

“How dare you call her a pig, I know several pigs who would be upset if they knew”*

A multimodal critical discursive approach to online misogyny against UK MPs on YouTube

Eleonora Esposito and Sole Alba Zollo

University of Navarra, Spain | University of Napoli Federico II, Italy

On the occasion of the 2017 UK election campaign, Amnesty International conducted a large-scale, sentiment-based analysis of online hate speech against women MPs on Twitter (Dhrodia 2018), identifying the “Top 5” most attacked women MPs as Diane Abbott, Joanna Cherry, Emily Thornberry, Jess Phillips and Anna Soubry.

Taking Amnesty International’s results as a starting point, this paper investigates online misogyny against the “Top 5” women MPs, with a specific focus on the video-sharing platform YouTube, whose loosely censored cyberspace is known as a breeding ground for antagonism, impunity and disinhibition (Pihlaja 2014), and, therefore, merits investigation.

By collecting and analysing a corpus of YouTube multimodal data we explore, critique and contextualize online misogyny as a techno-social phenomenon applying a Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) approach (KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018). Mapping a vast array of discursive strategies, this study offers an in-depth analysis on how technology-facilitated gender-based violence contributes to discursively constructing the political arena as a fundamentally male-oriented space, and reinforces stereotypical and sexist representation of women in politics and beyond.

Keywords: women MPs, misogyny, YouTube, multimodality, social media, Critical Discourse Studies

* The authors discussed and conceived the paper jointly. Eleonora Esposito is responsible for Sections 2, 3.1 and 4.1 and Sole Alba Zollo is responsible for Sections 1, 3.2, 4.2 and 5.

1. Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed an alarming increase in the sheer quantity and vitriolic quality of digitally facilitated violence against political actors, a widespread phenomenon affecting politicians across different political systems on a global scale. In particular, recent attacks against women MPs across party lines in the United Kingdom have drawn our attention to the widespread culture of hostility and intimidation in the country, painting a gloomy picture of the lived experience of women in British politics.

During the 2016 Brexit Campaign, when the online death threats of a white supremacist turned into the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox, the phenomenon started to receive renewed academic and media coverage, with concerns also being raised by public bodies and NGOs. In particular, a recent Amnesty International report shed further light on the means and measures of hostility against women MPs in the UK (Dhrodia 2018). This report, grounded in a large-scale (900,223 Tweets) sentiment-based study on Twitter, employed the social listening tool Crimson Hexagon across the six months preceding the 2017 UK general elections and identified the “Top 5”, most attacked women MPs in the United Kingdom, namely: Diane Abbott (Labour), Emily Thornberry (Labour), Joanna Cherry (SNP), Jess Phillips (Labour) and Anna Soubry (Conservative).

These results suggest that these five MPs were catalysing a considerable amount of attention and hostility across different digital spaces. To confirm this assumption, we set out to expand the results of Amnesty International with the aim of mapping multimodal discursive strategies of online misogyny from a closer, discursive perspective. We focus on YouTube as a particularly relevant cyberspace for the investigation of digital violence and abuse: YouTube has in fact been identified as an “unregulated space of hostility” (Murthy and Sharma 2018, 192) whose specific techno-discursive features seem to fuel a particularly high sense of antagonism, impunity and disinhibition compared to other social media platforms (Pihlaja 2014).

Drawing on recent contributions to the field of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), this paper expands on the problematization of gender-based hostility as a digital discursive practice surveyed in KhosraviNik and Esposito (2018). To that end, our study engages in a critical analysis of multimodal content (both user-generated videos and comments). Our aim is not only to offer an in-depth perspective on the actual discursive strategies employed in acts of digital violence, but also to delve into the inductive conceptualization of digital misogyny as discourse at the intersection of digital media scholarship, multimodal discourse theorisation and critical feminist explication.

The following section provides an overview of gendered violence on YouTube. After having detailed our corpus of data and the critical multimodal framework for its analysis (Section 3), we present the results and map the key multimodal strategies of online misogyny, both in the comments (Section 4.1) and in the user-generated videos (Section 4.2). Finally, in Section 5 we present some concluding remarks while at the same time suggesting future steps for the investigation of such a complex techno-social phenomenon.

2. Gendered violence in a jungle called YouTube

Representing a “high volume website, a broadcast platform, media archive, and a social network” all at once (Burgess and Green 2009, xvii), YouTube is characterized by “a complex configuration of semiotic components” (Androustopoulos and Tereick 2015, 356). The world’s most utilised video-sharing platform, YouTube’s interactive features provide many opportunities for user text production and interaction, as video-hosting is accompanied by titles, descriptions and ‘tags’ (keywords). In addition, videos are uploaded by registered users with a unique username, a profile picture and a profile page where they can insert personal descriptions and details.

While one of YouTube’s most distinctive features is the presence of an interactive comment thread for every video (and the unique interconnection between the two), the platform still manages to represent a ‘looser’ social network in comparison to alternatives such as Facebook. YouTube is less focused on personal connections and involved interaction, giving life to a digital “affinity space” (Gee 2005) rather than an actual community, which is “not centered on the individual profile page” (Murthy and Sharma 2018, 194) and ends up feeling somewhat less cohesive and imbued with a higher sense of anonymity. In the same vein, YouTube comments “create, at best, an interaction that culminates in 2–3 exchanges” (Rotman et al. 2009, 45), where tracking and participating in actual, in-depth discussions is not facilitated by the “rather anarchic” (Murthy and Sharma 2018, 194) architecture of the comment thread itself.

The loosely connected and loosely censored YouTube semiotic landscape has become notorious for the proliferation of antagonism (Pihlaja 2014). To start with, the platform does not actually restrict what types of video can be posted (beyond basic community standards forbidding openly violent and pornographic content). YouTube has often been at the centre of controversies for, among others, providing a platform to videos promoting Nazi ideology and Holocaust denial as well as videos by terrorist groups such as Al-Shahab, Boko Haram and ISIS/Daesh. Moreover, in the almost complete absence of filtering and moderating practices in

most public channels, there has been a general proliferation of racist, homophobic and misogynous content on the platform.

Offensive behaviour has been present in human communication since its very inception (Culpeper et al. 2017), but the opportunity to perform them on such a global scale became available much more recently. Across fields as diverse as criminology, social psychology, and media and communication studies, social media platforms like YouTube have fallen under particular scrutiny, defined as “anonymous and encouraging ecosystems for trolling, name calling, and profanity” (Rego 2018, 472), fostering behaviours that are “impulsive and hyper-responsive to the behavior of others nearby, which may be anti-normative and aggressive” (Moor et al. 2010, 1537). One of the main shortcomings of these existing perspectives on online abusive language is the danger of indulging in a delusional, digital deterministic narrative of online hostility which roots the phenomenon in the negative impact of techno-discursive design and ‘horizontal’ context of social media platforms on human communication. In this respect, the term “digital technology-facilitated (DTF) violence”, proposed in this study to define the phenomenon, aims at highlighting the facilitating role of digital technologies without downplaying the tangible, harmful impact of ‘online’ violence as an ultimately human action with specific offline motives behind it (see Esposito this issue 2021).

When investigating DTF violence, it is necessary to start from the core assumption that the cybersphere is far from being a ‘neutral’ space, and lived experiences of Internet users can vary considerably according to their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, mother-tongue, age/generation and dis/ability, among others. Particularly relevant to our study is the inherent gender dimension developed by the phenomenon, as women and LGBTQ+ people are targeted with abuse at a significantly higher rate (Citron 2014; Jane 2016; Titley et al. 2012). Gender-based DTF violence is often addressed not only to individuals but also ‘en bloc’ to members of feminist communities, lesbian and transgender women, with the result of making the Internet “a less equal, less safe, or less inclusive space for women and girls” (Ging and Siapera 2018, 516).

