**Twitter, Incivility and ‘Everyday’ Gendered Othering: An Analysis of Tweets Sent to UK Members of Parliament**

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**Abstract**

Recently, widely reported studies assessed messages sent to UK female MPs online and concluded that they suffer high levels of abuse (Stamboliva, 2017; Marin, 2018). However, these studies tended to focus on the most high-profile MPs and the worst instances of abuse or did not include male MPs in their study for comparison. This study aims to assess more subtle forms of incivility and othering and the experiences of less prominent MPs online. It takes a mixed methods approach to analysing 117,802 tweets sent to members of parliament over a 14-day period for evidence of incivility. Firstly, models assessing the factors associated with receiving incivility on Twitter are presented and furthermore an in-depth thematic analysis of gendered tweets is conducted. The findings suggest that for the receipt of certain types of incivility there is little difference between female and male MPs. However, female MPs were more likely to receive generally uncivil tweets, tweets with stereotypes about their identity and tweets questioning their position as politicians than male MPs. Qualitatively, in terms of gendered othering, we found several instances of tweets containing misogynistic abuse, tweets demonising and objectifying female MPs as well as tweets feminising male MPs.

**Keywords**

Twitter, Incivility, Gender, Representation, Othering.

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**Introduction**

In the UK, 2015 saw the first prosecution for Twitter harassment of a parliamentary representative (The Guardian, 7th May 2015). The perpetrator targeted a prominent female MP with misogynistic slurs. In response to the case, some female MPs, in conjunction with women’s groups, set up an initiative called ‘Reclaim the Internet’ to raise awareness about sexist harassment online, focusing on women in the public eye. Despite this high profile debate surrounding female MPs and online abuse in the UK, there has been surprisingly little academic research into the phenomenon. We instead draw on more general literature on online hate speech and abuse directed at women to inform our work. Of the studies that have been conducted, there were mixed results. Ward and McLoughlin (forthcoming) found little difference in the extent of abuse received by male and female MPs. Conversely, a study by Stamboliva (2017) found that the most prominent black female MP, Diane Abbott, received easily the most abuse during the 2017 election, with half of the total abuse directed at her. This suggests that the gender and race of the target plays a part in the online abuse of politicians. As a result, several groups propose that this online environment may be causing women to avoid going into politics (Ryall, 20th May 2017). The studies above used an automated approach, applying sentiment analysis to a corpus of tweets. Although this approach may be useful for identifying outright abuse, it cannot identify the more subtle forms of othering that people experience online.

This paper instead applies manual content analysis to every Tweet sent to each ‘ordinary’ (that is, not high profile) MP in the UK on Twitter over a two-week period, in order to capture the day-to-day tweets MPs receive from the public. Content analysis is applied here in an attempt to distinguish between general incivility and more discriminatory messages and to capture gendered tweets, including subtler ‘everyday’ sexist and other othering messages. This allows us to apply a gendered lens to online abuse and ascertain the extent to which incivility towards male and female MPs might be similar, but also whether the specific nature of the abuse is different. The study provides an important update to the scholarship assessing barriers to representation experienced by female politicians (Matland, 2005; Palmer & Simon, 2010) for the social media age. It will allow us to assess whether social media, which has now become an expected part of MPs’ connection with those they represent (Southern & Lee, 2019), may be adding another hurdle to the recruitment of female representatives.

*Women’s political representation*

Women have been historically marginalised in political institutions and many scholars attempt to both explain why, and offer remedies (Jamieson, 1995; Lovenduski, 2005). Factors which impact on women’s recruitment into politics include systematic features (such as legal structures and the electoral system); how parties are organised (their rules and ideological positions); individual factors (the resources and motivations of aspiring candidates, and the attitudes of selectors), and individual electoral circumstances. Parties’ candidate selection processes are often understood as a relationship between the supply of applicants and the demands of selectors who choose candidates based on their own preferences and perceptions of ability, qualifications and their perceived electability (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995).

Matters that affect the supply of women seeking selection include gendered socialisation, the sexual division of labour, and the fact women tend to have fewer resources than men (Lovenduski, 2005). For example, Busby and McLeod (2002) demonstrate that one of the greatest barriers for women has been the difficulty of balancing family responsibilities. On the demand side, women have been directly discriminated against by party selectors (Shepherd-Robinson & Lovenduski, 2002), where negative judgements are made based on perceived characteristics of their group, rather than about them as individuals. They also suffer indirect discrimination where ideas of what constitutes a ‘good’ MP count against women. These processes demonstrate that politics is therefore culturally coded as male, leading to essentially two substantive barriers to female representation; women are inhibited from seeking political office in the first place, and furthermore discriminated against when they do come forward (Lovenduski, 2005). Historically, arguments have been made which blame supply-side issues for the inequitable representation of women, suggesting that fewer women than men want to be politicians. The consensus today is that there is a problem with the demand side, that even though there are fewer women seeking selection than men, this does not mean that there are insufficient qualified women (Childs, 2008). There are also other potential factors which might discourage women from standing, such as the sometimes aggressive and adversarial style of politics (Busby & McLeod, 2002; Malley, 2012) or that the gendered nature of political institutions works to implicitly exclude women (Lovenduski, 2012).

Media coverage of politics might also deter women from participating. Numerous studies have demonstrated that women politicians tend to be marginalised in political news (O’Neill, Savigny & Cann, 2016; Harmer & Southern, 2018b). Female politicians are often subjected to different media treatment which positions them as political outsiders and downplays their experience (Norris, 1997; Harmer & Southern, 2018a). Scrutiny of their appearance and family arrangements are further examples (Lawrence & Rose, 2010; Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). Framing serious female politicians in this manner reveals a problematic tendency to trivialise and undermine them as effective political actors (Ross, 2002).

