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# "You're not my nanny!" Responses to racialized women leaders during COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

In the early days of the pandemic, public health officials and politicians across the globe relied on Twitter to rapidly communicate COVID-19 information. Although the majority of these authority figures continue to be privileged white men, the number of women and racialized leaders is increasing. We analyze how users responded to public health tweets by Canada's top public health official Dr. Theresa Tam and New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham. Examining responses to these two racialized women through a critical discourse analysis, we uncover a pattern of users mobilizing gendered and racialized discourses to undermine the message, sow public distrust, and challenge the authority of Tam and Lujan Grisham. This paper documents hostility in the digital public square that, we argue, constitutes intersectional harassing backlash which could have implications for the efficacy of public health messaging on and offline.

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## Introduction

What do memes of a dead woman, Hitler, and a monkey have in common? All are Twitter responses to two racialized women doing their jobs: Michelle Lujan Grisham, elected Governor of New Mexico in the US, and Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's appointed Chief Public Health Officer. Both women join other political and public health leaders in using Twitter to rapidly communicate COVID-19 information, an effective tool when used for this purpose (Rosenberg, Syed, and Rezaie 2020; Rufai and Bunce 2020). Yet, as the memes augur, some users responded in vulgar ways.

That women are subjected to gendered and sexist mediation on social media is well established (Southern and Harmer 2021; Dragotto, Giomi, and Melchiorre 2020; Fuchs and SchÄfer 2020; Wagner 2020; Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan 2019; Southern and Harmer 2019; Drakett et al. 2018). While some categorize these vulgar responses as forms of incivility in the digital public square (Southern and Harmer 2021), others suggest online attacks are forms of sexual harassment meant to create an unwelcome digital public space for women (Jane 2014; Megarry 2014). When this is directed at women in politics, it falls under the broader umbrella of violence against women in

politics (VAWIP), wherein women are targeted *because* of their position (Ncube and Yemurai 2020; Kuperberg 2018), and the violence is meant to push them out of office (Restrepo Sanín 2020; Krook and Sanín 2016). Some of this violence can be understood as a form of *backlash* – against feminism, progressive gender politics, or perceived social hierarchy changes (Piscopo and Walsh 2020). Emerging research suggests that intersectional<sup>1</sup> forms of oppression influence this backlash (Rowley 2020; Townsend-Bell 2020), and that online harassment of women politicians is influenced by multiple axes of privilege and marginalization (Palmer 2020; Southern and Harmer 2019; Amnesty International UK 2017). Investigating the terrain of racialized-gendered online responses to women of color leaders is a fruitful area of study to develop our understanding of backlash and the online public square.

The context of the pandemic adds urgency to our analysis of users' responses to racialized women communicating public health information. Marginalized communities, particularly people of color, are among the hardest hit by the pandemic due to structural inequalities (CDC 2020; Subedi, Greenberg, and Turcotte 2020). Thus, centering race is paramount to understanding the crisis communication environment. Political leaders are also using Twitter to disseminate potentially lifesaving information. Lujan Grisham uses Twitter as a tool of governing and Tam, an appointed civil servant, similarly uses Twitter to share information about Canada's COVID-19 responses. Users' responses to these two racialized women can tell us about the digital public square milieu for racialized women leaders and can signal potential consequences for compliance with public health measures.

To understand how Twitter users respond to these two racialized women communicating information as part of their pandemic-related responsibilities, this paper unfolds as follows. We first situate our study in two broad literatures: social media as a public space, and types of online responses to women leaders. We next discuss our empirical methods and explain our case selection. This sets the stage for our analysis. We find three patterns of response: supportive comments, civil critiques, and vulgar responses. The latter includes credibility challenges, authority disputes, racist caricatures, identity weaponization, othering, and silencing. We argue that these responses are best understood as intersectional backlash, aimed at undermining the authority of women of color, discrediting their leadership, and discouraging their participation in the digital public space. In our discussion, we consider implications beyond Twitter. The use of sexist and racist responses has the potential to undermine the credibility of the two racialized women and contribute to selective adherence to public health recommendations, furthering the pandemic's negative effects for marginalized communities.

## Digital public spaces in a pandemic

In a public health emergency, disseminating up-to-date public health information is critical. Politicians and public health experts are increasingly relying on Twitter to communicate information about the coronavirus pandemic, a powerful and effective tool when used for this purpose (Rosenberg, Syed, and Rezaie 2020; Rufai and Bunce 2020). Dr. Tam, a relatively obscure figure before the pandemic, saw her Twitter follower count increase dramatically as it became clear she was the face of Canada's public health information. On March 17, 2020, Tam's official Canadian Public Health Officer (CPHO)

Twitter account had 82,000 followers. By June 1, 2020, @CPHO\_Canada had more than 200,000 followers. Governor Lujan Grisham's Twitter followers doubled from roughly 15,000 followers on February 26, 2020 to more than 32,000 followers on May 23, 2020. Relevant and timely information during a pandemic is key to ensuring people stay safe, and Twitter is a critical medium to deliver this information.

