of this study, X represents precisely this kind of platform, where political discourse, public response and harassment can occur simultaneously and publicly. Kozinets (2020:74) notes that content from X (formerly Twitter) is easily collected and archived due to the structural nature of the platform being chronological. Furthermore, he states that ‘Tweets’ can contain insightful contextual content that can be studied on an interpretative level by identifying underlying humor or sarcasm. This becomes relevant to the threads analysed, as it can give insight into what values and norms users publicly advocate for.

## ***5.2 Data Collection and Interpretation***

Data collection was conducted in two phases following Kozinets' (2020:215) netnographic framework. The first phase consisted of finding key terms: "Ebba Busch", "BuschEbba", "Grok" and "Deepfake" were entered into the X's search engine alongside the relevant time frame December 31 up until January 18th. The goal was to identify posts and comments related to the case. The four posts were selected following Kozinets' (2020) five criteria for data-selection operations: relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity and richness. All four posts were directly relevant to the research questions, each capturing a distinct moment in the scandal. Activity and interactivity were evidenced by the high volume of comments across the four posts, totalling 2256 comments and accumulating 13.8M, 11.9M, 1.1M and 78.8K views respectively. The posts collectively generated a diverse range of user perspectives and the kind of contextually embedded, emotionally charged commentary that netnography seeks to analyse, satisfying the criteria of diversity and richness. Post 1 was selected due to its commentary on her politics during the period Grok remained unregulated. Post 2 is the first viral tweet, where a user prompts Grok to put Busch in a bikini in parliament. Post 3 is Busch's own response post addressing the scandal. Post 4 is an unrelated image of Busch posted after her response, chosen to examine user attitudes following her public statement. Posts 1 and 2 were selected due to their direct mention in media coverage, confirmed through reverse-searching on Google (Conger et al., 2026; Ferber, 2026). Posts 3 and 4 were selected to analyse how users respond to a female politician speaking out against TFGBV.

In the second phase, all 2256 comments across the four posts were read through and filtered using three criteria. First, spam and duplicate comments were entirely excluded. Second, comments in languages other than Swedish or English were not selected for close analysis. Third, comments were selected based on recurring patterns and thematic relevance. If something appeared multiple times or represented a general attitude, it was included for its analytical value. The selection continued through repeated immersion in the full dataset until thematic saturation was reached, meaning no new patterns or attitudes emerged from additional readings, ensuring that both dominant and minority perspectives were represented and that selective bias was minimised by

reading all 2256 comments before finalising the selection. This resulted in 178 comments selected for analysis, with approximately 40 comments per post.

Selected comments were saved as links and screenshots and organised in a separate document to structure the coding process. The data was processed through a movement Kozinets (2020:140) calls immersion. This meant reading through the comments repeatedly, recording observations and interpretations. These observations mainly concerned repeating language, norms and values highlighted in the threads, which was then documented in an immersion journal (Kozinets, 2020:282-284). The journal consisted of a document which compiled the data and sorted it in different sections based on which post they replied to. To organise and interpret the data, the paper uses Kozinets' (2020:323) "word-processing approach". This works well with medium-sized datasets, where the researcher manually tracks words which allows closeness to the data. Thus, the comments were colour-coded to highlight important words, underlying tone and opinions which reflect how the user justifies, accepts or challenges Grok's production of Deepfake content.

### ***5.3 Analytical Strategy***

This study will use a 'theoretically informed inductive approach' to thematic analytical strategy based on Braun and Clarke's (2006: 83-88) method. This means the data was analysed with a theoretical angle, but themes appeared naturally through familiarisation with the data, instead of imposing the themes from the theory during collection (Braun and Clarke, 2006:83). This approach was chosen as it allows for flexible and systematic pattern identification whilst maintaining theoretical grounding, which suits the interpretive aims of this study. The first step calls for familiarisation with the base data points and material, where base ideas of the data become central. Secondly, the data calls for initial coding, looking for attitudes and user-responses within the comments that inductively shape our themes where interesting features of the data from each code gets slotted into the analysis framework (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2015:51). After coding the data, it is processed in a thematic breakdown, where the comments get checked against both the coded subsections, and then against the entire dataset, creating a data map. Lastly we refined the specific themes based on the map, and created clear definitions and names for each theme outside of the code. Acceptance was identified in the comments that reproduced or trivialised Deepfake content without

critique, justification were comments actively defending Grok or delegitimising Busch's response. Lastly, challenges came from comments that named the harm, expressed solidarity or directed accountability to the platform and its users. These comments and themes then filtered into the report where relevant data and connections was required (Braun and Clarke, 2006:87)

## ***5.4 Trustworthiness***

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose alternative criteria for assessing qualitative research are required, suggesting trustworthiness as a qualitative parallel to validity and reliability. Each aspect of trustworthiness has a parallel with quantitative research criteria: Credibility parallels internal validity, transferability parallels external validity, dependability parallels reliability, and confirmability parallels objectivity (Bryman, 2016:374).

Credibility refers to how believable the findings are. This study strengthens credibility through prolonged engagement with the dataset. All 2256 comments were read through in full before selection, and the immersion process involved repeated readings of the 178 selected comments before thematically concluding them. The transparency of the data collection process, including the specific search terms, time frame and selection criteria, makes the analytical decisions visible and traceable. The use of a theoretically informed analytical framework grounded the data in established sociological theory.

Transferability refers to whether findings apply to other contexts. As a single-case netnographic study, this research does not claim generalisability beyond the specific phenomenon examined. However, the findings speak to broader documented patterns of TFGBV normalisation, gendered accountability and digital political scandal that are relevant beyond the Swedish context. Case description, platform and analytical process is provided allowing the reader to assess transferability themselves.