A more recently documented phenomenon that impacts on women’s political participation is the rise of violence against women in politics. Mona Lena Krook’s (2017) extensive review of this trend identifies a number of empirical studies from various national contexts including Sweden and Bolivia that suggest sexist hostility and intimidation have driven women out of politics. The majority of definitions of violence against women highlight three basic elements. Firstly, it involves aggressive acts aimed largely or solely at women in politics. Secondly, women are targeted via explicitly gendered means, for example, the use or threat of sexual violence. Finally, the goal is to deter participation of the targeted group in formal politics (Krook, 2017). Crucially, the concept of violence is not limited to physical manifestations. ‘Harassment’, ‘intimidation’ and ‘discrimination’ are also important because they draw attention to non-physical acts of aggression or the more subtle resistance to women’s political participation. The advent of digital technologies means that would-be politicians have to deal with the expectation that they will engage with social media in order for constituents and journalists to contact them, where they risk becoming targeted by uncivil or abusive discourse (Theocharis, Barberá, Fazekas, Popot & Parnet, 2016; Southern & Harmer, 2019).

There is a burgeoning literature addressing online participation in politics which suggests that the intemperate and uncivil tone of much online discussion represent a threat to democratic norms and values (Papacharissi, 2004). Scholars have defined a range of behaviours as uncivil, such as *ad hominem* attacks, vulgarity, derogatory language, direct insults, name-calling and aspersion (Kenski, Coe & Rains, 2017; Rossini, 2019). There is some concern that incivility can harm perceptions of political arguments, weaken political trust, and that it may discourage talented candidates from seeking elected office (Maisel, 2012). Other scholars have argued that civility and incivility are in the eye of the beholder and are context specific (Herbst, 2010). Rossini (2019) argues that incivility should not necessarily be perceived as threatening to democratic norms; rather incivility, such as rudeness and bad language are not always used to offend participants in the discussion so much as to make a rhetorical point. This is demonstrated by Kwon and Cho (2017) who find that swearing in online political discussions is indicative of participants’ emotional engagement with the topic and can be productive in drawing attention to certain issues. Rossini (2019) argues that more extreme forms of incivility, such as racial slurs and threats of violence are better conceived of as *political intolerance*, and should, therefore, be differentiated as posing a specific threat to democratic pluralism and participation.

There are clear parallels here with studies which conceptualise online harassment and trolling as ‘silencing strategies’ which discourage women’s online participation (Jane, 2014; Megarry, 2014; Banet-Weiser & Miltner; 2014). The empirical evidence indicates that women are disproportionately targeted, particularly women of colour, or those advocating explicitly feminist messages (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). A plethora of misogynist tactics, such as trolling, making sexist ‘humorous’ comments, and tacit shaming strategies all attempt to silence women’s voices online and re-inscribe the internet as a place where women do not belong (Jane, 2014; Fox, Cruz & Lee, 2015).

Whilst the anonymous nature of online interaction, the affordances of online platforms, and an insufficient legal framework for policing such behaviour are often seen as contributing factors, it is crucial not to lose sight of the deeply embedded social and cultural factors that legitimate the denigration of women. Much of this research assumes that this sexism is always aggressive or hostile. This is not always the case, as Fox et al. (2015) argue: one defence of online sexism is to dismiss it as merely a joke. They argue that regardless of tone, online sexism is pernicious, and reinforces and normalises the idea that people are entitled to belittle and demean women. Whatever motivates the culprit, othering women online can be detrimental to their status as equal participants in society.

This is important for our purposes as whilst messages that women MPs receive might not be explicitly abusive or misogynistic, they might reinforce women’s outsider status in more subtle and potentially enduring ways. This ‘ambient sexism’ (Fox et al. 2015: 436) can, therefore, impact on all women in politics, regardless of whether or not they have been individually targeted. Sexism experienced online by politicians then becomes increasingly problematic because it may contribute to the exclusion of women from political life. High-profile media coverage of these instances in turn may impact on the supply side of female political recruitment. Such “efforts to harm, intimidate and harass women should thus be seen as a serious affront to democracy, rather than dismissed as an unfortunate feature of ‘politics as usual’” (Krook, 2017, p. 75); or indeed social/digital media as usual. Therefore, efforts to restrict the participation of women online in these ways is deeply problematic and highlights the role that online othering can have in sending a broader and unambiguous message that women as a group do not belong in politics.

The experiences of women political representatives are complicated by the tension that arises from social media use becoming a key method of communication with constituents as part of their job. It would be very hard in today’s political communication landscape to simply opt out of their use. Therefore, female politicians may at the very least be at a political disadvantage if they do not make use of platforms like Twitter, or they may be seen as out of touch by voters who have a right to contact their elected representatives.