Twitter is not simply a privately-operated dissemination tool. It is also a networked public sphere (Benkler 2006) where elite and non-elite users interact and shape political conversations (Chen, Tu, and Zheng 2017; Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013). Leaning on Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public square, Peter Dahlgren (2005, 148) defines a public sphere as "a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates, ideally in an unfettered matter, and also the formation of political will." Twitter and other digital platforms represent a shift in how people engage in public, as more people "produce, circulate, and deliberate information" and contribute to shaping political discourse (Chen, Tu, and Zheng 2017, 1009). While elites may dominate the discussion, Twitter specifically facilitates bottom-up, top down, and peer-to-peer conversations (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013). Twitter users can "shout" back words of support or disapproval at the speaker or engage in a passionate argument with the person "next" to them seconds after the tweet is posted. There are silent observers who "eavesdrop" on these sideways conversations. As these direct responses and sideways conversations unfold, they can influence how people interpret the information and how they will behave after they exit the square.

In the context of a global pandemic, how public health information is interpreted, as well as the acceptance of public health experts *as leaders*, has significant implications for the health of the public. Preliminary research on adherence to COVID-19 policies suggests that gendered leadership may play a role in compliance. While a recent survey of Americans found that the leader's gender alone had no influence on pandemic policy compliance (Bauer, Kim, and Kweon 2020), Kalaf-Hughes and Leiter (2020) find that gender resentment reduces trust in women in leadership positions, which subsequently reduces compliance with public health measures. Gender of the leader alone may not reduce the efficacy of public health responses; yet, cultural perceptions about women in leadership might. How Twitter users mediate racialized women leaders may give insight into the cultural perceptions of leadership and, iteratively, may influence how users perceive racialized women leaders.

### Online harassment of women

Twitter, as a digital public space, can be a more equitable space and a platform that fosters discrimination. Research documents how users treat women on social media by attempting to silence them through intimidation, shaming, and discrediting tactics (Sobieraj 2018); deploying ad hominem attacks, sexual threats, and vulgar "e-bile" (Jane 2014); and using "humorous" memes to police who is allowed to take up space online (Drakett et al. 2018). Racialized responses can be directed at women as an additional point of marginalization. A woman's non-whiteness or immigrant status, for example, can be weaponized as justification to further discredit or dehumanize her in the online space (Elabor-Idemudia 1999).

A growing body of research looks specifically at social media attacks on women in politics. Southern and Harmer (2021) compare Twitter responses to UK Members of Parliament over a 14-day period. They find that women and men receive similar numbers of “uncivil” tweets, but women politicians receive more stereotypes and challenges to their authority. A study of responses to politicians in Canada and the US finds that higher-profile women politicians received a greater share of uncivil messages online than men with similar public visibility in both the US and Canada (Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan 2019). Dragotto, Giomi, and Melchiorre (2020) analyze one example of online vitriol directed at a woman politician. In January 2014, Italian Senator Laura Boldrini used procedure to force the chamber to vote on a measure strongly opposed by the extreme right-wing party Five Star Movement (5SM). The chamber voted, and the measure passed. Beppe Grillo, the leader of 5SM, was so enraged by this move that on January 31, 2014 he wrote on Facebook: “Cosa faresti in macchina con la Boldrini?” This question – What would you do in the car with Boldrini? – invited the public to describe violent rape fantasies against the Senator. The post received numerous offensive responses. Grillo’s angry, violent invitation directly correlates to the Senator’s use of her democratically afforded authority. This case adds to recent research suggesting that women in public office face online vitriol *because of* their authoritative positions (Southern and Harmer 2021; Fuchs and SchÄfer 2020; Ncube and Yemurai 2020; Palmer 2020; Wagner 2020; Southern and Harmer 2019).

Research further suggests that racialized women experience distinct and intense forms of online harassment. Amnesty International UK’s 2017 study of Twitter responses to politicians’ documents 30% more abusive tweets directed at Black and Asian women compared to their white colleagues. Southern and Harmer (2019) find that racialized women in UK politics receive misogynistic and racist tweets. Lisa Palmer (2020, 512) argues that Diane Abbott, the UK’s first Black Member of Parliament, experienced online forms of *misogynoir*.<sup>2</sup> It is well established that traditional news media engages in racial mediation of women of color in politics (Burge, Hodges, and Rinaldi 2019; Gerrits and Besco 2019; Trimble et al. 2015). This, along with the emerging evidence of online responses to racialized women politicians, suggests we might expect gendered, racialized, and intersectional tweets directed at racialized women in politics. The intersectional stereotyping literature, for example, finds that people rely on gender-by-race discourses that are uniquely different than discourses of either gender or race alone (Ghavami and Peplau 2013). Research on other realms of the internet suggests that racism directed at women is rampant (Gray 2012). As a newer terrain of research, there is still much empirical work needed to understand the racialized, gendered, and intersectional discourses directed at racialized women in politics.