Dependability refers to whether findings are likely to apply at other times. To strengthen dependability, the analytical process followed a systematic and documented procedure. From search terms and filtering criteria through to immersion, thematic mapping. The use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework further anchors the process in methodological tradition. As previous research contextualises this study and is used during the analysis it strengthens the papers dependability by

looking at previously documented findings as well as theories to arrive at the conclusions presented.

Confirmability refers to whether the researcher has allowed their values to intrude to a high degree (Bryman, 2016:374). This is addressed through the inductive approach to theme generation, where themes emerged from the dataset rather than being predetermined by the theoretical framework. Furthermore, the study benefits from what Bryman (2016:374) calls ecological validity as the data came from a naturally occurring digital environment rather than a fabricated or artificial one. The non-participatory stance adopted means the researchers did not intervene in or alter the online setting being studied.

## ***5.5 Ethical Considerations***

Qualitative and netnographic research has multiple aspects of ethics which need to be considered before initiating research. As this study handles sensitive data, such as usernames and opinions which can be linked back to individuals, it is important to take this into consideration. Thus, this chapter outlines these considerations using both Vetenskapsrådet's (2002) four research requirements and Kozinets' (2020) netnographic ethics framework.

Vetenskapsrådet's (2002) information requirement requires that participants are informed about the study's purpose and their role within it. Since this study draws on publicly available posts on X, direct contact with individual users was neither feasible nor appropriate. However, the public nature of the platform is itself ethically significant. Kozinets (2020:197) establishes that content produced on platforms such as X constitutes public data, and that users who have their privacy settings set to public have effectively provided a proxy for consent for others to view and use their data. Furthermore, Ebba Busch as a public political figure will not be anonymous in this study as she is central to the case. However, explicit images or depictions of her will not be included in the study as this would breach ethical guidelines and violate regulations. Similarly, Vetenskapsrådet (2002) urges consent in their second requirement. In netnographic research, this requirement is slightly complicated due to the consent gap in netnographic research (Kozinets, 2020:172-176). This refers to the discrepancy between the researchers' assumptions that public data is free to use, when in reality users may not express they want their data used in research without explicit consent. To address

this, no personally identifiable information beyond what is already publicly available has been used in this study, and users who appear in the analysis are not identified by name or username. This also addresses Vetenskapsrådet's (2002) requirement of confidentiality. Since this study analyses comments made publicly, and since the users involved are already visible in the digital context on X, the risk of harm is relatively low (Kozinets, 2020:234-235). Nevertheless, usernames are anonymised throughout, keeping in mind that even public data requires consideration of cloaking individuality (Kozinets, 2020:399-404). Lastly, the study considers Vetenskapsrådet's (2002) usage requirements, which requires that data collected about individuals is used solely for research purposes. All data collected from X in this study is used exclusively for the purposes of answering the research questions, and data is kept as securely as possible, only being processed by us as researchers and our supervisor.

In addition, it is important to address personal reflexivity as researchers to ensure potential biases are not reflected within the analysis. According to Jones (2024:5) this process includes reflecting on personal behaviours or tendencies whilst collecting and analysing the data, to reflect transparency of these when writing research. We are two Swedish sociology students with no personal or political affiliation to Ebba Busch or the Christian Democratic Party. However, as researchers studying gendered violence we are not neutral and approach the data with awareness that TFGBV constitutes harm, shaping how we read and interpret the data. Furthermore, the research is a collaboration which ensured that any tension between members was handled responsibly, prioritising mutual understanding over control. This paper is written by one man and one woman, which means that certain perspectives, such as gender bias, needs to be reflected on. One researcher, as a woman, brings experience of lived gender dynamics, which sharpens sensitivity to the data but requires reflection on whether these personal experiences risk exceeding what the data supports. The other, as a man, does not share this proximity and, thus, brings a degree of distance to the subject matter, which in itself carries its own interpretive implications. To avoid this actively affecting the results, we actively discuss the analysis to avoid one-sided bias. This awareness has been managed through inductive coding, ensuring the themes come from the data and were not imposed by our assumptions.

## **6. Deepfake Harm on X**

This chapter outlines relevant findings which emerged from the data, presented in three different sections to answer the research questions. The first section concerns how users accept TFGBV as a norm. It discusses the trivialisation and sexualisation of Ebba Busch through the use of misrecognition, a tool which legitimises or redefines harm. Within this section, the study focuses on comments which diminish the problem through themes such as humor and viewing the sexualisation of her as non-controversial. The second section focuses on how users justify Grok as a tool which contributes to producing TFGBV while simultaneously delegitimising Busch as a female political figure. While one cluster attacks Busch, the other defends Grok, both working to justify Deepfake production. The third section, however, discusses users who oppose, express solidarity and name the harm. It captures users who express solidarity with Busch and push back against prompting users to gain understanding of how not all users agree with the normalisation and delegitimation happening within the comments. A distinction central to the analysis is the one between acceptance and justification. Acceptance operates through indifference and absence of moral engagement, while justification involves active work to defend behaviours or attack its critic, which in this case would be Busch's response.

### ***6.1. Accepting TFGBV as the Norm***

The production of TFGBV content risks becoming normalised through misrecognition as the harm produced is rendered invisible through the reproduction of everyday gendered practices. This is reflected in the data of this section. In the posts analysed, many comments reflected trivialisation in different ways: by using humor, denial of harm.