*Gendered Online Abuse and Othering: The evidence so far*

The abuse and/or threats of violence and rape on Twitter reported by a number of high-profile women MPs has resulted in a number of studies which examined how women MPs are targeted online. Greenwood, Roberts, Rout, and Bontchieva (2017) studied 840,000 tweets sent before the last UK General Election. Their results suggest abusive tweets made up between two and four per cent of all tweets sent to politicians, and that the overwhelming majority were targeted at a relatively small number of prominent politicians. Controlling for political party and gender, they found that male Conservative candidates received the highest percentage of abusive Tweets. They did however note that women candidates were more likely to receive gendered abuse, for example calling them a ‘witch’. Similarly, in their study of 270,000 tweets directed at MPs over a two and a half month period, McLoughlin and Ward (forthcoming) also found that the number of abusive tweets was relatively low (2.6%). The results indicated that increased name-recognition of the MP has a positive relationship with increased levels of abusive tweets. When gender was controlled for, they found that men received more abusive tweets than women, however women received a significantly higher proportion of hate speech than men – 86% of tweets that contained hate speech were directed at women MPs. In stark contrast, Stambolieva et al. (2017) found that the vast majority of online abuse directed at politicians was aimed at female politicians, where Diane Abbott received almost half of all the abuse that was present in the study and that another woman of colour (the Scottish National Party’s Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh) was the second most abused politician. A more recent Amnesty International study corroborated these findings but only included female targets, meaning comparisons with male figures was not possible (Marin, 2018).

Whilst these studies give some indication of the extent of abusive messages that members of parliament receive on Twitter, they do not tell us the whole story. As Fox et al. (2015) make clear, sexist and racist content does not necessarily have to be explicitly hostile or abusive. Discrimination online can be a much more subtle, yet no less pernicious, way of othering women online in order to undermine them and remind others that they do not belong in the political realm.

For these reasons, here we pose three research questions:

RQ1) What is the extent of incivility towards MPs on Twitter?

RQ2) Is the extent of incivility different for female and male MPs?

RQ3) Is the type of incivility different for female and male MPs?

Previous studies in this specific area have used software to perform automated sentiment analysis. We argue that although this approach is useful for identifying key words and the overall sentiment of texts, is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, the risk of false positives. As previously noted, profanity or other terms which may be deemed uncivil or abusive might be context specific. Several of the Tweets analysed in this study contained swearing and yet were not uncivil to the MP in question, or even uncivil at all. Furthermore, the MP in question might not be the specific target of these sentiments, despite it appearing in one of their replies. Secondly, and conversely, there is the risk that the more subtle, ‘everyday’ forms of othering or even abuse will not be identified with automated methods. For instance, Tweets instructing female MPs to ‘get back to the kitchen’ would be overlooked using automated software.

**Data and Methods**

Our study employed a team of four manual coders to content analyse the selected Tweets (Krippendorff, 1980). This allows for the inclusion of contextual factors, colloquialisms and analysis of images sent. Content analysing the Tweets manually allows us to capture these subtler forms of incivility and furthermore assess with more precision the intention and target of the sentiment.

*Sample and data collection*

Overall, there were 578 MPs on Twitter at the time of the study (MPs on Twitter, 2018). We identified 18 who were deemed inactive (they had not tweeted for over six months) and removed from the sample. We furthermore removed the 50 most-followed MPs. These included both the Prime Minister Theresa May and the Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Corbyn. The remainder tended to be members of the cabinet or shadow cabinet. Some of those excluded were early adopters or savvy users of social media, or those who have gained a high following for other varied reasons. These MPs were removed since this study is focused on ‘ordinary’, or less high-profile, MPs and their experiences of incivility online. As outlined above, many of the previous studies on this have focussed on the abuse received by prominent MPs (Stamboliva, 2017). Although informative, this may not be representative of the broader picture and therefore the decision was taken to focus on less prominent representatives. We determined this by follower-count, as this is a study of Twitter interactions and neatly measures profile within this specific online space. This left us with a sample of 500 MPs. We then captured every public tweet aimed at each of these 500 MPs (both direct replies and @-mentions) for the whole sampling period, using NodeXL software.

The sampling period ran from the 19th March until the 2nd April 2018 inclusive, which was ten days before Parliament adjourned for Easter recess, and the first four days of the recess. This period offered a means of capturing a standard snap-shot of MPs’ experiences on Twitter since during recess MPs often work from their constituencies. We aimed to capture a mix of these periods to account for any differences that might occur between them. As MPs spend less time in recess, we captured fewer recess days for our sample. Initially, 117,904 Tweets were collected. [[1]](#endnote-1)

Tweets in languages other than English that could not be legibly translated on Google translate, were removed, leading to a loss of 19 tweets. Furthermore, NodeXL occasionally truncates Tweets, necessitating the coder to view the original tweet, via a link that is also scraped. Between collection and coding, some of these accounts were suspended and the tweets could not be coded. This led to a further loss of 83 tweets. As accounts can be suspended for abuse, it may be that these tweets may have been more likely to be uncivil than had they not been suspended, but the low number here means this is unlikely to appreciably bias the results. Where a reply was re-tweeted, this was also coded, as this generates another ‘mention’ and so could be considered akin to another reply. Our final sample contained 117,802 tweets, aimed at 500 MPs.

*Coding and analysis*

To construct our coding scheme, we drew upon Papacharissi’s (2004) typology of civility, which was specifically devised to be applied to online interactions. Firstly, we measured general incivility directly as a binary. Then we coded for the presence of Papacharissi’s measures of stereotyping, name calling, calling the recipient a liar, calling them unintelligent and profanity. We furthermore added variables which could be considered potentially threatening to democratic rights of MPs: direct measures of silencing, questioning their position as an MP (for example imploring them to resign or otherwise leave the political sphere) and outright threats of violence (see Appendix A for the full coding scheme). Lastly, coders were instructed to identify tweets that displayed gendered or sexist remarks. All of these were treated as separate independent categories, with none being sub-codes of other categories. All were measured as a binary and only sentiment aimed directly at the MP in question was coded. This led to ten variables overall, the first nine of which were used as dependent variables in the quantitative analysis, and the last used to identify tweets for qualitative analysis. We note that for some categories, tweets coded positively were not necessarily uncivil, and some were far stronger than merely uncivil. However, we deploy ‘incivility’ here as a shorthand term to describe all the variables measured.