It might be tempting to argue that vitriolic social media comments are a form of incivility. Ideally, online debate can be heated, but civil. The remedy for incivility is to encourage civility and implement decorum rules. However, this argument is rejected on two fronts. Megarry (2014) argues that online vitriol is a form of sexual harassment. Similarly, Dragotto, Giomi, and Melchiorre (2020, 46) frame the attack on Boldrini as a form of “technology-facilitated sexual violence” aimed at intimidating women politicians. This form of online sexual harassment reinforces gendered inequalities in online public forums and is grounded in social inequalities (Megarry 2014, 49). That is to say, racist and sexist attacks are manifestations of the material reality of patriarchy and white

supremacy. Labeling the harassment of women in politics as a pattern of sexual harassment rejects the “bad apple” narrative that it is a matter of individual decorum or misbehavior (see Dalton 2019, 3). Instead, it underscores how online harassment reinforces gendered and racialized exclusions online, reifying politics as white and male.

Online harassment can also be understood as a form of backlash under the umbrella of VAWIP. The VAWIP literature finds that women politicians are targets of violence across regime type (Restrepo Sanín 2020, 304), which may increase as women gain more elite political positions (Håkansson 2021; Krook 2020). Some VAWIP has been conceptualized as backlash. This can be understood as a response to feminist gains or challenges to gender norms, sometimes tied to a specific event or movement. It can also be seen as an “ever-present manifestation of oppression that shapes the lives of members of marginalized groups” (Piscopo and Walsh 2020, 269). For example, Rowley (2020, 281) emphasizes the importance of positionality in the conceptualization of backlash, cautioning that it is “often readily gendered as female and raced as white.” Similarly, Townsend-Bell (2020, 292) argues that backlash is experienced differently within and across groups of women, along important axes of privilege and marginalization.

Conceptualizing online harassment as backlash while employing an intersectional lens lays bare the manifestation of systems of oppression that do not view racialized women as worthy of political leadership. For example, Ncube and Yemurai (2020) argue that women politicians face online harassment because they are perceived to be challenging the patriarchal order, an ever-present form of marginalization. A parallel argument can be made that online harassment directed at women of color may be the result of the perception that they are violating race and gender hierarchies that prescribe, among other things, who is capable and worthy of holding leadership positions. Rather than labeling vitriolic responses as uncivil, conceptualizing the vitriol as sexual harassment or backlash exposes foundational power structures that rely upon and perpetuate social inequality.

Much of the research has documented the online harassment of everyday women or women in politics. More is needed on the responses directed at racialized women politicians. What response patterns can be observed, and what tone do they set for the digital public square? How do the patterns fit with theorizations of online harassment as forms of sexual harassment and backlash? How do the patterns interact with the context of a pandemic? We examine how these response patterns serve to undermine racialized women leaders and discuss potential effects on public health and trust in institutions.

## Methods and materials

For this analysis, we are interested in the types of responses racialized women officials receive when communicating information to the public about COVID-19 via Twitter. We focus here on two racialized women public officials, Canada’s Dr. Theresa Tam and New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham. Both Lujan Grisham and Tam have backgrounds in public health. Tam is Canada’s chief public health officer, appointed on June 26, 2017. Her expertise in immunization, infectious disease, and global health is evidenced in her prolific academic publication record and in the leadership role she held

during SARS, H1N1, and Ebola public health emergencies. Lujan Grisham, a Democrat, took office in 2019. Previously, she served as a US Representative, Chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and New Mexico Secretary of Health.

Both women fit our basic selection criteria: each is a woman of color and public authority who uses Twitter frequently to communicate pandemic-related public health information. There are also important differences between the two women. Tam is an appointed official, and Lujan Grisham is an elected official.<sup>3</sup> They are also embedded differently in local racial politics. Lujan Grisham is a light-skinned Hispanic woman in a minority-majority state with a diverse population that is predominantly Hispanic, Latinx, and Indigenous, while Tam is an Asian woman<sup>4</sup> in a white-majority country that clings to a multicultural identity. Asian people continue to face increased violence during the pandemic as people erroneously blame China for the outbreak (Human Rights Watch 2020; Xu 2020). Although race is constructed differently in the US and Canada,<sup>5</sup> there are parallels between the positionality of Tam and Lujan Grisham. Hispanic and Asian people experience both structural and overt racism, while occasionally obtaining conditional inclusion within their national racial hierarchies (see Thobani 2007; Dua 2007). That the two women are embedded in different racial and national contexts, and that they do not occupy equivalent positions, are both limitations and strengths of this analysis. This backdrop of diverging social and political constructions of racial categories prevents us from making claims about scope or directly comparing political contexts. However, analyzing a broad array of responses targeted at two differently racialized women leaders facilitates an understanding of racialized, gendered, and intersectional harassment across positions and borders.