The largest part of the data set is the sexualisation of Ebba Busch present not only in the original viral content but sustained and reproduced across all posts. One user under Post 3 wrote: "The hottest politician in the world" followed by an AI generated picture of Busch in a Bikini. Unlike the following sections, these comments do not engage with the scandal through critique or justification. Rather, users who prompt Grok to generate bikini images or nudity of Busch and then post the output publicly are extending the scandal. Here, the prompt and its generated image function as visible

misrecognition of Ebba Busch as a political woman. As seen in Post 2, the poster states “@grok bikini now” posted with an image of Busch standing in parliament attached. This comment does not announce any harm, it is seen as casual use of a tool. Bourdieu (2001), argues that masculine domination "constitutes women as symbolic objects whose being is a being-perceived," keeping them in a permanent state of symbolic dependence in which they "exist first through and for the gaze of others, that is, as welcoming, attractive and available objects" (Bourdieu, 2001:66-67). The output and sexualisation is precisely what aligns it with Bourdieu’s account of dominant reproduction of gendered hierarchies. The reduction of Busch to an unwilling object of pornography requires no explicit acknowledgement from the commenter because the tool is treated as self-evidently ordinary.

Busch’s response in Post 3 centres around one fundamental claim, she says her body is her own, and that its use without consent is harmful. Her attempt to assert herself as a speaking subject is met with a reassertion of her status as an object, available to be gazed upon regardless of what she says. This led to an increase in sexualising imagery under Post 3 and 4 trying to deny that claim, reasserting her as an object regardless of what she says. What is striking is that most sexualising comments are not aggressive, but apathetic. This distinction matters because aggression implies awareness of transgression, whereas apathy signals its absence entirely. One user wrote under Post 3: “@grok looks nice thanks”, attaching a photo depicting Busch in a bikini generated by Grok from a screenshot of her response video. It did not engage with Busch’s statements at all. The users are not consciously staging a counter-argument, but using her rebuke against her to diminish her response. The indifference is closer aligned with Bourdieu’s (2001) more ambient misrecognition where the symbolic violence is produced in an imperceptible manner. The coldness, more than any explicit hostility, captures what he means when he argues that the androcentric order needs no justification because it imposes itself as neutral. The comments use apathetic androcentrism to invalidate her response without explicitly engaging with it and further sexualising her for speaking out. Post 4 furthers the trend with more sexualised images being depicted of her in the comments, despite the post being completely unrelated to the scandal itself. This suggests that speaking out about TFGBV as a female political leader creates backlash that seeps into other contextual political spaces over time.

Furthermore, under Post 3, there is an influx of comments which intentionally misrepresent the harm through consistent logic of minimisation. A shared argument appears: the harm is not real because the body was not real. This reasoning comes up multiple times in different tones: “it’s not even your body depicted,” “you were not undressed,” “nobody has seen your actual body,” “it was just your head on an imaginary body.” The repetition of these arguments across separate comments, suggest it is not an individual opinion but rather points to a shared male cultural logic that systematically constructs Deepfake harm as unrecognisable (Eaton et. al, 2026). The separation argument serves to further minimise Busch and her assertion of autonomy. By separating her individual self from her generated body, the harm gets undermined or neutralised in the user's definition. To them, the person depicted is not her, which clashes with Busch’s claim. This can be understood by viewing it from one of Kelly’s (1988) core observations: the definition of what constitutes harm is always constructed from the perpetrators perspective, never the victims. This technicality which the commentary uses in response to her speaking out about her victimisation further aligns with Kelly. Kelly (1988:133) writes "At the same time as women are unable to name their abuse as abuse, men are able to deny responsibility for abusive behaviour." This is reflected in this comment:

Over 8 billion people you can't control but you can teach your children about a small number of immature idiots there are in the world and that every picture on the internet can be manipulated and old saying: Sticks and stones may break my bones buy words/pics will never hurt me. (User A, Post 3, 2026)

By speaking out and framing Grok as a tool that enables harm, Busch incidentally contests its dominant definition and draws attention to the misrecognised harm (Jenkins, 2025). Kelly (1988) argues that the creation of new definitions contests the male dominated ‘common sense’ definitions. Busch’s definition allows her experience to be placed inside the continuum, making it recognisable as harmful. The definition used by these commenters fail to recognise the harm which victims of Deepfake abuse experience, extending to their relationships, reputation and causing real psychological harm (Ji, 2025; Giugni, 2021). The new definition presented tries

to rectify the user dominated definition which allowed for Deepfake production as a form of TFGBV.

A prevalent subcategory constitutes responses which make light of the situation through humour. These comments appear mainly under Post 2. Some comments consist solely of laughing emojis. One user comments “lol”, another comments “I can’t stop laughing”, and another one comments “Okay this is wild”. These comments actively respond in a way which codes the situation as entertainment rather than harmful. The political scandal theory illuminates this: for a scandal to consolidate a genuine moral event that requires accountability, public response must recognise transgression (Thompson, 2000;2018). Laughter forecloses that recognition entirely and positions the Deepfakes as spectacles and not violence. As previous research shows, minimising harm in this trivialising way can be done as a form of peer-bonding, which mainly manifests itself within perpetrator relationships (Flynn et al., 2025). These comments reflect this sort of banter and friendly interaction between perpetrators producing Deepfake content. This is a form of symbolic violence, as humor can operate through tone and create misrecognition in cases where women are being ridiculed for being targeted sexually (Bourdieu, 2001). No one has to say that the behaviour of prompting Grok to undress Busch is acceptable, because their laughter does it for them. Thus, a case of misrecognition can be observed as users fail to recognise the violence of Deepfake production. This risks producing a harmful narrative: that production of Deepfakes is not harmful but enjoyable and a part of entertainment on digital platforms. This has significant consequences for women and women in politics. Both Ji (2025) and Giugni (2021) reflect on how Deepfakes can operate to silence women into not speaking out or participating in politics at all. By enforcing the idea that Deepfake production is entertaining, it risks posing real harm to women, causing a silencing culture which can in turn lead to withdrawal of women from political digital contexts. Victims of Deepfake harm risk needing to decide to leave political settings as they have to choose between bodily autonomy or political visibility (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2026). The sexualisation of Ebba Busch and subsequent trivialisation of her response reflect the very structure harming women in politics (Håkansson, 2024-a; Giugni, 2021). The Swedish political context becomes particularly relevant here as 45% of Riksdagen

consists of women, yet this formal representational equality does not extend to how they are treated in digital spaces (WEF, 2025).