A team of four coders was deployed. Two external coders coded three-quarters of the tweets and the authors coded the remainder. Two pilots were conducted with debriefs after each, before the full sample was coded. Furthermore, 5000 tweets were randomly selected and coded by the two external coders separately so that inter-coder reliability checks could be performed. Krippendorff’s Alpha scores for each variable were within acceptable limits of ≥ 0.67 (Krippendorff, 2004) as can be seen by Table 1.[[2]](#endnote-2)

[Table 1 about here]

For the quantitative analysis, findings are presented at the tweet-level (that is, the percentage of the whole 117,802 tweets that were uncivil, stereotyping, silencing etc.) and at the MP-level (that is, the percentage of the 500 MPs in our sample who had at least uncivil, stereotyping, silencing etc. tweet aimed at them). We ran binary and ordinal logistic regressions which were performed on the MP-level data. We ran models for each of the variables coded. The dependent variable in the binary models was simply whether the MP in question had received at least one tweet from the variable in question or not. For the ordinal models, we aimed to measure the extent of the type of incivility received. Therefore, the dependent variable here was divided into three categories (‘high’, ‘medium’ and ‘low’) based on the extent of each type of incivility the MP had aimed at them, coded around the mean for that variable. Candidates with fewer than ten tweets aimed at them during the sampling period were removed from the ordinal models, leaving 441 MPs in these models rather than 500. This was to avoid potentially inflating the significance of one uncivil tweet, potentially placing that MP into the ‘high’ category for this variable.

For the binary models, these were left in, as it was felt that, measured as a strict binary, even one tweet ‘mattered’. Party (here measured as the two main parties, the Conservatives and Labour, plus an ‘other’ category), MPs’ black and minority ethnic (BAME) status, their LGBT status and age were controlled for[[3]](#endnote-3) (House of Commons Library Report on Diversity, 2018) as it has been suggested in previous literature that these characteristics may also effect incivility towards representatives (Ward, 2016). We also controlled for the number of followers they had at the time the tweets were collected. This was logged to account for the large variation in followers in the sample (616 to 36,293) and provide a more stable model.

For the qualitative analysis, tweets which had been coded as containing any form of gendered sentiment or sexism were identified, providing us with 295 sexist tweets to analyse qualitatively. We followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of thematic analysis by inductively coding the tweets, and constantly comparing these codes. We developed these codes into broader themes which were the most common forms of gendered othering we observed in the data. We have chosen not to anonymise the recipients of these tweets so that the extent to which MPs experience online othering is discussed overtly. This mixed-methods approach provides a broad overview of the differences male and female MPs experience online as well as a detailed examination of the types of messages they receive to provide a comprehensive analysis of the topic.

**Results**

*Quantitative analysis*

[Table 2 about here]

Firstly, in line with research question one, the overall extent of incivility is assessed. We examine this via two units of analysis, tweet and MP-level. Overall, 9.8% of tweets coded were deemed uncivil by the coders. This shows that incivility towards MPs is, although not a widespread occurrence, not an insignificant one either, with almost one in ten of all of the Tweets sent to the MPs in our sample being in some way uncivil. However, looking at the data for incivility received by individual MPs, almost two-thirds of the MPs sampled here received at least one uncivil tweet during the sampling period. Considering this was a relatively short period, this shows that MPs are much more likely to encounter incivility online than not. For certain MPs, this was to an extreme degree. Two MPs in our sample, Alan Duncan and Andrew Stephenson, received incivility in 80% of the tweets sent to them during the sampling period.

[Table 3 about here]

Moving on to assess gender differences, there are perhaps fewer differences than one might expect but nonetheless some important patterns emerge. In answer to RQ2, when measured at the tweet level, male MPs received more uncivil tweets, but when measured at the MP level, female MPs were more likely to have received at least one generally uncivil tweet than men. Although the numbers were small, female MPs were more likely to receive tweets which stereotyped them. Indeed, when this is measured at the MP level, almost double the amount of female MPs had received at least one tweet containing stereotyping compared to male MPs. Furthermore, much of the stereotyping aimed at male MPs was about their party. For example, ‘all Tories hate poor people’. There was much more gender based stereotyping aimed at women however, as the examples in the qualitative analysis will show. This serves to imply to or remind female MPs that they are seen as women first as MPs, rather than being seen as individuals (Ross, 2002).

Female MPs were also far more likely to have their position as representatives questioned. The most common of these types of tweet was being told outright to resign as an MP and leave politics. But there were variations on this theme such as telling MPs they don’t deserve to represent the people of their constituency, or implying they weren’t fit for office. Female MPs were more likely to receive such messages and the differences were significant when measured with tweet or MP as the unit of analysis. This is again telling in a broader sense in a way that perhaps differences in the other categories might not be. These tweets are explicitly or implicitly telling female MPs they should leave politics or aren’t fit to hold office. This feeds into the broader questions raised in the literature review about barriers to representation. People who are uncivil to MPs on Twitter are keen to remind female MPs of their still-precarious position as representatives and this only highlights the pervasive feeling of being unwelcome in the political sphere. Female MPs were also more likely to have their truthfulness called into question, although this result was only significant when analysed with tweet at the unit of analysis. Nevertheless, this has some clearly gendered implications.