We collected Twitter responses to the women's COVID-19 specific tweets over a randomly selected, similar length of time for each woman, during the early months of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> This amounted to 787 responses to tweets by Tam from June 4 to 15 and 767 responses to tweets by Lujan Grisham from May 25 to June 12. We captured direct replies to the women as well as the sideways conversations nested within their feeds. We omitted responses from users with restrictive privacy settings but included tweets that Twitter flagged as potentially containing offensive content. Of these responses, 73 feature an image or gif directed at Tam and 88 directed at Lujan Grisham; the remaining responses are word-based.

In order to capture the data as faithfully as possible, we screenshot responses at random intervals between one and 24 hours after the initial tweet was posted. We used this method for two reasons. First, we wanted to be as “in” the public square as much as possible to better understand the back-and-forth responses and sideways conversations. This precluded using data scraping programs. By embedding ourselves within the data, we applied an “ethnographic sensibility” to data collection and analysis (Prinz 2019; Schatz 2009). We cultivated a close proximity to the Twitter engagement (Prinz 2019), returning regularly to each of the women's feeds throughout data collection. Second, tweets are often deleted; Twitter occasionally removes offensive tweets and users can delete their own at any time. It is not possible to predict when this will happen. Our in-the-moment data collection captured both raw reactions (including since-deleted tweets) and enduring patterns. This approach is designed to avoid issues with quantitative approaches to social media analysis, such as the difficulty assessing different types of data within the same source (for



example, visual versus textual responses), disentangling automated content, and handling deleted content of historical data (Olteanu, Kiciman, and Castillo 2018; Stieglitz et al. 2018). We anonymize user handles by randomly assigning pseudonyms to account for ethical concerns that may arise from any content deletion after data collection has ended (Maddock, Starbird, and Mason 2015). Applying this ethnographic sensibility, in combination with a critical discourse analysis, allowed us to inductively examine response patterns.

We specifically use feminist critical discourse analysis. This method identifies the interconnected, nuanced gendered assumptions and power relations that “are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged” (Lazar 2007, 142). This inductive method is useful to identify the terrain of responses to the emerging empirical focus on responses to racialized women with authority. Critical discourse analysis draws on a tradition of understanding how language and images rely upon and reinforces social systems (Fairclough 1992). In this case, we study “processes of differentiation” and their relationship to systems of oppression (Dhamoon 2011, 235). That is to say, the responses to each leader have the potential to racialize and gender, reinforcing patriarchy and white supremacy. While we selected the two women based on their identity, we use discourse analysis to study “othering discourses” (Gerrits and Besco 2019, 89). Prioritizing the quantifications of themes might miss the texture and intensity of the responses. We instead follow previous research on the gendering and racializing of women leaders by using an interpretive approach (see Hawkesworth 2003, 532), in this case, discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is also well-suited to analyze the rich, polysemic data of words, memes, hashtags, and emojis.

We took a three-step approach to analyzing the corpus of Twitter responses by carefully reading and re-reading it for patterns, contradictions, and comprehensiveness (see Bryman, Bell, and Teevan 2012, 259). We first identified preliminary themes, one author immersing themselves in Tam’s feed and the other in Lujan Grisham’s. Images, memes, and emojis were considered within these themes as we considered manifest and latent content. We re-read the responses and identified contradicting narratives and alternative interpretations as both authors read across the corpus. In the third reading, we looked for unaccounted themes, contradictions, and silences. To identify a pattern, we considered three valences: repetition, intensity, and clarity. We found the volume of harassing comments ebbed and flowed from day to day, intermixed between gratitude and demands for more information. Harassing comments were consistently embedded within responses to each woman, with a few elevating to levels of violence significant enough to give us pause. For the pattern of silencing, for example, only a few users conveyed this message to Tam, but when they did, it was intense and clear. The numerical representation of the patterns would miss these other valences, even as quantification in other research contributes to understandings of online harassment. Discourse analysis is not an objective assessment. Much like the discrepancies observed through the Rashomon effect,<sup>7</sup> we anticipate that discrete users will interpret responses differently, and that these interpretations may not align with the user’s original intent. When the authors disagreed, we discussed the meanings until we agreed on the significance. To relay this to the reader, our analysis focuses on patterns across the tweets and their significance for understanding racialized women’s health leadership in a moment of crisis.



## Findings

Tam and Lujan Grisham received three main types of responses: supportive comments, civil critiques, and harassing vitriol. We also identified distinct patterns within each of these three categories. Supportive comments included responses of gratitude, love, and defense. Civil critiques focused on policy disagreement, displeasure, and concern. Users engaged in harassing vitriol by challenging competency, disputing authority, depicting racist caricatures, weaponizing racial identity, othering, and silencing. Below we use examples to illustrate each pattern, detailing when and how they are explicitly gendered and racialized.