Misogynistic variants of DTF violence, also referred to as “gender trolling” (Mantilla 2013), “gendered cyberhate” (Jane 2018), “online misogyny” (Ging and Siapera 2018) in recent literature, have become very common across online platforms and are usually manifested “in the form of psychological, professional, reputational, or, in some cases, physical harm” (Ging and Siapera 2018, 516). In particular, given the primacy of the visual across digital media, image-based DTF violence has come to represent a real staple of the cybersphere, where new affordances like image modification and new trends like meme culture capitalise on long-standing, established strategies of gender-based sexism and objectification of women’s bodies (Nussbaum 2010).

It is unsurprising, then, that the issue is particularly acute for women who have a public presence and for women who elbow for space and recognition in male-dominated spaces, with the result that female political representatives have come to represent an excellent target for DTF violence (IPU and PACE 2018; Zeiter et al. 2019). Largely perceived as questioning or even disrupting gendered power relations, female politicians have always been portrayed, evaluated and perceived in gendered ways: among the most recent examples are the misogynistic construction of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 Presidential Campaign in the U.S. (Partington and Taylor 2018) or the biased mediated discourse against U.S. congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (see Rasulo, this issue 2021). Unfortunately, the rise of social media seems to involve female politicians increasingly becoming victims of disparaging and vicious comments, insults, rape and death threats and even simulated sexual violence (Powell and Henry 2017). Targeted victims experience violence on a continuum which encompasses both the political arena and the cybersphere, and that takes on many different, evolving forms, posing a real challenge in terms of investigation and explication.

For this reason, this study is grounded in a conceptualization of DTF violence as a ‘techno-social’ phenomenon, shaped at an extremely complex intersection of multimodal communicative acts. Meanings are located in specific technological affordances which are largely shaped by motivations and contexts grounded in the commodification of data, in which exchanges with massive social and cultural implications take place. In order to problematize gendered DTF violence against political actors, this very intersection is to be explored, striking a balance between a horizontal (digital/industrial) awareness of the new context of digital interaction, its native norms of practice and meaning-making resources, and its possible repercussions on discursive practices and content. Most importantly within this, we aim to engage in a vertical (social) contextualization which positions and explicates DTF violence within the cultural and social norms of the ‘offline’ world and its Foucauldian networks of power/knowledge (KhosraviNik 2018; KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018).

In particular, the paper is aimed at addressing two main research questions: (1) What are the discursive strategies of DTF violence employed in the YouTube comment sections analyzed? and (2) What are the multimodal resources of DTF violence that characterize the YouTube user-generated videos analyzed?

3. Methods and data

3.1 A critical multimodal framework for social media data

Both theoretically and empirically, this work draws on recent contributions within the domain of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), an emerging theoretical and methodological framework combining tenets from Critical Discourse Studies with scholarship in Digital Media and Technology (KhosraviNik and Zia 2014; KhosraviNik and Unger 2016; KhosraviNik and Sarkoh 2017; KhosraviNik and Esposito 2018). Drawing on core tenets of critical discursive theories and methods, SM-CDS is to be regarded as a *problem-oriented* approach which is not interested in investigating either linguistic units or the digital technologies context per se but in studying complex social digital discursive phenomena which require a multidisciplinary approach.

In this respect, the growing dissemination and social relevance of heavily visual platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat or Tik Tok is contributing to an even greater need to address the interplay between different modes of signification. As we have seen in Section 2, YouTube poses some methodological challenges of dealing with a complex multimodal setting of digital texts which incorporate moving images and sound, as well as a range of participatory features in an attached comment thread, characterized by multi-authoring and interactivity phenomena among others (Androutopoulos and Tereick 2015; Benson 2017). In order to tackle these issues, SM-CDS draws on the scholarly tradition of social semiotics as a “form of enquiry” that “comes into its own when it is applied to specific instances and specific problems” (van Leeuwen 2005, 1).

3.2 Data collection and framework operationalization

We retrieved the 15 most viewed and most commented YouTube videos (with an enabled comment thread) for each of the search queries “Diane Abbott”, “Emily Thornberry”, “Joanna Cherry”, “Jess Phillips” and “Anna Soubry”. Data was scraped by means of the GitHub utility YouTube Comments Scraper, which allows extraction of comment threads accessing YouTube’s API. Subsequently, data was cleaned and prepared in .xml format by means of a Python script to be visualised on corpus manager Sketch Engine.

This process of data collection resulted in a medium-sized corpus of 75 videos and 113,084 comments with a total of 2,743,174 words (3,151,637 tokens), which allowed both representativity and manageability within a fundamentally critical and qualitative approach to social media data. Regarding user-generated comments, we found some comment sub-corpora were considerably larger (40,125

comments for MP Abbott, 35,044 comments for MP Phillips, 31,505 comments for MP Thornberry) while some other MPs received fewer comments (5,091 for MP Soubry and 1,319 for MP Cherry). Data collection was terminated on April 22, 2020 and the corpus does not include any comments posted after that date.

In order to narrow down our study in accordance with our research aims, neither the content of videos nor the content of related comment threads were used as selection criteria. Moreover, at the time of collection we were not aware of the ratio of abusive to non-abusive content in the chosen material, nor was establishing this ratio one of the aims of the analysis. It was hypothesized that the videos that had managed to catalyze more user attention (in terms of visualizations and number of comments) would also represent foci for substantial abusive content. We identified two different sets of videos in our corpus of data, which we labelled for convenience as *non-user generated* and *user-generated* videos.

On the one hand, non user-generated videos consist of content uploaded by verified YouTube accounts belonging to established mass media outlets, such as *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *Bloomberg Politics*, *Channel4* or *SkyNews*. These videos consist of news pieces, which are accompanied by informative headlines (which also serve as YouTube video titles) and are more neutral in tone, such as “Boris Johnson should have the guts to resign, says SNP’s Joanna Cherry” or “Brexit: MPs Jess Phillips and Jacob Rees-Mogg battle it out”. Videos with disabled comment thread (a common strategy of some official news accounts to curb hostility and abuse on digital spaces) were not included in the corpus.

User-generated videos consist of single snippets (or mash-ups of different snippets) of interviews, TV shows or any other public appearance of the targeted politician, which are posted by individual YouTube users. They are usually accompanied with an offensive title, such as “Dianne Abbott MP – A Racist Pig” or with one expressing a negative value judgement “Emily Thornberry’s *calamitous* Question Time” or “Diane Abbott’s *hair-raising* interview on Marr” (our emphases).

While an in-depth, multimodal analysis of all the videos included in the corpus is beyond the limitations of this journal paper, we still aimed at highlighting how different semiotic resources (such as the insertion of overlay messages with different styles and colours, pictures and sounds) are employed in the “embedding” and “remixing” (Androutopoulos and Tereick 2015, 354) of *user-generated* videos specifically taking into account the abusive implied meanings and motives (see Section 4.2).

In the same vein, the critical discursive analysis of the user-generated comments was aimed at identifying specific topics of digital misogyny, their related discursive strategies and their means of realization (see Section 4.1). While the examples are by no means a complete taxonomy of the numerous strategies being found, they map the most relevant and recurring ones. In our analysis, comments

are anonymized but not censored and they include graphic content (as well as spelling and grammar mistakes which are to be attributed to their authors). This choice is motivated by the belief that any self-censorship would result in an objectionable and harmful edulcorating of the vile nature of these acts of DTF violence. Emphasis in the quoted examples is always ours, unless specified.