[Tables 4 and 5 about here]

For the logistic regression models[[4]](#endnote-4), these patterns generally hold even when controlling for party and other factors which may engender incivility. There were few significant results. A larger follower-count was significantly or almost-significantly associated with receiving higher levels of every type of incivility measured here, giving credence to our assertion above that assessing only high-follower MPs might provide a distorted picture of online incivility. It is also interesting to note that BAME or LGBT status appeared to have little negative effect on the levels of incivility received. Stereotyping was higher for each group in both models, but was not significant, and other results were mixed. When assessing gender, even controlling for other factors, female MPs were borderline- significantly (p=0.066) more likely to receive generally uncivil tweets and tweets questioning their position, and significantly more likely to receive tweets that contained stereotypes. In the ordinal models, again the earlier findings are largely supported. Female candidates were more likely to receive stereotyping and the effect was stronger once the extent of this is accounted for in these ordinal models, suggesting they receive not only more stereotyping overall but also to a larger extent. Female candidates were also more likely to have their position questioned at a somewhat-significant level (p=0.106) even accounting for the extent of these types of tweets, although the effect size reduces slightly. This informs RQ3 and does suggest that the type of incivility received is different by gender. As well as more general incivility, female MPs were more likely to receive the arguably more ‘extreme’ types of incivility measured here, including stereotyping and questioning their position as representatives (as well as violence, although the results were not significant in either model). However, the significant result for general incivility disappears once extent is accounted for in the ordinal models here. This informs RQ2 further and suggests that fewer male MPs overall receive generally uncivil tweets but that those who do receive them at a higher proportion than female MPs. This is supported by the point above, that the two MPs with by far the highest levels of uncivil tweets (around 80% of all tweets aimed at them) were both male.

*Qualitative analysis*

To gain a more nuanced insight into gendered incivility online, we also completed a qualitative thematic analysis based on all 295 tweets which were identified as being gendered. We have preserved all spelling and grammatical errors from the original tweets. We identified four main themes. These were explicitly gendered or misogynistic abuse, demonization, objectification, and the feminization of male MPs.

*Directly gendered or misogynistic abuse*:

There were several instances of openly sexist abuse:

'@Dr\_PhilippaW smarmy smug self centred bitch'

'@margarethodge He hasn't done anything wrong. Witch.'

'@EstherMcVey1 You focking lying whore'

These examples all contain gender-specific insults in British English which are aimed at women. Most of them are openly abusive and are demonstrative of the name-calling and swearing that has already been discussed earlier.

*Demonization:*

Another form of gendered stereotyping demonized female MPs for being uncaring:

'@EstherMcVey1 You are an evil witch, one of the westminster coven of mean hearted, penny pinching and murdering Crohns'

@LouHaigh I only know she’s lying these days when her lips move! Deceitful, heartless witch of a woman. Cruella de Vile!

'@EstherMcVey1 Sod off back up north you uncaring, evil demeaning woman.'

Whilst these examples can also be characterised as sexist and uncivil, they reveal a more subtle form of undermining women by implying that they are unfeminine. Calling women heartless and cruel is an attack on their perceived femininity and further problematizes their involvement in politics. Jamieson (1995) calls this a ‘double bind’, arguing that because politics is coded as masculine, women have to behave accordingly whilst simultaneously risking being perceived as insufficiently feminine.

*Objectification:*

Objectification of female MPs took two forms. One was deriding their appearance and the other involved sexualising them. A number of women received tweets which sought to label them as unattractive and overweight:

'@Sandbach Lay off the cookies fatty'

'@carolinenokes You are so fucking ugly.'

'@margarethodge You are an lying old goat,who wears far to much make up for your age.'

'@HeatherWheeler 👈🏻 When someone obese votes to take food from poor childrens mouths'

These tweets reveal the extent to which women are expected to conform to normative ideas about femininity by attending to their appearance. The final example is particularly interesting as the insulting part is coupled with direct criticism of a political decision made by this specific MP. This highlights the extent to which legitimate criticism of a woman’s political record can be mixed with inappropriate assessments of her appearance, which is discriminatory.

Female MPs also received a number of tweets which explicitly sexualised them in some way:

'@CatSmithMP great work cat you 4 eyed sex princess i want you'

'@DeidreBrock Oooooh , nice bum... Lol'

'@KellyTolhurst The arse on her...only reason why I watch PMQs…'

'@EstherMcVey1 Are you for fucking real.. I mean you may look shaggable but does all the pain and worry you cause turn you on.. Vile witch

These tweets emphasise the perceived attractiveness of the recipients on one level, but moreover a number of them seem specifically designed to be offensive. The first refers to the MP in question as a ‘sex princess’ whilst simultaneously mocking the fact that she wears glasses. The final example is even more offensive referring to its recipient as a ‘vile witch’ at the same time as suggesting that the tweeter finds her sexually attractive. Such tweets seem designed to elicit discomfort in their intended targets, whilst the other two are much more straightforwardly objectifying. These examples demonstrate that female MPs are subjected to unwanted attention which has little to do with their jobs as political representatives.

*Feminization (of male MPs):*

There were also a number of gendered tweets aimed at male MPs challenging their masculinity. A number of different MPs were accused of cowardice by referring to them needing to ‘grow some balls’:

‘@BobBlackman Get off your damn knees and grow a pair’

'@BrandonLewis Your exactly why I won’t be voting @conservatives again. Face up to the truth and grow some.'