The findings in this section reveal a consistent logic of misrecognition through which TFGBV against Ebba Busch is minimised and rendered socially unrecognisable as harm. Rather than recognising Busch's claims when she speaks out, users trivialise and redirect them through gendered common sense definitions, which reflects Kelly's argument of socially sanctioned violence. Busch's attempt to assert her bodily autonomy instead generates further sexualisation and dismissal, reestablishing her as a gendered object within the Swedish digital political context. The findings therefore suggest that user responses function as mechanisms of TFGBV which reproduce gendered power structures in Swedish digital politics and minimise the harm of Deepfake victims. Sweden remains a country with high levels of formal gender equality, but digital political visibility continues to carry distinct risks tied to sexualisation and loss of bodily control. This contributes to fundamental risks in Swedish equality by making political participation more precarious for women than their male counterparts.

## ***6.2. Justifying Grok as a Tool***

This section argues that users justify Grok and construct it as a neutral tool, thereby shielding the gendered harm produced from accountability, and delegitimising Busch as a female political actor when responding to it. The first pattern identified is how users position Deepfake production as artistic and freedom of speech. The second focuses on how users shift focus to pre-existing technologies, framing the development as inevitable. The third pattern looks at how users position Ebba Busch as a fragile leader, and compares her to her male counter-parts. The fourth pattern focuses on how users use her politics against her to undermine her position and shift the narrative of the scandal.

Prevalent arguments position Grok as an artistic tool in the scandal, giving it elevated capital which symbolically suppresses the meaning of Deepfakes. One user replies to Ebba Busch's response in Post 3, and states: "Is an artist allowed to paint whoever they want? The answer is yes. Can you sell that art? Also yes... Technology develops, stop being silly." This statement invokes a framework of creative freedom to construct Deepfake production as an extension of legitimate artistic processes. This is significant, as it dismisses the harm of Deepfake production and reframes Busch's

objection as an attempt to repress creative expression. This constitutes misrecognition of the harm Grok is contributing to producing through symbolically elevating Deepfake content. It illustrates the same perspective identified in perpetrators of Flynn et al's (2025) study. Much like their findings, perpetrators elevate the production itself as a form of "craftmanship" to minimise Busch's perspective that it causes genuine harm. By elevating Deepfakes, it shields the production process from accountability in producing gendered harm. Other users also position Grok's ability to produce Deepfakes as a form of "free speech", framing it as an important part of expression. One user says: "Free speech means free speech, Ebba. Good that you're using yours." in response to Post 3. These users indicate that she has no right to judge users because the practice is a pillar of democracy, and should, therefore, be shielded from criticism and legislation. These arguments both form misrecognition surrounding the production of TFGBV, as elevating its legibility and artistic capital work to shield perpetrators while minimising victim perspectives.

Furthermore, a large part of the comments which reply to Busch's response video in Post 3 signify a theme of 'whataboutism'. Here, users shift focus away from the criticism of Grok onto other AI-models. These comments reflect a sense of technological determinism, framing Grok's development as technologically inevitable. Users invoke Photoshop, ChatGPT, Gemini and general AI-capabilities as equivalences. One user says: "Grok simplifies the process of digitally 'undressing' people. But the possibility has existed for forty years with tools like Photoshop". This framing performs a normalisation strategy within scandal management. By situating the specific transgression within a continuum of pre-existing technologies, users attempt to dissolve the scandalousness in producing Deepfakes (Thompson, 2000). This logic intensifies when users deploy the images themselves as argumentative evidence. One user, in response to Post 3, posted an image of Busch in a bikini generated by ChatGPT, captioning it: "Time to ban ChatGPT too? This image is from ChatGPT!". Here, the Deepfakes on X gets framed as less legitimate to target, arguing that other tools can do the same. These comments, however, fail to realise that producing Deepfake media no matter where it originates from breaks violations (European Commission, 2026). Thus, this also constitutes misrecognition. Grok's image-editing functions represent a qualitative shift in accessibility, speed and social embeddedness of Deepfake image

generation (Conger et al., 2026). The argument that Photoshop can do the same thing frames the situation as inevitable. Users fail to examine what gendered power-relations exist within Deepfake production by presenting it as, simply, the latest iteration of an ancient practice.

The arguments of ‘whataboutism’ and Grok’s artistic expression both risk reputational harm to women in politics. Female politicians speaking out on the issue risk being framed as wanting to limit creative expression or suppress freedom of speech. How does one navigate the topic of Deepfake production, which is known to produce gendered harm, when users frame it as a pillar to free speech in Sweden? It also risks framing the politician as wanting to halt technological development. If this framing becomes socially accepted in the Swedish political context, it risks undermining female politicians’ ability to speak out about Deepfakes without delegitimising their position. In the long term, this can affect representation of women in politics as a whole in Sweden if repeated TFGBV abuse causes female politicians to leave politics altogether (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2026:49, 88).