### From supportive comments and civil critique ...

Both women received clear messages of support, taking the form of gratitude, love, and defense. Expressions of gratitude and love were straightforward. One user wrote to Lujan Grisham: “Thank you for your reasonable and well thought out response to this devastating disease. I [heart emoji] NM!” (@NM18a, June 12, 2020). Another user declared: “We love you Dr. Tam” (@CD99a, June 4, 2020). These expressions of love may be gendered, with users ascribing a maternal role to the leaders or subtly positioning racialized women as objects of affection. Responses defending the women against critical and harassing comments were more complex forms of support. For example, to an image posted to Dr. Tam’s feed of two Chinese soldiers with the caption “Your ancestor,” one user responded: “... you know she’s British right sparky” (@CD85b, June 13, 2020). This example is illustrative of the peer-to-peer conversations in the two women’s Twitter feeds and a pattern of responses in which users defended the women. This pattern is evocative of the trope that women need to be defended due to women’s “weaknesses” or cultural expectations of chivalry. Both women received ample harassing comments, which likely contributed to the volume of comments in their defense.

Civil critiques focused on direct criticisms of specific public health policies. This included disagreement of the policies themselves, displeasure with how the policy was being implemented, or concerns over enforcement. For example, a user in New Mexico stated: “There has been a spike in cases, Governor. We are not on track for phase 3. Please enforce citations for mask violations” (@NM20b, June 7, 2020). Sometimes these critiques combined concerns with enforcement and policy guidelines, as illustrated by a response on Tam’s feed: “We need stronger guidelines on wearing masks as more & more people are not abiding by social distancing measures” (@CD82c, June 9, 2020). These comments were critical and polite, were not explicitly gendered or racialized, and did not resort to name-calling, conspiracy theories, or calling for the leader’s resignation. These responses highlight the bottom-up potential of Twitter: direct communication of suggestions, critiques, and queries.

### ... To harassing vitriol

We uncovered clear patterns of harassment, including responses challenging the women’s competence, disputing their authority and credibility, weaponizing their racial identity, othering, and silencing, as well as memes depicting racist caricatures of

the women. These patterns are intertwined in some responses and others only employ one type of vitriol. These responses are united in their gendered, racialized, and intersectional discourses.

Challenges to the competence of these two highly skilled women were endemic. Even when not explicitly offensive, these responses draw on culturally prevalent misperceptions that racialized women are less competent (Ditonto 2020). Lujan Grisham's daily updates on COVID-19 numbers received responses such as: "You probably have the same tweet and you just put in random #s. There is no goal, no leadership" (@NM90c, June 12, 2020). Users referred to the governor only by her first name, while asserting she had: "no earthly clue as to what she's doing" (@NM32d, May 30, 2020). Tam received similar comments, such as: "You failed our country" (@CD70d, June 5, 2020) or "Sorry but you have zero credibility" (@CD63e, June 8, 2020). These responses use gendered and racialized discourses to target the women's credibility. Using the governor's first name, for example, minimizes her position and demonstrates gendered disrespect. References to "our country" are emblematic of the racist discourses throughout Tam's responses. Tam could be included in references to the "country" or excluded as an outsider causing harm to "our [white] country." Gendered attacks on Tam's competence included calling her a "double dipping witch" and insinuating that she was sleeping with Canada's prime minister, calling him her "bed buddy" (@CD34h, June 7, 2020). This plays on the worn-out trope that women get ahead not by being competent, but by sleeping with their bosses. The "double dipping" reference, one repeated throughout the responses, also accuses Tam, as an Asian woman, of being loyal to China. Southern and Harmer (2021, 2019) similarly found that Twitter users would question the intelligence and authority of women of color politicians in the UK. We found a similar pattern directed at women of color in North America, in which gendered and racialized discourses formed the basis to question the women's competence and authority.

Users also drew on explicitly gendered discourses to downplay the women's authority. Fixated on the governor's feminine body, users posted memes insinuating that she prioritizes her hair and jewelry. Users fat-shamed Lujan Grisham, posting a photo of her in workout clothes captioned: "Let them eat cake. I'll have the menu. All of the menu'-Lockdown Lujan" (@NM75p, June 6, 2020). Through this focus on the governor's appearance, users assert both the centrality of gender difference and gender inequality (Sobieraj 2018, 1708) and subtly communicate that the governor, as a frivolous and undisciplined woman, is an unfit leader. Another user responded that the governor was "not my nanny" (@NM35e, May 30, 2020), suggesting that would be the only scenario under which a racialized woman's health-care recommendations should be heeded. The use of the term "nanny," as opposed to "mother," connotes intersecting dimensions of difference. There is a class connotation, as nannies are an expensive form of childcare; a racialized implication, as the vast majority of nannies are women of color; and a gendered component, as nannies are predominantly women. Users also promised to remove the governor from office, while calling her "that bitch," "c\*nt," and "dumb twat" (@NM44f; @NM63g, May 27, 2020); Tam was similarly called a "bitch" (@CD26l, June 4, 2020). Jane (2014) calls this online language directed predominantly at women "e-bile." Users also hurled anti-Asian and anti-Chinese "e-bile" at Tam and used Spanish-language "e-bile" such as *puta* (@NM98l, May 25, 2020) to gender-racialize

Lujan Grisham as a Hispanic woman. These misogynistic and racist responses are employed to discredit women's authority.