'@DerbyChrisW Another idiot MP getting offended over a joke grow some balls man heard worse in a playground when I was a kid'

Although such tweets obviously should not be taken in the literal sense, the elision of male genitalia with political courage is particularly revealing as it demonstrates the extent to which politics remains a masculine endeavour, which makes a verbal attack on a male MPs masculinity a particularly effective form of reproval. Similarly, tweets which urged male MPs to ‘man-up’ act as potent forms of criticism:

‘@DavidDuguidMP You're not the opposition, your in a minority government. If this mattered to you truely, you could practically bring the government down on your own. Man up, you tell us honestly that you've sold the fish for EU access again’

This example serves as a subtle reminder that politics remains a traditionally masculine sphere where politicians are expected to behave ‘like men’. Less subtle gendered tweets aimed at male MPs actively sought to feminise or emasculate the recipient:

'@JohnMannMP Corbyn would never support such mass murder and that’s why I support him, not rent-a-gob harpies like you.'

‘@GavinWilliamson you little fuckin weasel. You vain, little runt. Who do you think you are, running around like a little woman, telling us what to believe. Spreading fear... Your day will come.’

‘@ChrisLeslieMP Stop being such a twat and squealing like a little girl. Get on with what the majority of the electorate voted for and that's to leave..... So leave!!!!!!’

These examples explicitly associate these male MPs with perceived feminine behaviour. The first example calls the recipient a ‘harpy’ which is a gendered insult ordinarily directed at women. The remaining examples explicitly accuse the recipient of behaving like a woman or girl. These gender-based insults reinforce the expectation that MPs should conform to traditional forms of masculinity by explicitly associating these male MPs with femininity. This furthermore emphasises the extent to which the political sphere remains a masculine environment where ‘feminine’ traits are seen as inadequate. Overall, then there were several instances of gendered discriminatory tweets. Some of these were incredibly misogynistic and would be very unpleasant for female MPs to receive. Although male MPs received tweets which could be considered gendered abuse, these tended to reinforce the idea that politics is not a place for women, suggesting that Twitter is a space for sexism in politics which may contribute to the exclusion of women from the political sphere.

**Conclusions**

The analysis shows that there were some clearly gendered patterns in the data, although perhaps fewer than one might expect. Female MPs were more likely to receive generally uncivil tweets. They were also more likely to receive tweets which stereotyped them and questioned their position as representatives. This air of more general impoliteness, being reminded that they are representatives of their identity / gender rather than themselves as an individual (and are therefore held to different standards than male MPs), and being told more often that they should leave politics altogether shows that political Twitter is pervaded by ‘ambient sexism’ (Fox et al., 2015).

It is important to note that the sampling period was only 14 days. As outlined above ambient sexism creates a pervasive feeling of being othered and of being unwelcome. Experiencing such interactions over a long period might make the job of female MPs less appealing and more difficult than for male colleagues. Furthermore, as outlined in the qualitative analysis, some of the tweets sent to female MPs were extremely misogynistic and abusive which undoubtedly makes a female MP’s job more challenging than it should be. This supports Rossini’s (2018) assertion that the problem is not online incivility but rather discrimination or intolerance. Where gendered differences did occur, these were on the measures that most clearly point to discrimination or general bias, and this is significant.

This study also shows that there are fewer differences in how female and male politicians are addressed on Twitter then one might expect. Media coverage of the abuse suffered by female MPs has tended to focus on the most extreme cases and the women who have become high-profile targets for abuse (Arnold & Wheeler, 7th March 2018; Elgot, 5th September 2017). Most recently, the press reported extensively but rather uncritically on a new study by Marin (2018) on behalf of Amnesty International, which found a large amount of online abuse towards female MPs and other public figures, but did not include male MPs in the study for comparison as we do here. Reading about online abuse may have itself discouraged women from entering politics according to some women’s groups (BBC, 20th May 2018). Overall, this coverage is clearly well-intentioned, hoping to expose the abuse suffered by female MPs on social media. However, and without wishing to downplay the abuse suffered by these high-profile women, it seems that for less prominent MPs, the picture here is much more nuanced. The extent to which male MPs suffer incivility online is just as extensive on some measures assessed here, if not more so. This supports earlier work by scholars such as Theorcharis et al. (2016) who assert that online incivility towards representatives is generally pervasive and not necessarily driven by certain characteristics of the representative in question, but seems to be a fundamental feature of online communication towards representatives. If we consider how this might impact the supply of female candidates, there may well be less reason for women to be put off entering politics based on a wish to avoid social media abuse than media reporting would suggest. It may well be the perception of online abuse, filtered through media coverage, rather than the reality that might discourage women.

The study of course only captures a snap-shot of tweets sent to MPs. Although we endeavoured to choose a sampling period that avoided bias as much as possible, there is a possibility that sampling a different period may yield different results. Furthermore, the models here only account for a small amount of the variation in the dependent variables. For future studies, it will be necessary to expand the range of control variables, for example taking account of the subject of the tweet sent by the MP in question, whether they have recently received negative media coverage and perhaps accounting for prominence via a means other than Twitter followers. When coding the Tweets, there was a sense, although this was not directly measured, that male MPs received uncivil criticism of policy or party direction more than women, whereas female MPs received more personal comments. We would aim to measure this directly in future work on this topic.