Another argument within the justification theme delegitimises Busch through her response to it, framing toughness as a prerequisite for political qualification for women. One user says “Toughen up! Regular people have to endure far worse things in life”. Another one says: “The victim card does not suit you at all” and “That’s what happens when you’re deputy prime minister”. This framing of toughness performs gendered gatekeeping. Gender is accomplished through interaction, and individuals are expected to act within normative conceptions of what it means to be recognisably male or female within a given context (West and Zimmerman, 1987). These users see her as transgressing these norms, which functions as delegitimation of her sex category within the political context. Toughness, in this sense, functions as an accountability mechanism together with the expectation to perform uncomplaining availability as a woman. The capacity to absorb TFGBV without complaint is constructed through these user-comments as a requirement of political competence. This creates a double-bind for women in politics as the norms of the political role versus the norms expected from a woman go in opposite directions (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Women are expected to endure objectification silently as proof of their political competence whilst at the same time remaining legible as appropriately feminine. Incidentally, Busch’s perceived

incumbency of her sex-category becomes the very reason for users to be able to shift the accountability of the scandal back onto her. Thompson (2000) describes this as second-order transgressions, in which the target of the transgressions become the transgressor themselves through victim-blaming. Thus, either response from Busch confirms her inadequacy: she's either too weak to lead or too sexualised to be taken seriously as a leader. Busch's response to the violation gets used against her to delegitimize her ability to be politically competent. In this case, the toughness narrative shifts the conversation to paint Busch's response as the problem rather than the users producing Deepfake content.

Busch is only subject to this expectation because she's a woman. Some users refer to how male counterparts on X have responded to Deepfakes produced by Grok to diminish her response in Post 3. One comment says: "So many men in bikinis and worse, all over X. Have you seen fat JD Vance? He just laughed about it." Another user says: "[...] if a man had experienced exactly the same thing, people would have laughed and seen it as humor/a joke. But women always have to wear the victim card. Always." These comments explicitly invoke gender equality as a rhetorical weapon against Busch's objection. As shown in previous research, women who hold higher positions in politics tend to experience higher rates of gender-based violence in media (Håkansson, 2024-a; Giugni, 2021). Thus, the argument performs a false equivalence between the mockery of a male politician's body weight and the sexualised Deepfake production targeting a female politician. Commenters deny the structural and gendered dimension of Deepfake TFGBV while appearing to argue from a stance of fairness by insisting that Busch's experience is equal to her male counterparts. This frames her perspective as insignificant and furthers the argument that she is inadequate as a political leader because she does not adhere to the normative male expectations to absorb TFGBV.

Similarly, the other users shift the focus of the scandal away from the generation of Deepfake content onto Busch's political position through her response. Where the previous cluster argues she should not have spoken to retain her political qualification, this cluster argues she had no right to object in the first place. These comments are prevalent throughout all posts. Her body becomes the site, to these users, of a verdict. For example, one user comments under Post 3: "You probably liked it too. The attention. It suits you better than to fool people that you are some sort of a 'leader.'" This

comment directly attacks her credibility as a politician by entangling her in the enjoyment of being sexualised by users prompting Grok. This furthers the established double-bind of her political position as a woman (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Another comment under Post 2 states: "She's a horrible, disgusting Zionist. Also, not very pretty. This is a very flattering pic of her" when talking about an image prompted by Grok. This comment first uses her political position to frame the Deepfakes as deserved punishment, and then legitimise the 'Grok' version of her. Other comments under Post 1 directly attack her political stance by, for example, prompting Grok to put her in a burka. Some users even discuss her deserving a way harsher fate than just a bikini picture. The Deepfakes are thus framed by these user comments as a proportionate political response. These comments represent the most aggressive form of scandal reversal in the dataset (Thompson, 2000). The comments invert the moral direction of the scandal entirely, positioning Busch's political position as the provocation which warranted the production of Deepfakes. Håkansson (2024-b:17) demonstrates that men who are frequent social media users show the highest tolerance for hostile behaviour toward female politicians. These comments reflect that hostility. They frame Busch's objection as unreasonable as opposed to Grok's ability to produce TFGBV content. Some users also agree with the notion that she might even "deserve" it. As Ji (2025) demonstrates, women tend to withdraw from online spaces to not face further backlash from responding to Deepfake abuse. Not only are they working to justify the harm done against Ebba Busch, but they are also delegitimising her for speaking out against it. This is a mechanism for silencing, and risks furthering the narrative that speaking out against harm can lead to further harm being produced.

Together, these justificatory and delegitimising patterns close off routes through which Busch's experience of harm is recognised as legitimate. Users within this section demonstrate a clear theme: that Busch's response to the Deepfake scandal was unwarranted for multiple reasons. First, Deepfake production is elevated and shielded through artistic, democratic and technologically inevitable developments. Then, users flip the narrative onto Busch herself, positioning her as politically inadequate to respond to the scandal. It projects that Busch's political authority does not protect her from being treated as a body available for public manipulation. Instead, her visibility intensifies disciplining comments and blame-shifting. In this case, comments on X look like a

space where egalitarian national ideals coexist with everyday symbolic violence. Against the backdrop of Sweden aiming to be gender-neutral, the digital political context represented in this case sends out a contradicting message: that political women do not exist on digital platforms in the same way as men. Instead, they are more subject to scrutiny simply because they are digitally visible. The double-bind is present for any woman who is politically digitised and creates grounds for delegitimisation, simply because it is impossible to adhere to both masculinised political expectations and feminine expectations of being appropriate (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This impossibility is because Deepfakes are user-prompted without the need for two party consent, which puts any woman in a precarious situation (Flynn, Clough and Cooke, 2021).