Commenters challenged Tam's authority, attacking her credibility by calling her gender identity into question. This included drawing a stylized Chinese mustache on Tam's photo and calling her "Mr Tam" (@CD31i, June 5, 2020) and "a man" (@CD29j, June 15, 2020). These responses echo a now-deleted Facebook rant by a Chilliwack, British Columbia, school trustee, who wrote: "Dr. Theresa Tam, Canadian Head of Public Health is suspected by Wikipedia of being Transgender! If this person, who has spent a major portion of their life deceiving people as to who she/he truly is ... why should we believe anything he/she says" (quoted in Chilliwack Progress Staff 2020). Calling Tam a man and suggesting she may be transgender regurgitates transphobic rhetoric that accuses trans people of being "deceivers/pretenders – and ... liars and frauds" (Bettcher 2007, 55) and seeks to instill distrust in Tam's public health expertise.

That Tam is Asian prompted an array of racist memes and comments. One user transplanted Tam's face onto a monkey, calling on a history of racist depictions of people of color as subhuman animals. The image also darkened Tam's skin tone, which could be read as advancing colorism or anti-Black racism. Another drew exaggerated eyebrows and a long, narrow mustache over her face, captioning the photo: "HERRO, I AM NEW READER OF CANADA" (@CD25k, June 4, 2020). This caricature of Tam as a Chinese man evokes racist stereotypes that Asian people cannot fully grasp English, suggesting she is an incomprehensible communicator and ineffective leader. It also plays into the accusation that Tam is lying about her gender.

Lujan Grisham received responses which weaponized her identity as a Hispanic New Mexican, drawing on the legacy of the Lujans, a politically elite, established, light-skinned family who trace their lineage to Spanish colonizers of New Mexico (Gonzalez-Aller 2016). In the context of New Mexican politics, this aspect of the governor's identity was operationalized as being inextricably linked with her socioeconomic status. She was also featured as a jewelry-laden royal, a Marie Antoinette who likes to "live high on the hog while her subjects suffer" (@NM87h, May 30, 2020). While this is a reference to class, it is also a reference to the racial position of the Lujans.

Lujan Grisham was also framed as racist towards fluctuating groups of people; this fluidity draws attention to the malleability of her racial identity<sup>8</sup> and its shifting proximity to whiteness. In late May, when the coronavirus outbreak on the Navajo Nation was climbing at an alarming rate, she was framed as anti-Indigenous, even suggesting that she was "intent on committing genocide on the Navajo Nation" (@NM19i, May 25, 2020). This positions Lujan Grisham as a conquistador, another throwback to her family connections to Spain. Less than two weeks later, this narrative shifted, as a user wrote: "I spoke to a hospital worker ... the only Covid cases coming in are from the reservation! Why aren't we hearing about this? And why are we being punished for it? You prejudiced little thing you!" (@NM57j, June 6, 2020). This pattern of responses utilizes tired stereotypes that Indigenous peoples are susceptible to diseases in a way that Europeans are not, and that Indigenous peoples receive unfair government benefits. By imposing restrictions during a time when the "only" deaths in New Mexico were "from the Rez or nursing homes" (@NM64k, May 25, 2020), Lujan Grisham is accused of protecting marginalized populations at the expense of the non-Indigenous, non-elderly population. Here, users take advantage of the Indigenous population to position

Lujan Grisham as antagonistic towards and separate from “everyone else,” constructed here as a collective white European “we.” This is similar to the response pattern observed with Tam, where her Asianness was weaponized as evidence of her as having a tenuous membership in “our country.” Tam’s identity as Asian can also be selectively activated, malleable in its relationship with whiteness and belonging within a multicultural society.