4. Results

4.1 Discursive strategies of DTF violence

4.1.1 *Strategies of body shaming*

Focusing on women MPs' facial features and bodily shape or size represents a core strategy of body shaming in the data in exam. This is an unsurprising result, as the female body has always been sexually objectified and a woman's worth equated with her body's appearance and sexual functions (Nussbaum 2010). This phenomenon can be regarded as a by-product of the gendered sociocultural contexts we live by and it occurs irrespective of a woman's profession as politician.

Simultaneously, women in politics are not simply objectified 'for being women' but their presence in the political arena results in a widespread popular scrutiny through which they are analyzed, judged, and criticized for their appearance much more than their male counterparts. For the past decades, this focus on women politicians' appearance has been consolidated by sexist media coverage, which has granted obsessive attention to their physical features and perceived degree of attractiveness up to the smallest details like their clothing, makeup, and hairstyles (van der Paas and Aaldering 2020).

Although objectification is an established social practice, this does not make such comments less worthy of discussion. In fact, while making a woman politician's physical appearance the object of public discussion is a form of sexism *per se*, the abusive and violent content of these comments is maximised in the digital sphere, across the most varied and creative forms of realisation. For example, our dataset shows recurrent metaphorical use of animal names as derogatory and insulting, which is, again, a fairly common form of impoliteness. Apart from the classic English slang "cow", commonly used to define a woman as unintelligent and annoying, a vast array of metaphorical expressions are employed as they are related to the animal's depravity ("pig", "sow"), size ("pig", "sow", "hippo", "whale"), disagreeableness ("slug") or ugliness ("bulldog", "toad"):

- (1) "Jess Phillips **fat cow** doesn't have to worry about men even chatting her up, well, not at least before 10 pints" (MP Phillips)

- (2) “I can’t stand that gobby **fat cow** 🐮” (MP Cherry)
- (3) “The Hackney **Hippo** strikes again” (MP Abbott)
- (4) “Did I just see lipstick on a **pig**?” (MP Phillips)
- (5) “another **fat ugly pig** mad because men pay her no attention” (MP Phillips)
- (6) “**SOW**bry (after the female **pig**) shut up you stupid **cow**” (MP Soubry)
- (7) “Lady Nugee has a neck like a **bulldog**, but not she isn’t as pretty”
(MP Thornberry)
- (8) “A sickening **slug** of **repulsive dimensions**” (MP Abbott)
- (9) “Thornberry is a **fat** disgusting **slug**” (MP Thornberry)
- (10) “Look at this black **toad** sitting there, someone let it free and off the panel”
(MP Abbott)
- (11) “Soubry, gracious in defeat as always ... you slimmy old bitter **toad**.. back to
your sewer now Soubry, get off our TV’s, nobody wants to see you anymore
you offensive old has been” (MP Soubry)
- (12) “Someone drag this **whale** back to the sea” (MP Abbott)
- (13) “Brilliant the way our good brexiteers, shout and holla above the bullshit of
this beached **whale**” (MP Cherry)

As implied by some of these animal references and related adjective use (such as “overweight” and “fat”), women MPs’ size seems to be the object of an authentic collective obsession. Such comments largely fall within the social practice of *fatshaming*. Needless to say, the weight-related stigma is particularly impactful on women, whose bodies suffer from a higher social pressure to be thin (Harjunen 2016). Our data show how the practice of fatshaming is not only grounded in comments about size, but also encompasses presumed eating habits and calorie intake as well as weight changes, which seem to be attentively monitored:

- (14) “Miss Piggy’s **weight** is shooting up again (never saw a woman who goes from
“fat” to “fatter” as quickly as Thornberry...)” (MP Thornberry)
- (15) “Ignorant **fat cow** ...she just gets **fatter** and **fatter**, since the Brexit vote she’s
gotten even fatter..haha she’s really stressed and stuffing her gob. a hideous
beast...” (MP Thornberry)
- (16) “This is when she was Emily 3 **bellies** now she’s got 5 **bellies**”
(MP Thornberry)

- (17) “I couldn’t buy any **chocolate** or **ice cream** this weekend, cause that **fat cow** eat it all” (MP Thornberry)
- (18) “Tell her women **daily calorie** intake is 1500 not 15000 **fat bastard**” (MP Abbott)
- (19) “DIANE ABBOTT Needs to get some **SlimFast** in her life” (MP Abbott)

Women MPs are also insulted on the basis of the fact that their appearance does not necessarily conform to beauty ideals of an appropriately “gendered self” (Bailey et al. 2013) and is not considered feminine enough. An example is comments on MP Diane Abbott’s appearance which are aimed at underlining her resemblance to a man, namely the former Prime Minister of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe:

- (20) “She looks like a fat **Robert Mugabe** in a wig with some blusher”
- (21) “**Robert Mugabe** needs to grow his moustache back”
- (22) “Good to see **Bob Mugabe** has moved into British politics after he did a great job in Zimbabwe”

In the same vein, references to gender transitioning are frequently employed against women MPs for their perceived ‘lack’ of femininity:

- (23) “A **20 stone male body builder**, wearing a dress, looks more **feminine** than Jess ‘foul mouth’ Phillips” (MP Phillips)
- (24) “Repugnant fucking fat pig.....**is it male or female**, I’m uncertain” (MP Thornberry)
- (25) “Jess Phillips sounds like she is taking some kind of **sex change hormonal drugs**” (MP Phillips)
- (26) “Jess Philips probably had a more **feminine voice** before his balls dropped” (MP Phillips)
- (27) “Emily Thornberry...an early experiment in **male to female transition**...not considered a success” (MP Thornberry)
- (28) “Can anyone translate what this **ugly man** is saying?” (MP Cherry)

Facts and rumours about women MPs’ private lives are always capitalized upon in DTF violence. In the case of Diane Abbott, the negative remarks on her physical appearance intersect with the narratives of her relationship with former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, which was also romantic briefly when they both were early-career politicians in the 1970s. In particular, there is an abundance of comments that highlight her ‘ugliness’ and question how Corbyn could have possibly

engaged in a sexual relation with her. In some of these comments, the negative effect is augmented by using pronouns like “it”, “this” or “that”, or the substantive “creature”, all contributing to attribute to Abbott the nature of a disgusting object rather than a person:

- (29) “And Corbyn shagged **it**, ha ha ha ha ha...”
- (30) “Jeremy Corbyn was shaggin **this!!!!**”
- (31) “Corbyn stuck his dick in **that**”
- (32) “Corbyn had sexual relations with **this creature**”

Other insulting comments show an interesting prevalence of the reframing of meanings from one form to another by means of synaesthesia. This rhetorical and literary device describes one sense in terms of another, for example associating a colour with a flavour or an image with a smell, which is the case of our examples. In this respect, the affordances of YouTube seem to intensify these multimodal processes and the blending of senses typical of synaesthesia, as different meaning forms (writing and visuals) become more permeable and more malleable as they are brought together to complement the whole meaning (Cope and Kalantzis 2020). In the following examples, abusive comments on women MPs’ physical appearance are synaesthetically reframed as comments on their alleged bad odour (including the one of their private parts) and overall perception of lack of personal hygiene:

- (33) “100% her **fanny stinks**” (MP Abbott)
- (34) “Urggh horrible woman I bet her **minge stinks** 😬” (MP Cherry)
- (35) “get this bad smelling woman out of politics. bet her **breath stinks**” (MP Soubry)
- (36) “Jess Philip’s looks like she **stinks** and needs a **good wash**” (MP Phillips)
- (37) “Thornberry actually looks like she **stinks of shit**” (MP Thornberry)

4.1.2 *Strategies of gender stereotyping and gatekeeping*

Among the many established acts of semiotic violence working to reinforce gender inequality, “rendering women incompetent” (Krook 2020, 198) is one of the most effective acts of gatekeeping employed to exclude women from the political arena. Recently theorized by Krook (2020; see also Kuperberg this issue 2021), semiotic violence is not to be mistaken with negative comments on female politicians’ political views, activities or decisions, but consists in attacks aimed at dis-

cursively creating a fundamental incompatibility between their gender identity as women and their role of politicians.