### ***6.3. Opposition, Solidarity and Naming the Harm***

This section discusses how comments challenge the acceptance and justification outlined in the two previous sections. While fewer in number this imbalance is analytically relevant as the form it took, its brevity, anonymity and isolation, reveals the limits of open opposition within these spaces as well as show how some direct the scandal narrative back onto the perpetrators. The first, and largest, theme analysed in this section concerns users who directly name the harm and condemn users who prompt Grok. The second theme concerns users who stand in solidarity with Busch, and the third theme directly critiques X as a platform and Grok.

Opposition to what's happening and naming the harm is one of the more present themes among these comments, mainly in Post 1 and 2 where users are prompting Grok to generate Deepfakes. Some users reply directly to other users producing Deepfakes using Grok, condemning their behaviour. They say: "You're a pervert", "Shameless" or "This is wrong" without elaboration or argument. These comments simply refuse to accept the harm or justifications for using Grok as a tool to produce Deepfakes by shaming users or telling them off directly for engaging in TFGBV. This directness is significant, as it stands in contrast to earlier documented responses which tend to be lengthy and argumentative. This contrast matters, because it suggests that those pushing back are not engaging on the terms the dominant culture has set within the comments. Instead, they are making a straightforward moral statement and withdrawing from the debate. This brevity can be understood as a form of resistance under pressure, as the

comment section reflects a masculine dominant gender performance. To oppose this openly would, for men in the comment section, mean deviating from the normative performance which invites sanction from other commenters in the form of ridicule or attack. Thus, the brevity of opposition can be understood as a way of objecting while minimising the risk of having one's own gender performance scrutinised by the group withholding dominant opinion (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Kelly, 1988). As previous research indicates, for women in the comment section this dynamic is sharper and more harsh (Ji, 2025). A woman who writes a long, detailed objection risks being categorised by other commenters in the same way Busch herself is. Many commenters who object in this case have their identity hidden by being set to private, and women who oppose the users prompting in the comment section are significantly, at least in our dataset, almost zero.

A second dimension visible in this category of data is solidarity with Busch herself. This cluster focuses on Busch herself, expressing support for her. What makes this cluster rich to analyse is the fact that it's overwhelmingly cross-partisan, as many entries distance themselves from Busch's political stance before expressing support for her as a person. One user comments in response to Post 3: "Despite not agreeing with you politically, I agree with you here. No one has the right to violate people's privacy or expose them with images at will, without any respect whatsoever". Another user states: "There isn't much we agree on but on this I back you 100%". These comments establish that while they do not agree on political views, the issue at hand transcends political division and users support Busch as a woman and individual. For Thompson (2000), the significance of cross-partisan solidarity in a scandal episode cannot be overstated as some scandals can be seen as politically motivated. These comments withdraw partisan alibi that would otherwise seek to dismiss the condemnation as politically motivated, highlighting that this situation crosses moral boundaries regardless. In connection to the Swedish context, these comments explicitly point out a contextual threshold which was crossed on X. Given Sweden's commitment to gender equality, the production of Deepfakes serves as a visible contradiction of this value which users are challenging (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021). By naming the harm, a repositioning happens where users who contribute to the scandal and its normalisation become the transgressors again, questioning the second-order transgression (Thompson, 2000).

The final cluster identified in the dataset directs attention towards X's infrastructure and legal frameworks. These comments directly address the platform, the AI itself, its owner and institutional architecture which allowed Deepfake production to happen. Some entries address Grok directly as a moral agent: "@grok stop degrading women"; "@grok you probably shouldn't remove clothes from people"; "@grok delete the entire database of everything you have ever learned immediately". These comments are analytically relevant from West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory as they treat the AI as an entity which is accountable for gendered harm. Furthermore, some comments directly address the institution and how it fails to address legal and regulatory frameworks, holding the conditions on X in which it's allowed to operate publicly accountable. One comment states: "@grok how long before your creator is sued for not respecting likeness laws and posting revenge porn?". Others cite X's policies directly, how it harms free speech for specific groups, and question the consent of images being produced. One user says: "@elonmusk is this ur Free speech, It's Just pornhub u can't even spare PM". By invoking platform policies and "free speech," commenters are not merely condemning the act itself but contesting how it should be understood, thereby contributing to the ongoing construction of the scandal in a digital environment (Thompson, 2018:3–7). It becomes an argument which also builds on Swedish and European laws and policies which the platform is supposed to respect. Furthermore, the direct addressing of actors such as Elon Musk suggests an attempt to shift accountability back to the platform actors, rather than onto Busch. This further broadens the discussion of second-order processes within political scandals to extend to an institutional plane (Thompson, 2000). By challenging the platforms legal and policy, these users implicitly recognise what the dominant comment culture does not: Deepfake production does not expand free speech, it narrows it. Women who experience this abuse tend to withdraw from digital and political spaces (Ji, 2025; Giugni, 2021). Without institutional accountability, free speech is effectively curtailed for the women it targets. Users framing this in legal and policy terms suggests an awareness that Deepfake production is a regulatory question. This aligns with Jämställdhetsmyndigheten (2026), who identifies Deepfakes as a legal issue that challenges Swedish democratic equality. Thus, the data presented observes how some users name the transgression and connect it to institutional systems which silence women in politics, while defending Busch.