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**Data availability**

The Tweets were collected using NodeXL software, from the Twitter Search API. NodeXL scrapes the last seven days’ worth of tweets for any given command. We did this twice to provide our sample of two weeks’ worth of tweets. We used the ‘to: @’ command in the search along with our selected MPs handles. This returns just the tweets aimed at said MP(s). Occasionally tweets outside of the past seven days are returned. This was checked for, by sorting by date, and these were removed before coding. All the data used for this study is held by the authors and available on request.

**Software information**

The tweets were collected using NodeXL software and statistical analysis for this paper was conducted using SPSS and Stata.

**Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Table 1: Krippendorff’s Alpha Scores for each Variable

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Any Uncivil** | **Stereotype** | **Name-Calling** | **Swearing** | **Silencing** | **Position** | **Intelligence** | **Veracity** | **Violence** |
| **KALPHA** | 0.8653 | 0.8450 | 0.8249 | 0.8600 | 0.9165 | 0.9128 | 0.7758 | 0.7953 | 0.8888 |

Table 2: Overall Percentage of Uncivil Tweets by Tweet and MP as Unit of Analysis

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Tweet** | | **MP** | |
|  | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** |
| **Civil** | 106,259 | 90.2 | 178 | 35.6 |
| **Uncivil** | 11,543 | 9.8 | 322 | 64.4 |
| **Total** | 117,802 | 100 | 500 | 100 |

Table 3: Each Type of Incivility Measured by Gender for Tweet and MP as Unit of Analysis

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **Tweet** | | | **MP** | | |
|  | | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***p-value*** | ***Male*** | ***Female*** | ***p-value*** |
| ***Any Uncivil*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 89.5 | 91.8 | 0.00 | 38.3 | 30.1 | 0.07 |
|  | **Yes** | 10.5 | 8.2 |  | 61.7 | 69.9 |  |
| ***Stereotyping*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | ***No*** | 99.7 | 99.2 | 0.00 | 88.1 | 77.9 | 0.00 |
|  | ***Yes*** | 0.3 | 0.8 |  | 11.9 | 22.1 |  |
| ***Name-calling*** |  |  |  | 0.00 |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 97.3 | 98.1 | 61.4 | 59.5 | 0.68 |
| **Yes** | 2.7 | 1.9 | 38.6 | 40.5 |  |
| ***Swearing*** |  |  |  | 0.00 |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 98.3 | 99.3 | 68.8 | 69.3 | 0.91 |
|  | **Yes** | 1.7 | 0.7 | 31.2 | 30.7 |  |
| ***Silencing*** |  |  |  | 0.72 |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 99.7 | 99.9 | 89.3 | 90.2 | 0.76 |
|  | **Yes** | 0.2 | 0.1 | 10.7 | 9.8 |  |
| ***Intelligence*** |  |  |  | 0.06 |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 99.3 | 99.4 | 77.4 | 75.5 | 0.62 |
|  | **Yes** | 0.7 | 0.6 | 22.6 | 24.5 |  |
| ***Position*** |  |  |  | 0.00 |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 99.3 | 99.2 | 82.5 | 74.2 | 0.03 |
|  | **Yes** | 0.7 | 0.8 | 17.5 | 25.8 |  |
| ***Veracity*** |  |  |  | 0.24 |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 98.3 | 98.4 | 68.6 | 72.4 | 0.38 |
|  | **Yes** | 1.7 | 1.6 | 31.4 | 27.6 |  |
| ***Violence*** |  |  |  | 0.78 |  |  |  |
|  | **No** | 99.06 | 99.05 | 97.3 | 96.3 | 0.54 |
|  | **Yes** | 0.04 | 0.05 | 2.7 | 3.7 |  |

Table 4: Binary Logistic Models for Different Types of Incivility

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Any Uncivil** | **Stereotype** | **Name-Calling** | **Swearing** | **Silencing** | **Position** | **Intelligence** | **Veracity** | **Violence** |
|  | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** |
| ***Male (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Female* | 1.49 (0.32)~ | 2.02 (0.55)\*\* | 1.03 (0.22) | 1.00 (0.22) | 0.80 (0.27) | 1.59 (0.40)~ | 1.02 (0.25) | 0.85 (0.19) | 1.39 (0.80) |
| ***Cons (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Labour* | 0.65 (0.14)\* | 0.70 (0.20) | 0.74 (0.16) | 0.69 (0.16) | 0.84 (0.29) | 0.89 (0.23) | 0.73 (0.18) | 0.66 (0.15)~ | 0.49 (0.30) |
| *Other* | 0.87 (0.27) | 0.46 (0.22) | 0.81 (0.25) | 0.91 (0.28) | 1.65 (0.70) | 0.79 (0.30) | 1.49 (0.49) | 0.81 (0.26) | 0. 69 (0.57) |
| ***White (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *BAME* | 0.65 (0.23) | 1.71 (0.69) | 0.96 (0.34) | 0.48 (0.20)~ | 0.85 (0.49) | 0.48 (0.23) | 0.98 (0.41) | 0.76 (0.30) | 0.54 (0.58) |
| ***Heterosexual (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *LGBT* | 1.14 (0.44) | 1.26 (0.61) | 1.37 (0.50) | 1.27 (0.48) | 0.61 (0.39) | 1.72 (0.70) | 0.87 (0.39) | 1.22 (0.46) | 0.69 (0.03) |
| ***Age*** | 1.00 (0.01) | 0.98 (0.01) | 1.00 (0.00) | 0.99 (0.01) | 0.99 (0.01) | 0.99 (0.01) | 1.00 (0.01) | 1.00 (0.01) | 0.96 (0.03) |
| ***Followers*** | 1.60 (0.20)\*\*\* | 1.56 (0.28)\*\*\* | 1.91 (0.25)\*\*\* | 1.79 (0.25)\*\*\* | 2.23 (0.51)\*\*\* | 2.30 (0.41)\*\*\* | 1.00 (0.00)\*\*\* | 1.64 (0.23)\*\*\* | 2.65 (1.14)\*\* |
| Constant | 0.03 (0.04)\*\*\* | 0.01 (0.01)\*\*\* | 0.00 (0.00)\*\*\* | 0.00 (0.00)\*\*\* | 0.00 (0.00)\*\*\* | 0.00 (0.00)\*\*\* | 0.08 (0.05)\*\*\* | 0.01 (0.01)\*\*\* | 0.00 (0.00)\*\* |
| N | 500 | 500 | 500 | 500 | 500 | 500 | 500 | 500 | 500 |
| Pseudo R2^ | 0.03 | 0.05 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.03 | 0.07 |
| Chi2 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.25 |