In addition to body shaming, women MPs are equally targeted with instances of DTF violence which could be defined as ‘mind shaming’, aimed at disqualifying them based on their alleged lack of intellectual and political abilities. Often, the two strategies overlap in comparative statements where a woman MP is insulted both for her physical features and intellectual skills, for example equating her ‘ugliness’ to her ‘stupidity’:

(38) “Jess Philips: **tits** bigger than her **brain**” (MP Phillips)

(39) “This bitch is **ugly** as fuck, even **stupider** than she is **ugly**” (MP Abbott)

(40) “Lets be honest – She’s as **terminally stupid** as she is **terminally ugly!**”
(MP Abbott)

(41) “She’s as ugly and vile as she is **stupid!**” (MP Soubry)

It is commonly acknowledged that politicians are expected to appear both competent and authoritative as well as likeable and relatable, generating a ‘double bind’ which has proven particularly difficult for women to navigate (Campus 2013). Some attacks show how gender bias still affects perception of women MPs’ political expertise, as they draw on the stereotype that women are ‘too emotional’ to be trusted with politics:

(42) “Just because you have **pussy problems** Anna affecting your **emotional** state, keep it to yourself instead of trying to take it out on democracy” (MP Soubry)

(43) “**Emotional, unstable**, could feel sorry for her if she wasn’t so downright nasty!!!” (MP Phillips)

(44) “There are already enough women on the committee to allow **childish emotional drama** to disrupt conversation and debate” (MP Phillips)

(45) “Well women have **no emotional regulation** whatsoever, so deal with it till we get our emotions straightened out... which might I add will take a looong time” (MP Phillips)

(46) “I’m sorry to say woman should not be in politics they are to **emotional**”
(MP Thornberry)

This very same trope that characterizes women as less rational, disciplined, and emotionally stable than men, entails that they would be more prone to mood swings, irrational overreactions, and mental illness:

- (47) “I see deselection in your future, she is that **crazy woman** who lives at the end of the street with a load of cats and shouts at every body who goes buy what a nut job 🐷🐷🐷🐷😞😞😞” (MP Soubry)
- (48) “Why hasn’t this **nutjob** been committed to a **mental asylum** yet?” (MP Soubry)
- (49) “In that woman’s eyes, you can see the **madness...**” (MP Soubry)
- (50) “Stupid, common women. Obviously forgot to take her **medication**” (MP Phillips)

At the same time, when the same women MPs show a higher degree of confidence, proactivity and express their own opinions with conviction, they are often received with outrage and their attitude triggers violent criticism, as shown in these comments:

- (51) “It is amazing Diane Abbott has been voted in as an MP – she is **patronising** and **smug**. She is very dangerous!” (MP Abbott)
- (52) “lol great stuff, show that **arrogant, self serving, entitled** Scottish Cow the English decide what happens in England” (MP Cherry)
- (53) “What a **big headed, self opinionated, arrogant** bloody woman...” (MP Phillips)
- (54) “**Arrogant, histrionic & belligerent**” (MP Phillips)
- (55) “What an **arrogant** tart, totally **undemocratic**” (MP Soubry)
- (56) “She is a **contemptuous, obnoxious** woman” (MP Thornberry)

Female MPs active in the fight against gender inequality and violence against women are very often singled out for abuse, as established by one of the latest Inter-Parliamentary Union surveys (IPU and PACE 2018). But even if not actively involved in gender policies, women’s very presence in the political arena is the symbol of an advance towards gender equality which is not welcomed by all segments of society. For example, women MPs are labelled as feminist, a term clearly employed with a negative connotation in the context of other insults, or using neologisms such as ‘femtard’ (compound of ‘feminist’ and ‘retard’), ‘femi-nazi’ (compound of ‘feminist’ and ‘Nazi’):

- (57) “Biggest **feminist** snowflake ever in the uk” (MP Abbott)
- (58) “Typical **feminist** woman: Immature, attention-seeking, demeaning, and self-centered” (MP Phillips)

- (59) “This fat **feminist** should do Britain a favor and choke on her fish and chips”
(MP Thornberry)
- (60) “These **feminazis** are nasty awful people, deluded and self loathing”
(MP Thornberry)
- (61) “Thornberry is an insane **feminazi**”
(MP Thornberry)
- (62) “Jess Phillips is a horrible **FEMTARD**”
(MP Phillips)

MP Jess Phillips is often openly accused of being a feminist, especially in the light of her reaction to Conservative MP Philip Davies’s proposal for an International Men’s Day in 2015, to which she famously replied “You’ll have to excuse me for laughing. As the only woman on this committee, it seems like every day to me is International Men’s Day”. A video excerpt of the debate was posted on YouTube by the Daily Mail account with the title “MP Jess Phillips laughs at men’s rights debate request” and is also included in our corpus (see also Section 4.2). The video triggered furious reactions in the comment thread and many abusive comments often intersect with strategies of body shaming. One of the most recurring arguments is that Phillips is a ‘feminist’ because she is unattractive to men, which is the ultimate cause of her anger and ‘hysteria’:

- (63) “Have you noticed how your typical **feminist** has male features or is outright unattractive?”
- (64) “Typical dumb hatefull **feminist**, ugly as fuck and angry about men not wanting to fuck her”
- (65) “why are they always ugly!! has anyone ever witnessed a sexy **feminist**? they don’t exist”
- (66) “Fat check Ugly check Man hating check Lesbian check Overweight check **Feminist** check”
- (67) “WHY ARE SO MANY **FEMINIST** FAT AND UGLY ... MY DOG WOULDN’T WANT TO DO JESS PHILLIPS ...YUP SHE IS UGLY INSIDE AND OUTLIFE FOR HER MUST BE A BITCH”

Women are often regarded as tokens of policies of gender equality, rather than legitimate residents of the political arena on the same level as men. They are seen as being assigned political roles only thanks to gender quotas or for the sake of representativity, but thought not to have the competence to actually do their job as politicians. In particular, Diane Abbott is often targeted with these insults as a Black British woman: she is believed to represent a double token, not only for her gender, but also for her ethnicity (see also Kuperberg, this issue 2021):

- (68) “This is what happens when you start putting more **blacks** and **women** into roles like this purely based on their **gender** and **ethnicity**, rather than their brains or ability”
- (69) “This is what happens with positive discrimination, going for a ‘**black**’ woman because she is not a ‘white’ man”
- (70) “When you’re not qualified for the job but you get it anyway because you’re **black women**”
- (71) “diane abbot is honestly troglodytic in looks and in intellect, she’s just the **token black woman**”

What is very revealing of some social attitudes against the actual presence of women in politics is that many comments are not targeted insults, but consist of more general reflections on the fundamental incompatibility of women with political roles, of which the targeted women are seen as a mere example. Women would have a negative impact on the political status quo of the UK, for which they are deemed responsible, and they should be removed from office:

- (72) “**women + politics** ... country wrecking cunts the lot of ‘em” (MP Abbott)
- (73) “**remove** women from politics” (MP Phillips)
- (74) “Women **don’t belong** in politics” (MP Thornberry)
- (75) “**I hate** women in politics” (MP Thornberry)
- (76) “women in politics, **not a good place** for a **real** women” (MP Thornberry)
- (77) “To put a women in politics is **like letting a monkey fly a plain**” (MP Phillips)
- (78) “Apart from Maggie Thatcher, politics and women **do not mix**” (MP Phillips)
- (79) “Women involved in politics has been one of the **biggest disasters** in human history” (MP Phillips)
- (80) “When a female politician is not a rather rare occurrence the **society is collapsing**” (MP Thornberry)
- (81) “If the UK wants to be great again they need to **get women out** of politics” (MP Thornberry)
- (82) “**Before women** got involved with politics, things where faster” (MP Thornberry)

The proposed solution to the problem of women in politics, therefore, would be to send women back where they belong: to the kitchen, to make sandwiches and

cook dinner for their husbands, from where they can exit only to go to the hospital to deliver babies:

- (83) “They should be in the **kitchen** not in parliament.” (MP Abbott)
- (84) “Who the hell is this wench who came out of the **kitchen** without being told to do so?” (MP Thornberry)
- (85) “Womem belong in the **kitchen** nowhere else” (MP Thornberry)
- (86) “Send her back to **kitchen** to make sandwiches for her long suffering husband;” (MP Phillips)
- (87) “The first mistake men made was letting women out of the **kitchen**” (MP Phillips)
- (88) “Miss you have the right to get in the **kitchen** and cook me some dinner and after that you can drive your ass down to the hospital and have that baby” (MP Phillips)
- (89) “Women are stupid as fuck and yeah want to slap the shit out of them sometimes but i dont do it because im so fucking sad to say it but we do need them :(i cant live with a dirty bathroom and a empty **kitchen**, can u?” (MP Phillips)

4.1.3 *Strategies of moral degradation*

Morality seems to be particularly at stake when it comes to women in politics: a woman’s interest in the political arena may be regarded as ‘immoral’ *per se*, as it violates and subverts the gendered social order that has always seen men in charge of high-status, decisional roles. For this reason, women in politics are often subject to harsher judgements and a general “moral suspicion” (Manne 2017, 271), encompassing every possible ground for doubt about their competence and accomplishments, but also their very character and nature.

Against this background, ‘slut-shaming’ and other strategies questioning a woman’s morality still prove to be an effective silencing act against women who try to advance in the political arena. Some attacks entail the use of the most basic and widespread insults against women, questioning their morality on the basis of their sexual behaviour, characterized by a long-standing, established connection to their reputation in a way that sees no male equivalent both in terms of conceptualization and terminology:

- (90) “And that silly **bitch** is in government” (MP Abbott)
- (91) “This woman is a **bitch** go back to Scotland you Scottish bitch” (MP Cherry)
- (92) “I bet she is a complete **slut** as well!” (MP Phillips)

- (93) “IF spunk was CHOCOLATE, THIS SLUT would be WILLY WONKA, SHE IS SO FULL OF SHIT, IT OZZES OUT OF HER FAT FUCKING MOUTH...” (MP Thornberry)
- (94) “what a ugly **trollope** he is” (MP Cherry)
- (95) “She is absolutly a stupid **whore!**” (MP Abbott)
- (96) “STUPID FAT **WHORE ...**” (MP Thornberry)

Other insults seem to be characterized by a higher degree of linguistic creativity. An example is the use of creative word play with the women MPs’ surnames, which are altered to include an outright insult (“Cuntberry”, “Sourbitch”), a comment on their size (“Fatberry”, “Abbopotimus”), on their personality (“Sourberry”), or mentions of their intimate parts (“Sourpuss”, “Thornbush”). Abusive comments are also characterized by a vast number of intertextual references to popular culture, which, in the shared comment thread of the YouTube videos, function as a discursive strategy of audience engagement, goliardy and an appeal to shared knowledge:

- (97) “fuck this slag, pour acid on it and let it melt away like the **wicked witch of the west**” (MP Phillips)
- (98) “I thought it was **Ken Dodd!**” (MP Soubry)
- (99) “She is one stupid woman. another few nails in labour’s coffin, you couldn’t make it up! i don’t even think she believes it herself. she looks like **shreks princess**” (MP Thornberry)
- (100) “She’s in more dire need of an orgasm than any other female politician in history. In fact, I think she’s a **Fembot. Dr Evil** you’ve done it this time” (MP Soubry)
- (101) “she looks more like the giant slug from **Star Wars** as each day passes” (MP Abbott)

Another extremely common strategy to question the morality of a woman in politics is accusing her of having obtained her seat in Parliament in exchange for sexual favours. In the case of Diane Abbott, given her aforementioned past relationship with Jeremy Corbyn, it is even easier for haters to craft an alleged connection between her political career and an eventual exchange of sexual favours with Corbyn himself:

- (102) “She **fucked** her way into parliament, just ask Corbyn”
- (103) “She got her job by giving Corbyn a **blow job**”

- (104) “She **got into a position with Corbyn** on numerous occasions to get into her current position...& I apologise for putting that image in your heads”
- (105) “Would it still be an MP if it hadn’t been **gagging on Corbyn’s cum?**”

4.1.4 *Strategies of direct threatening and abuse*

Threats of various kinds are one of the most prevalent forms of abuse against women in politics: almost 47% of female MPs interviewed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2018 confirmed they had received death, rape, beatings or abduction threats while serving their terms, including threats to kidnap or kill their children (IPU and PACE 2018). The following comments are just examples of the tone and content of the multifarious threats women MPs receive on a daily basis:

- (106) “Don’t you just want to **beat her to death**” (MP Abbott)
- (107) “**Stab her rape her burn her alive** piss on her remains and throw it onto a motorway” (MP Abbott)
- (108) “Fucking critter wants **hanging up** by her tits and **beating** with a branch from the mango tree within Some one **kill this cunt asap**” (MP Abbott)
- (109) “As a proud Scotsmen I wish cherry a speedy **painfull death** treasonous treacherous filthy SNP euro scum oh salmonds a sex beast rapist fact” (MP Cherry)
- (110) “I wish this fat bitch would **die of Aids...fucking swamp donkey**” (MP Cherry)
- (111) “These women **deserved to be raped** by Islamic rapists” (MP Phillips)
- (112) “Hope this whore dies a **slow, painful and horrible death**” (MP Soubry)
- (113) “This woman needs a **fucking slap**” (MP Thornberry)
- (114) “best **rape** this fat whore and then **remove her head**” (MP Thornberry)

In particular, the existence of a widespread rape culture in digital spaces allows for the proliferation of rape threats in an environment where they are often considered a mere form of humour and framed as jokes (Powell and Henry 2017). An example is Carl Benjamin, a YouTuber also known as Sargon of Akkad, who became famous for the controversial statement “I would not even rape Jess Philips” (Baynes 2019). On the one hand, the sentence establishes a connection between a woman’s pleasant physical appearance and the act of domination through violence which rape actually represents; on the other, it reveals a patriarchal logic in which a woman’s constructed “worth” resides in her beauty and

sexual propriety (Thompson 2018). However fallacious and openly offensive, Benjamin’s statement originated an authentic viral trend of “I wouldn’t even” comments on YouTube against Phillips as well as other female MPs:

- (115) “**I wouldnt even** take her seriously” (MP Phillips)
- (116) “**I wouldnt even** let her make me a sandwich” (MP Phillips)
- (117) “Jess Phillip’s toothbrush: **I wouldnt even** brush her” (MP Phillips)
- (118) “**I wouldn’t even** knife her” (MP Phillips)
- (119) “**I wouldnt even** piss on it if it was on fire” (MP Phillips)
- (120) “**I wouldnt even** try to save her from a band of Islamist rapists...” (MP Phillips)
- (121) “**i wouldnt even** throw jess through a window, oh wait fuckin A i would” (MP Phillips)
- (122) “does Jess Phillips have any discernible skills? As she seems quite incompetent to me :) **I wouldn’t even** knife her in the front ;)” (MP Phillips)
- (123) “**I wouldn’t even** rape her tbh” (MP Thornberry)
- (124) “**I wouldnt even** force Jess Phillips to rape her...” (MP Thornberry)

4.2 Multimodal strategies of DTF violence

User-generated videos included in our corpus are characterized by a prevalence of “remixing” and “embedding”, two common practices of recontextualization in YouTube’s participatory culture (Androutsopoulos and Tereick 2015). Videos are commonly “embedded” in YouTube from other sources (such as mass media, especially mainstream TV shows, interviews and news broadcast), and they are recontextualized by means of a new title, short description and set of tags. In the same vein, a number of pre-existing videos may be cut, combined and manipulated (that is, “remixed”) into a new creative blended artefact.

In both cases, the new meaning making resources being added (like the new title and description) or created by modification and montage of different videos have a profound impact on the original message and its main purpose, usually marking a shift from a (more or less unbiased) informative message to content which is primarily aimed at the derision of the targeted female politicians. Other modifications, such as the insertion of overlay messages with different styles and colours, pictures and sounds also play a significant role in crafting

an overall cohesive message at an interface between visual and verbal elements (van Leeuwen 2006).

With over one million views, the most viewed YouTube video featuring Diane Abbott is entitled “Diane Abbott vs Basic Maths and Logic”, consisting of a remix of six different interviews or televised public appearances of the British MP. The video was uploaded by *Politics UK*, a YouTube account managed by Steven Edginton, a 20-year old freelance journalist and digital strategist who ran the Brexit Party’s social media campaign and is responsible for managing the digital presence of various Eurosceptic and right-wing pressure groups, including *Leave Means Leave*, the *Taxpayer’s Alliance* and *Westmonster*.

Among the six different moments chosen by Edginton to be included in the video, there are some of Abbott’s public appearances that had the greatest media resonance in the UK and managed to spark a controversy not only on her political knowledge, but on her very cognitive abilities. Some moments seem to have been chosen to highlight Abbott’s alleged issues with mathematics, as per the video title. These include a famous interview conducted by ITV on 5 May 2017, when Abbott was unable to give exact figures on the Labour party’s performance, suggesting that the party had a net loss of 50 seats in the 2017 local elections. However, her figure was corrected by the interviewer who stated that Labour had in fact lost 125 seats, at which point Abbott said that the last figures she had seen were a net loss of around 100. The original interview footage is enhanced by *Politics UK* to include a logo of the YouTube channel and a white and red graphic of Abbott’s incorrect answers (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Colour as semiotic mode – Abbott on labour seats

The “Diane Abbott vs Basic Maths and Logic” YouTube video then includes an appearance on the BBC’s Daily Politics where Abbott was compelled to listen to her own interview on LBC radio, explaining Labour’s policing commitments to Nick Ferrari. The interview, later labelled by LBC itself as the “Car-Crash Interview Everyone’s Talking About” received massive media coverage due to the fact that MP Abbott gave estimates of how much new 10,000 police officers would cost, ranging from £300,000 to £80 million. The footage is enhanced with

the same graphics by *Politics UK*, marking MP Abbott’s ‘incorrect’ answers (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Colour as semiotic mode – Abbott on policemen cost

Colour here represents an important semiotic mode (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002): the use of the white and red font, in fact, creates a perfect colour contrast making it easy for the viewer to read the overlay verbal text. But readability is not the only element at stake: as exemplified in the “Key” shown in the bottom right corner, red is chosen for its highly salient connotation of ‘danger’, ‘stop’ and ‘mistake’ (Jewitt and Oyama 2000) to underline Diane Abbott’s incompetence at mathematics. The colour red catches the viewers’ attention and its indexical meaning (red is conventionally associated with mistakes in educational contexts) emphasises the message and contributes to its salience. Abbott’s alleged poor knowledge of maths and logic, already implicit in the video title itself, is underlined by means of this interplay of modes and is highly reprised in the comments thread, where abusive comments mainly adopt discursive strategies aimed at underlining her incompetence and stupidity (see Section 4.1).

In videos such as “Diane Abbott vs Emily Thornberry-biggest gaffes”, typographical features are employed not only to underline the British MPs’ ‘embarrassing moments’ during their televised public appearances but, interestingly, also to add negative evaluative comments about their performance. Figure 3 is an example of an additional semiotic resource which is used to express the YouTuber’s point of view, with an overlay caption being added to the pre-existing clip. In the snippet taken from a heated interview with Sky News journalist Dermot Murnaghan, Emily Thornberry complains that he has a particularly aggressive attitude with her and blurts out: “I’d certainly think that sometimes when it comes to sexism some Sky presenters need to look at themselves too [...] it really upsets me that every time I come on you, you do another pop quiz”. The overlay caption works to add the YouTuber’s point of view, which is that Murnaghan is asking valid questions and he is not being sexist. As such, the video ultimately casts a negative light on Thornberry, who would be complaining without a real reason.

The video “Diane Abbott vs Emily Thornberry-biggest gaffes” is also an example of the combination and integration of the meaning-making resources of music and sound effects, which play a significant role in order to attract attention



Figure 3. Evaluative comments on Thornberry's statement

and elicit feelings. Given its powerful capability to reach people and arouse emotions through evocative messages, sound is a wrap-around medium able to create the mood and the emotional temperature of the event represented, moving us "towards or away from a certain position", and ultimately "changing our relation to what we hear" (van Leeuwen 1999, 18). In particular, the intense music added to the original footage, where a crescendo of violins creates a climactic atmosphere similar to that of a dramatic movie, can stir viewers' response to the video content through a cognitive process of association, contributing to the creation of an unfavourable feeling of tension and unpleasantness towards the participants.

The kind of negative framing shown in Figure 3 can be even more explicit and intrusive when using sound as a semiotic resource, as in the video "Emily Thornberry Show's Utter Contempt for the British Voters on BBC Question Time". The video starts with a voiceover announcing "We will focus on the nonsense Emily Thornberry is saying" and the footage is actually paused several times so that the same voiceover can guide the viewer's attention to some particular moments of the debate in which Thornberry expresses her views, while adding negative value judgments, mocking or ridiculing her. The video ends with a final explicit value judgement, reinforcing the idea that Thornberry deserves to be mocked: "we end the clip with the Brexiteers mocking her and rightly so, she deserves it!"

Other sounds also play an important role in maximizing the feeling of ridicule and mockery against the targeted politicians. In particular, canned laughter is a powerful semiotic resource, which represents a standard feature of situation comedies and is employed to push audience into laughing and to strengthen the perception of humour of a portrayed situation. Canned laughter, as well as other sounds like trumpets, bird chirping, waterfalls, are employed to create a humorous effect and to ridicule the targeted MP in the video "Diane Abbott Best Gaffes Compilation".