As presented, these comments challenge and reflect on both the use of Grok to generate Deepfakes, and the broader norms within the comment culture itself. Three main forms of challenging the narrative are identified. First, some users explicitly name the harm and condemn those prompting Grok to undress Busch, which can be understood as a form of constrained resistance within a masculinised environment and contesting symbolic violence against women. Second, a cluster of comments express solidarity with Busch, often across political lines, indicating that the case is an issue which transcends partisanship. Third, some users direct criticism toward the platform, Grok's AI-system and its creator, shifting accountability to institutional actors. This highlights how scandals are not only norm-violations, but involve struggles over interpretation and responsibility where users contribute in potential redirection of the narrative.

## 7 Discussion

This study set out to examine what patterns user-comments on X reflected in relation to the Grok-Busch Deepfake scandal and if they reveal mechanisms through which TFGBV operates in Swedish political digital contexts. First, it examines: “What themes and patterns emerge in user comments on X in response to the Grok–Busch Deepfake scandal?”. Secondly, it asks: “Do user responses to the Busch scandal reveal mechanisms of TFGBV and if so what do they say about gendered power structures in Swedish digital political contexts?”

A majority of coded entries reflected themes of acceptance or justification of Deepfake production with most of these entries constituting active sexualisation. A further portion engaged in patterns of humor, dismissal or delegitimisation of Busch’s political position. Only a minority of entries moved in the opposite direction, opposing the acceptance and justification of TFGBV used against Busch through Grok. The acceptance and justification does not work in isolation but in tandem, where acceptance normalises the pattern, and justification protects it from scrutiny. The dominant formation in the comments on X was predominantly one of normalisation rather than contestation, which answers the first research question directly. Majority of users accepted Grok’s TFGBV-producing capacity through misrecognition, treating Deepfake generation as unremarkable, humorous and continuous with prior technological practices rather than a form of gendered harm. Furthermore, the justification of Grok’s capabilities led to an amplification of this phenomenon, where Ebba Busch gets transformed into the transgressor for speaking out. This narrative was contested by a minority of users who condemned others who prompted Grok, users who stood in solidarity and users who questioned the platform itself.

Previous research established that TFGBV targeting women in politics is not incidental, instead highlighting it as a structural issue. It functions as a mechanism of political silencing which disproportionately affects women in leading positions (Giugni, 2021; Håkansson, 2024-a). This study’s findings fall in line with that pattern and extend it by identifying the strategies users on X employ to sustain normalisation and simultaneously construct Busch’s position as a female political figure. Through technological determinism, dismissal, and a framing of toughness the users disqualify Busch and her statement through what this study identifies as a delegitimisation

mechanism. If she objects, she is told technology developing in this way is inevitable. If she points to the images, she's told they're not really depicting her. If she speaks publicly about the harm, she is told that doing so proves she is not fit for political office. Each argument closes off a way for her experience to be perceived as legitimate, constructing a double bind where both speaking out and staying silent confirms her inadequacy as a political figure. West and Zimmerman (1987) help breaking this down: her incumbency in a sex category is used to discredit her statement by applying different norms when interpreting her response. In silence she is a politician, and when speaking she is a woman. This is consistent with Kelly's (1988) observation that the threshold for recognisable harm is often built on the perpetrator's perspective.

These mechanisms demonstrate a gap between Sweden's formal gender equality and gendered realities in digital political contexts. TFGBV fundamentally alters political behaviour and silences women's voices. Women modify their political messaging, reduce their online engagement, and in some cases abandon their digital presence entirely to avoid abuse (Ji, 2025; Giugni, 2021). The mechanisms shown in the data, namely normalisation of Deepfake production and delegitimisation of the female politician speaking out about it are contextually important in this sense. They are not only upholding existing gender-hierarchies but operating to minimise victim perspectives, which can have detrimental consequences. In a context where political visibility increasingly requires digital presence, this silencing dynamic constitutes a genuine democratic problem (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2026).

It is important to note, however, that the minority of responses who oppose the dominant themes presented in the two first sections of the analysis signify that the scandal transgressed national moral values. Cross-partisan solidarity entries affirm her standing as a political agent and as a person. Notably, a large part of the data which opposed users depicting her in Deepfakes responded directly to the users generating them. Whilst those comments are generally short, they still depict a group of users who morally oppose and name the harm directly. Furthermore, users also question how a platform can allow users to depict politicians and leaders in this way, referring to the institutional arrangement of the platform's policies and ownership to contest the permission of AI contributing to the production of TFGBV in this way.

Future research within the topic of TFGBV should continue to examine the relationship between platform design and normalisation of TFGBV. Longitudinal studies tracking how attitudes to Deepfake production would allow for conclusions about whether the normalisation patterns identified in this study persist on other platforms or cases. Furthermore, qualitative interview studies could complement the netnographic approach taken in this study by providing insight into how users experience the boundary between AI use and gendered harm. Future research within Sociology specifically would benefit from incorporating other sociological themes such as class and intersectionality. This study has focused primarily on gender as the structuring axis of the patterns observed, but questions of who has access to the platform literacy required to name infrastructure as harm, and whose political identity renders them most vulnerable to the collapse of harm into deserving, point toward inequalities that a class and intersectional analysis could productively address. Finally, an important, but not analysed, dimension in this study is whether women and men perceive this differently. In our data, we were not able to identify users mainly due to many being set to private. A qualitative interview with men and women which sociologically analyses this phenomenon would, therefore, be rich in future research to examine how they talk about TFGBV in digital media and towards female politicians.