Users also explicitly “othered”<sup>9</sup> the two women. While Tam was demonized as being an agent of the Chinese state, Lujan Grisham was demonized as broadly un-American. Users photoshopped the governor’s face onto Hitler, called her Führer, Mussolini, communist, tyrant, and fascist, and employed the hashtags #WuhanLujan and #LujanVirus. Individually, each tweet reads like a non-specific indictment of a disliked leader, untethered to reality, as the governor does not have clear ties to China, Nazi Germany, or fascism. Taken together, there is a clear pattern that the governor, in imposing public health orders, is taking away individual New Mexicans’ freedom. The governor is depicted as an out-of-touch elite, with un-American political ties who cannot be trusted to care for the “real” citizens. Users similarly suggested that Tam was too responsive to China. Users said: “you’ve got your head so far up China’s ass it’s pathetic” (@CD18l, June 4, 2020) and “you fucking chinese muppet” (@CD31a, June 4, 2020). At the time, news pundits and opposition politicians expressed concern that Canadian federal leadership was being too deferential towards China. One could read the tweets mentioning China in Tam’s feed in this vein. However, it would be a mistake to overlook that these tweets are directed at an Asian woman and, in the first example, using sexualized language. Some tweets were less subtle, suggesting that because Tam is Asian, she is loyal to China, calling her “Chairman Tam” (@CD55r, June 7, 2020), “Comrade Tam” (@CD51x, June 9, 2020), and “a communist double agent for china” (@CD05v, June 15, 2020). The emphasis on Tam’s attachment to China plays on the racist trope that only white Canadians are true Canadians, and all hyphen Canadians cannot, by their skin color or mythologized attachment to an imagined “motherland,” be truly loyal to Canada (see Thobani 2007).

Finally, users tried to silence both women, a theme also found in Southern and Harmer’s (2019) analysis of Twitter responses to women in politics in the UK. In response to Tam, one commenter captioned the image of a dead woman’s body: “Hush now child... you have no idea what you’re talking about anymore...” (@CM10m, June 9, 2020). Posting a dead woman on a woman’s social media account is a clear threat of violence and the ultimate threat of silencing. Numerous users also sought to silence the governor. A particularly evocative meme featured three faces: an enslaved African person wearing a muzzle and metal collar, a woman wearing a BDSM-style ball gag and blindfold, and Nancy Pelosi wearing a mask (@NM87m, June 4, 2020). Captioned: “Slaves Wear Masks,” the user declares that masks are an infringement on freedom. Underlying is the message that the racialized women making mask-wearing mandatory should be silenced and subjugated. There is a clear connection between Pelosi, Democratic congresswoman and current Speaker of the US House of Representatives, and Lujan Grisham, to whom the meme is directed. These threats of violence illuminate why women in politics report being concerned about their physical safety as a result of online trolling (Akhtar and Morrison 2019). Indeed, we found clear undercurrents of violence and intimidation, of women needing to be put “in their place,” and of racist and patriarchal vitriol.

## Discussion: backlash beyond the digital public square

The intersectional backlash uncovered in our data could have serious public health consequences. Emerging research on health compliance suggests that the social identity of the leader may not matter (Bauer, Kim, and Kweon 2020), but rather cultural perceptions of gender (Kalaf-Hughes and Leiter 2020), and presumably race influences compliance. Social media is not only a window into these cultural perceptions; it has the potential to influence them as elites and non-elites turn to Twitter to find up-to-date public health information (see Rosenberg, Syed, and Rezaie 2020). While we cannot draw conclusions about compliance, our data identified gendered, racialized, and intersectional forms of harassment directed at Tam and Lujan Grisham as they relayed COVID-specific information on Twitter. These responses sought to undermine both the women's messages about public health and their credibility as public health leaders. Such a pattern of responses could influence citizens' trust in public health information and the institutions creating the health guidelines. The attacks on Lujan Grisham and Tam could also further normalize misogyny and racism, an enduring pattern beyond this pandemic.

The online vitriol directed at Tam and Lujan Grisham is not simply about creating a hostile space online, as it is inextricably linked to the offline sphere. We agree with the assessments of Jane (2014) and Megarry (2014) that the pattern of harassing online comments creates a hostile public square, similar to the way street harassment makes public streets inimical. The threat of harassment – in any sphere – is as important as the experience of harassment. It is also helpful to view this violence as backlash (see Piscopo and Walsh 2020) to racialized women doing their job. Current systems of inequality reinforce that white men, often with class privilege, are the only people capable of leading effectively (Gerrits and Besco 2019). The vitriol directed at Tam and Lujan Grisham is not necessarily a response to a particular gain made by racialized women, but rather the backlash is a manifestation of these ever-present hierarchies of inequality and the pandemic sharpens our focus on the potential negative consequences of social hierarchies. It is insufficient to view these vitriolic responses as incivility, the cost of racialized women leading, or a digital relic. These two racialized women faced a slew of hateful commentary, which we classify as intersectional harassing backlash.

Both women were harassed in ways that interlocked racism, sexism, and, at times, classism. References to Tam “double dipping” both sexualized her in a gendered matter and referenced her supposed split loyalty between Canada and China or some other mythologized understanding of Asia. The thin black lines drawn under Tam's nose evoke an Asian Disney villain and calls into question Tam's gender identity. These gendered-racialized discourses challenged Tam's credibility, trustworthiness, and authority, painting her as both an object of derision and a subject attempting to deceive. Lujan Grisham's racial identity was molded into whichever categorization could be most readily weaponized on the day, always with the undercurrent that she was an untrustworthy other. That we were able to so clearly observe the malleability of Lujan Grisham's racialization is one of the strengths of our approach, as some of this nuance can be harder to see in larger quantitative studies. That some of the racialized responses also emphasized Lujan Grisham's gender in an offensive manner is not coincidental. Viewing these discourses separately tells us only one piece of the puzzle – it is crucial to identify how these discourses intersect as it highlights how harassment is not exclusively gendered.