Often videos are cut ad hoc, with the purpose of highlighting the semiotic relevance of existing laughter in the video. One example of this is in "Joanna Cherry

SNP freezes on question time” and “SNP and Joanna Cherry gets destroyed on BBCQT”. Both videos consist of the same clip extracted from an episode of BBC Question Time, when a member of the audience asks MP Cherry a sarcastic question and she stammers considerably before answering, provoking an outburst of laughter in the audience. Both videos have negative evaluative titles, but at least in the first video the whole scene is shown, including when she proceeds to answer the question and receive a warm applause from the audience. The second clip is even more effective in ridiculing her since it only includes the question from the audience and Cherry’s stammering, but it closes on the audience laughing, without featuring her answer and the audience applause. By simply cutting some frames, YouTubers manipulate the information and influence viewers, abstracting the moment of hesitation from its context of situation. Consequently, in order to fully understand the intended purpose of these videos, it becomes necessary to look for what has been excluded from the new video artefact.

Short clips like the ones featuring Cherry can be regarded as an example of ‘fail videos’: an established digital trend characterized by the viral sharing of videos that show people failing to do something, from simple mishaps to serious accidents. Watching female politicians’ mishaps in the public arena, even showing a small hesitation in public political debates, “can appeal to the viewer’s curiosity, to sensation seeking, and last but not least to aggressive humour in the form of *schadenfreude*” (Döring and Mohseni 2019, 255), that is, taking pleasure in other people’s bad luck. Even if they may be only regarded as funny and entertaining, they intentionally elicit malicious glee and invite laughing at somebody rather than laughing with somebody, so that a single insignificant event can be exploited to express and spread gendered negative opinions towards female politicians.

The aforementioned example from the “SNP and Joanna Cherry gets destroyed on BBCQT” video also shows the importance of evaluative titles in embedded videos, which often contribute to inciting derogatory language. Negative lexical evaluation (using adjectives such as “embarrassing”, “disastrous”, “calamitous” and “pathetic”) is often inserted in the titles as a clickbait. Other times titles are openly misleading, such as in the video “Feminist Jess Phillips laughs at Men’s Rights”; the most viewed video featuring Jess Phillips in our corpus, with 868,800 views and more than 7,000 comments. Watching the whole video, it becomes clear that she is not laughing at men’s rights, but at Philip Davies’s proposed debate to commemorate international men’s day “in the spirit of gender equality”. During the debate, Phillips herself explains that she laughed at her colleague’s statement because the two houses do not reflect gender equality as she is the only woman on that committee. However, the video title managed to work as an effective clickbait attracting thousands of comments including anti-women and anti-feminist hostility, insults and violence.

Multimodal resources do not play a role exclusively in the videos, but they are to be found also in the comments section, in the form of emoticons and emojis. As pictorial representations of a facial expression, “emoticons as symbols can convey a message of acceptance or rejection”, emotions such as happiness or sadness, as well as “hatred in a way more hurtful than any other form of expression” (Benavides-Vanegas 2020, 329). In our corpus, derogatory comments are complemented by visual markers of disagreement such as vomiting/nauseated face emoticons, or markers of sarcasm such as mocking face emoticons. Several body-shaming comments are, for instance, reinforced visually by animal emoji depicting pigs or cows. Sometimes insults tend towards an upscaled graduation of hatred realised both lexically and orthographically, through repetition of exclamation marks and capitalization. Even if emoticons and emoji are often used to reinforce one’s position, showing a smiley face next to an insult can also mitigate the meaning of the comment. This is particularly evident in strategies of moral degradation (as seen in Section 4.1.3), where the use of mocking face emoticons paired with outright insults and slurs becomes a strategy to frame the insults as a ‘joke’ and offer a justification in the face of possible disapproval (“Grandma Soubry and her alzheimer’s 😂😂”, “What a blowout dummy Cherry is 😂😂😂”, “I was just wondering if any one else thinks Anna soubry is porkable or am I just sick? 🤔😂🤔”).

5. Concluding remarks

Investigating gender and politics entails acknowledging that any woman who ever rejected and struggled against those long-standing, gendered societal assumptions that excluded her from the political arena has *always* been the target of some form of physical or psychological violence. Looking back, countless messages were sent to ‘Suffragette’ leader Emmeline Pankhurst and her Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). For instance, a famous postcard dated 1909 reads “You set of sickening fools. If you have no homes – no husbands – no children – no relations – why don’t you drown yourselves out of the way” (Krook 2020, 53; see also Atkinson 1992). This shows that sending insulting, sexist and threatening messages to women interested in politics goes back a long way.

While showing hostility towards women in politics is a longstanding common practice, the advent of the Web 2.0 has contributed to facilitating the proliferation of sexist, insulting and threatening messages addressed to female politicians. Our findings underline how the vast array of malleable meaning-making resources that characterize the new social media communication paradigm are among the most useful assets for perpetrating DTF violence. For example, we have described

how various semiotic components (words, colours, pictures and sounds) are employed in different processes of recontextualization, where videos are imbued with new messages of sexist and violent nature. In the same vein, a vast number of interlocked discursive strategies can be identified that show the unsurprising result that women MPs are not only shamed for not being pretty, thin and feminine enough, but also attacked for not being intelligent or capable enough and despised for being too emotional or too aggressive. This paints an overall picture where gender stereotyping is still prevalent. A considerable amount of linguistic creativity and irony is also at play, which contributes to the mainstreaming of such discourse as episodes of “hate-play” or “recreational nastiness” (Jane 2014, 531–2) and to a more general normalization of online violence as an integral and harmless act of digital citizenship (Sarkeesiaan 2015).

When it comes to the British context, the general feeling is that women still elbow for political representation in the context of a Westminster politics which continues to be “very male, very middle-class, and very white” (Davey 2018, 417). Progress towards full gender equality has been surprisingly slow: in 2019, a hundred years after the election of Viscountess Astor as the first female MP in the House of Commons, women still represented only one third of the Westminster Parliament (32%), lagging considerably behind other comparable democracies. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for a critical conceptualization of DTF gender-based violence as a vicious phenomenon which makes British female MPs feel unwelcome and at danger in the political arena, to the point that many were pushed to step down in the latest 2019 General Elections (Scott 2019). In this respect, this research calls for the further investigation of DTF gender-based violence as discourse for its tangible (rather than virtual) role as a gatekeeping practice and its potential to jeopardise the hard-fought progress towards equality and closing the gender gap.

Funding

Eleonora Esposito’s work was generously supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (H2020-MSCA-IF-2017 – Grant Agreement ID: 795937)

References

- Androustopoulos, Jannis, and Jana Tereick. 2015. “YouTube: Language and Discourse Practices in Participatory Culture.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication*, edited by Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Tereza Spilioti, 354–370. London: Routledge.