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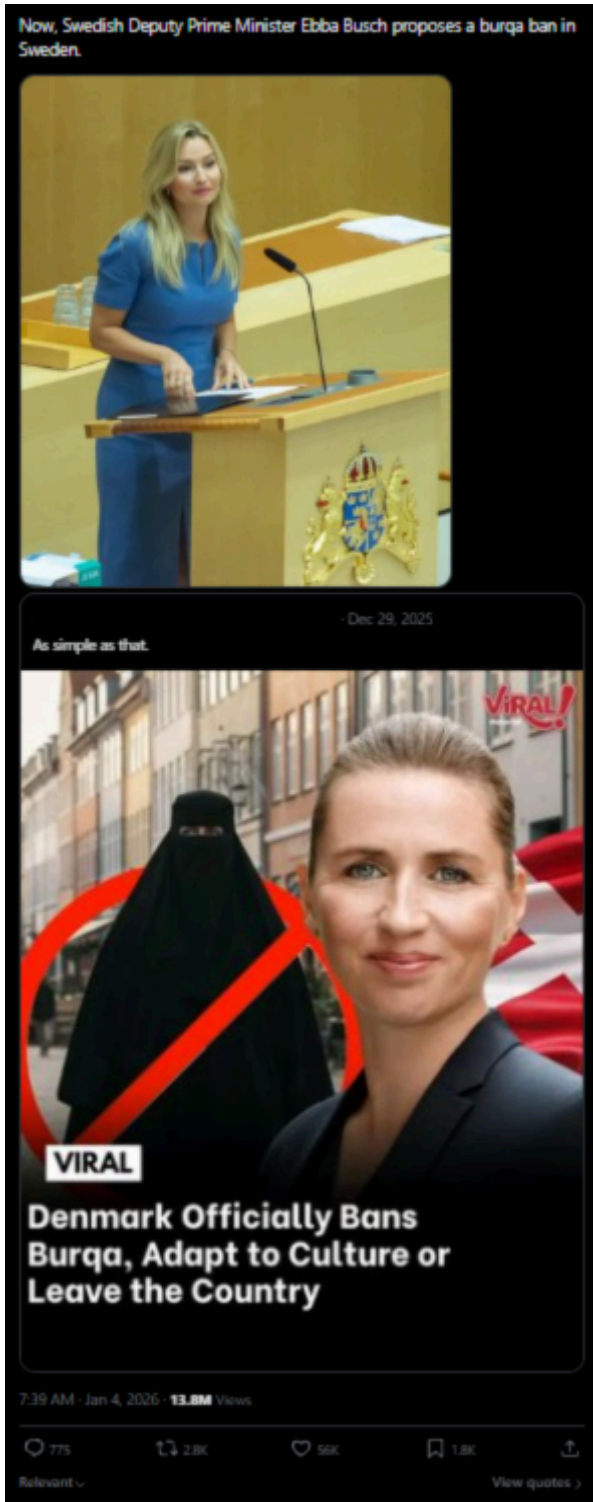
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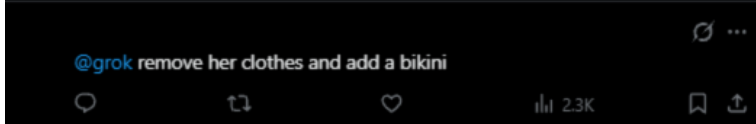
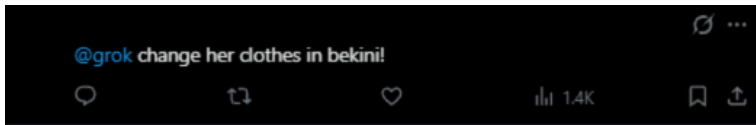
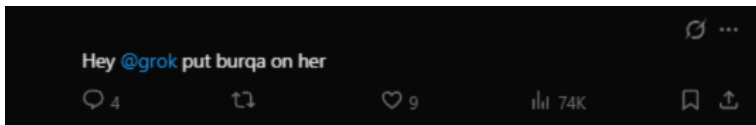
# Appendix

Note: Original usernames have been redacted for anonymity.

Post 1:



Examples of comments under Post 1:



Post 2:



Examples of comments under Post 2:

@grok replace her dress with dental floss



31K



@grok instead of a regular bikini, give bikini battle armor resembling the deadric from elder scrolls



181K



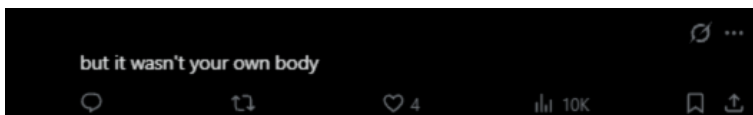
She's a horrible, disgusting Zionist. Also, not very pretty. This is a very flattering pic of her.

9:15 PM · Jan 5, 2026 · 314 Views

Post 3:



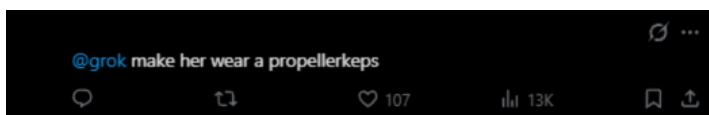
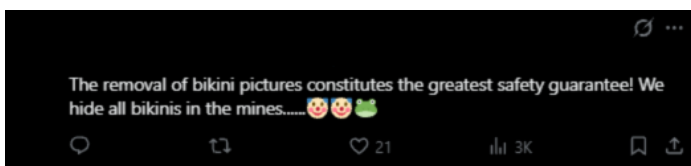
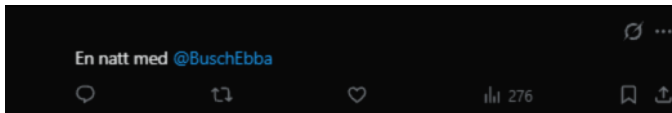
Examples of comments under Post 3:



Post 4:



Examples of comments under Post 4:





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