\*\*\* Significance at ≤0.00 \*\*significance at ≤ 0.01 \* significance at ≤ 0.05 ~ significance at ≤ 0.10 ^McFadden’s Pseudo R2

Table 5: Ordinal Logistic Models for Different Types of Incivility

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Any Uncivil** | **Stereotype** | **Name-Calling** | **Swearing** | **Silencing** | **Position** | **Intelligence** | **Veracity** | **Violence** |
|  | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** | **OR (S.E)sig** |
| ***Male (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Female* | 1.07 (0.20) | 2.14 (0.59)\*\*\* | 0.93 (0.19) | 0.90 (0.20) | 0.81 (0.27) | 1.49 (0.37) | 0.96 (0.23) | 0.87 (0.20) | 1.41 (0.81) |
| ***Cons (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Labour* | 0.62 (0.12)\*\* | 0.64 (0.19) | 0.67 (0.14)~ | 0.61 (0.14)\* | 0.87 (0.30) | 0.90 (0.23) | 0.75 (0.18) | 0.55 (0.12)\*\*\* | 0.47 (0.29) |
| *Other* | 0.69 (0.19) | 0.46 (0.22) | 0.65 (0.20) | 0.82 (0.25) | 1.76 (0.75) | 0.73 (0.27) | 1.29 (0.42) | 0.63 (0.20) | 0.69 (0.57) |
| ***White (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *BAME* | 0.62 (0.21) | 1.62 (0.67) | 0.83 (0.30) | 0.43 (0.19) | 0.91 (0.52) | 0.53 (0.26) | 1.21 (0.50) | 0.93 (0.37) | 0.56 (0.60) |
| ***Heterosexual (Ref)*** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *LGBT* | 1.11 (0.36) | 1.25 (0.61) | 1.68 (0.60) | 1.01 (0.36) | 0.58 (0.37) | 1.70 (0.68) | 0.90 (0.39) | 1.39 (0.21) | 0.75 (0.80) |
| ***Age*** | 1.00 (0.01) | 0.98 (0.01) | 1.00 (0.00) | 1.00 (0.01) | 0.99 (0.01) | 1.00 (0.01) | 1.01 (0.01) | 1.01 (0.01) | 0.96 (0.03) |
| ***Followers*** | 1.23 (0.15)~ | 1.38 (0.25)~ | 1.58 (0.21)\*\*\* | 1.56 (0.22)\*\*\* | 1.97 (0.54)\*\*\* | 1.99 (0.35)\*\*\* | 1.91 (0.31)\*\*\* | 1.28 (0.18)~ | 2.41 (1.03)\* |
| Cut 1 | 1.13 (0.11) | 3.80 (1.74) | 4.62 (1.24) | 4.18 (1.34) | 7.88 (2.22) | 7.66 (1.69) | 7.81 (1.59) | 3.02 (1.31) | 9.46 (4.08) |
| Cut 2 | 2.12 (0.11) | 4.27 (1.75) | 5.27 (1.25) | 4.80 (1.34) | 8.33 (2.23) | 8.17 (1.70) | 8.39 (1.61) | 3.56 (1.31) | 9.88 (4.08) |
| Cut 3 | 3.18 (0.15) | 5.07 (1.75) | 6.17 (1.26) | 5.63 (1.35) | 9.11 (2.24) | 9.01 (1.70) | 9.19 (1.61) | 4.44 (1.31) | 10.59 (4.10) |
| N | 441 | 441 | 441 | 441 | 441 | 441 | 441 | 441 | 441 |
| Pseudo R2^ | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.04 |
| Chi2 | 0.15 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.07 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.12 | 0..39 |

\*\*\* Significance at ≤0.00 \*\*significance at ≤ 0.01 \* significance at ≤ 0.05 ~ significance at ≤ 0.10 ^McFadden’s Pseudo R2

1. Taking users’ tweets for research without explicit informed consent could be viewed as ethically problematic. However, all Twitter users sign the Twitter Terms of Service (Twitter, 2018) which states that their posts may be taken and used by third parties for research. To maintain ethical standards, we anonymised the data by removing the sender’s handle. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Calculated using the KALPHA script in SPSS 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In our full sample of 500 MPs, there were 337 male and 163 female MPs. There were 40 black and minority ethnic and 460 white MPs. There were 35 LGBT MPs (29 male and 6 female). The youngest MP was 28 and the oldest was 84 years old. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. All logistic regression modelling done in STATA version 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)