- Atkinson, Diane. 1992. *Suffragettes in the Purple, White and Green: London 1906–1914*. Museum of London.
- Bailey, Jane, Valerie Steeves, Jacquelyn Burkell, and Priscilla Regan. 2013. “Negotiating with Gender Stereotypes on Social Networking Sites: From ‘Bicycle Face’ to Facebook.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 37(2): 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859912473777>
- Baynes, Chris. 2019. “Carl Benjamin: Police Investigating Ukip Candidate’s Rape Comments about Labour MP Jess Phillips.” *The Independent*, May 7.
- Benavides-Vanegas, Farid Samir. 2020. “Emoticons, Memes and Cyberbullying: Gender Equality in Colombia.” *Social Semiotics* 30(3): 328–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1731169>
- Benson, Phil. 2017. *The Discourse of YouTube Multimodal Text in a Global Context*. London: Routledge.
- Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. 2009. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. London: Polity Press.
- Campus, Donatella. 2013. *Women Political Leaders and the Media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295545>
- Citron, Danielle K. 2014. *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674735613>
- Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis. 2020. *Making Sense. Reference, Agency, and Structure in a Grammar of Multimodal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316459645>
- Culpeper, Jonathan, Michael Haugh, and Dániel Z. Kádár (eds). 2017. “Introduction.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)politeness*, edited by Jonathan Culpeper, Michael Haugh and Dániel Z. Kádár, 1–8. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-37508-7>
- Davey, Jennifer. 2018. “Women and Politics.” *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000*, edited by David Brown, Robert Crowcroft and Gordon Pentland Brown, 417–433. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dhroodia, Azmina. 2018. “Unsocial Media: A Toxic Place for Women.” *IPPR Progressive Review* 24(4): 380–387.
- Döring, Nicola, and M. Rohangis Mohseni. 2019. “Fail Videos and Related Video Comments on YouTube: A Case of Sexualization of Women and Gendered Hate Speech?” *Communication Research Reports* 36(3): 254–264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2019.1634533>
- Esposito, Eleonora. 2021. “Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Gender, Politics and Violence.” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict: Special Issue on Critical Perspectives on Gender, Politics and Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00051.int>
- Gee, James Paul. 2005. “Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces: From the Age of Mythology to Today’s Schools.” In *Beyond Communities of Practice: Language, Power and Social Context*, edited by David Barton and Karin Tusting, 214–232. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610554.012>
- Ging, Debbie, and Eugenia Siapera. 2018. “Special Issue on Online Misogyny.” *Feminist Media Studies* 18(4): 515–524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447345>
- Harjunen, Hannele. 2016. *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body: The Fat Body in Focus*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315583976>

- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). 2018. “Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women in Parliaments in Europe.” <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe>
- Jane, Emma. 2014. “‘Your a ugly, whorish, slut’ – Understanding E-bile.” *Feminist Media Studies* 14(4), 531–546. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.741073>
- Jane, Emma. 2016. “Online Misogyny and Feminist Digilantism.” *Continuum* 30(3): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1166560>
- Jane, Emma. 2018. “Gendered Cyberhate as Workplace Harassment and Economic Vandalism.” *Feminist Media Studies* 18(4): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447344>
- Jewitt, Carey, and Rumiko Oyama. 2000. “Visual Meaning: A Social Semiotic Approach.” In *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*, edited by Theo van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt, 134–156. London: Sage.
- KhosraviNik, Majid. 2018. “Social Media Techno-Discursive Design, Affective Communication and Contemporary Politics.” *Fundan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (ePub ahead of Print), 1–16.
- KhosraviNik, Majid, and Eleonora Esposito. 2018. “Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally-mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-based Hostility.” *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 14(1): 45–68. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lpp-2018-0003>
- KhosraviNik, Majid, and Johann Unger. 2016. “Critical Discourse Studies and Social Media: Power, Resistance and Critique in Changing Media Ecologies.” In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 3rd edn, edited by Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 205–234. London: Sage.
- KhosraviNik, Majid, and Mahrouz Zia. 2014. “Persian Nationalism, Identity and Anti-Arab Sentiments in Iranian Facebook Discourses: Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Media Communication.” *Journal of Language and Politics* 13(4): 755–780. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.13.1.o8kko>
- KhosraviNik, Majid, and Nadia Sarkhoh. 2017. “Arabism and anti-Persian Sentiments on Participatory Web: A Social Media Critical Discourse Study (SM-CDS).” *International Journal of Communication* 11: 3614–3633.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. 2002. “Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar of Colour.” *Visual Communication* 1(3): 343–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357202001003006>
- Krook, Mona Lena. 2020. *Violence against Women in Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190088460.001.0001>
- Kuperberg, Rebecca. 2021. “Incongruous and Illegitimate: Antisemitic and Islamophobic Semiotic Violence against Women in Politics in the United Kingdom.” *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict: Special Issue on Critical Perspectives on Gender, Politics and Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00055.kup>
- Manne, Kate. 2017. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190604981.001.0001>
- Mantilla, Karla. 2013. “Gendertrolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media.” *Feminist Studies* 39(2): 563–70.
- Moor, Peter J., Ard Heuvelman, and Ria Verleur. 2010. “Flaming on YouTube.” *Computers in Human Behavior* 26(6): 1536–1546. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.05.023>

- Murthy, Dhiraj, and Shubham Sharma. 2018. "Visualizing YouTube's Comment Space: Online Hostility as a Network Phenomena." *New Media & Society* 21(1): 191–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818792393>
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2010. "Objectification and Internet Misogyny." In *The Offensive Internet*, edited by Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum, 68–87. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Partington, Alan, and Charlotte Taylor. 2018. *The Language of Persuasion in Politics. An Introduction*. London and New York.
- Pihlaja, Stephen. 2014. *Antagonism on YouTube: Metaphor in Online Discourse*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Powell, Anastasia, and Nicola Henry. 2017. *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58047-4>
- Rasulo, Margaret. 2021. "Are Gold Hoop Earrings and a Dab of Red Lipstick enough to get even Democrats on the Offensive? The Case of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez." *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict: Special Issue on Critical Perspectives on Gender, Politics and Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.00057.ras>
- Rego, Richard. 2018. "Changing Forms and Platforms of Misogyny. Sexual Harassment of Women Journalists on Twitter." *Media Watch* 9(3): 472–85.
- Rotman, Dana, Jennifer Golbeck, and Jennifer Preece. 2009. "The Community is where the Rapport is – On Sense and Structure in the YouTube Community." In *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Communities and Technologies*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 41–50. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1556460.1556467>
- Sarkeesian, Anita. 2015. "Stop the Trolls. Women Fight Back Online Harassment." *Women in the World*. YouTube video.
- Scott, Jennifer. 2019. "Women MPs Say Abuse Forcing them from Politics." *BBC News*. October 31.
- Thompson, Laura. 2018. "'I Can Be your Tinder Nightmare': Harassment and Misogyny in the Online Sexual Marketplace." *Feminism & Psychology* 28(1): 69–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353517720226>
- Titley, Gavan, Ellie Keen, and László Földi. 2012. *Starting Points for Combating Hate Speech Online: Three Studies about Online Hate Speech and Ways to Address it*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Van der Pas, Joanna Daphne, and Loes Aaldering. 2020. "Gender Differences in Political Media Coverage: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Communication* 70(1): 114–143. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz046>
- van Leeuwen, Theo. 1999. *Speech, Music, Sound*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-27700-1>
- van Leeuwen, Theo. 2005. *Introducing Social Semiotics*. London: Routledge.
- van Leeuwen, Theo. 2006. "Towards a Semiotics of Typography." *Information Design Journal* 14(2): 139–155. <https://doi.org/10.1075/idj.14.2.06lee>
- Zeiter, Kirsten, Sandra Pepera, Molly Middlehurst, and Derek Ruths. 2019. *Tweets that Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics*. National Democratic Institute. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Tweets%20That%20Chill%20Report.pdf>

Address for correspondence

Eleonora Esposito
Institute for Culture and Society (ICS)
University of Navarra
Calle Universidad 2
31009 Pamplona
Spain
eesposito@unav.es

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7445-859X>

Co-author information

Sole Alba Zollo
Department of Political Science
University of Napoli Federico II
solealba.zollo@unina.it

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3766-5917>

Publication history

Date received: 1 July 2020
Date accepted: 13 August 2020
Published online: 22 February 2021