This study has its limitations. The two women in our study are not directly comparable, either in their positions or the local racial politics. The focus on two racialized women allowed us to dig deeper into these discourses, but it is a small sample and does not tell us how response patterns might differ for white men. Future research may benefit from comparing public figures with similar positions, although this may prove challenging, as the number of women of color in both elected and appointed positions in both Canada and the US is extremely low. At the time of this research, there were not enough women of color in these positions to allow for a direct comparison between the countries. Our ongoing work, which focuses on the US, suggests that white men do not face the same level of harassing responses (Calasanti and Gerrits 2021), and other studies suggest the online harassment of men politicians is quantitatively and qualitatively different (Southern and Harmer 2021; Rheault, Rayment, and Musulan 2019). Our finding that these attacks persist in both Canada and the US speaks to the magnitude of the phenomenon, although the extent is outside the study's purview. Insofar as the Rashomon effect is a limitation, interpretive work cannot claim a universal "truth." Ongoing debate, refinement, and engagement with these patterns is important to understand the online terrain for racialized women leaders.

Our analysis raises questions to be tackled in what Kuperberg (2018, 685) calls the "uncharted territory" of VAWIP research. This includes how social media users respond to racialized women in appointed positions compared to elected positions and how intersectional backlash shapes the digital public square beyond the pandemic. We would expect qualitatively different responses to white women, men of color, and white men, a task for future study. We also would expect differences depending on local racial politics – for example, misogynoir might drive different responses than anti-Asian racism-sexism. Simultaneously, there might be important convergences of responses directed at racialized leaders that could clarify some of the patterns we identified. This study also raises the question of how online vitriol might influence racialized women's decisions to run for office or remain in leadership positions. It could be, counterintuitively, a catalyst for racialized women to take on leadership roles. Women political candidates have reported being both more aware of the hostile online environment and less likely to be put off their political ambitions because of it (Wagner 2020). Yet, racialized women expressed more concern about online harassment (Wagner 2020, 7). It is unclear if racialized women might be more deterred than white women from seeking or keeping positions of authority due to online backlash. There is much to unpack here in terms of how interlocking systems of privilege and oppression influence how women in politics navigate the digital public square.

While gendered and racialized discourses online are not new, the coronavirus pandemic has sharpened our focus on the ways these discourses are used to try to challenge the authority of racialized women leaders. We find clear evidence that Dr. Tam's and Governor Lujan Grisham's tweets about COVID-19 received intersectional backlash. These responses questioned the veracity of Tam and Lujan Grisham's information and their credibility as leaders, creating the potential for serious public health ramifications. The online harassment of racialized women leaders has critical implications for both the digital public square and its offline counterpart.



## Notes

1. Crenshaw (1991) explicates how vectors of oppression are interlocking and multiplicative, rather than additive, building on earlier work by Black feminists who argued that oppression could not be reduced to gender as race permeates cultural understandings (Collins 1986; Combahee River Collective 1986). For this analysis, we find Rita Dhamoon's (2011) categorization of types of intersectional investigations especially compelling, as we focus on responses to women selected because of their *identity* and analyze them in relation to *discourses of differentiation and systems of oppression*.
2. A term originally coined by Moya Bailey in 2008, misogynoir refers to the anti-Black misogyny experienced by Black women (Bailey and Trudy 2018).
3. Lujan Grisham is presently the only woman of color governor in the US. The lone woman premier of a Canadian province, Caroline Cochrane, is white and leads the sparsely populated Northwest Territories. The US's national appointed health official, Dr. Fauci, is a white man.
4. Tam was born in Hong Kong, grew up in the UK, and completed her pediatric residency in Canada.
5. Racial understandings and norms between the two settler states are historically distinct, with Canada pursuing a policy of multiculturalism (pluralism) and the US one of assimilation. Official racialized categories are similarly discrete: the US Census Bureau groups people by race, while Statistics Canada employs the concept of "visible minorities" to categorize those who are non-white in color and race. However, both countries have consistently employed malleable racial categorizations to control racialized populations (Thompson 2016).
6. We chose the early months of the pandemic for two practical reasons. One, it seemed like people were paying particular attention to public health information in those months. We wanted to capture a moment in which it was likely there was substantial engagement. Two, we could not know in advance how long the pandemic would last and collected a snapshot to investigate our research questions while it remained possible.
7. Coined after the 1950 Akira Kurosawa film *Rashomon*, this phenomenon references the disparate interpretations of individual witnesses to the same event. While a response to a tweet does not have the same weight as a murder, it can be interpreted in different ways, including in contradiction with the original author's intent, without one ultimate "true" interpretation.
8. Malleability refers to the various ways in which users interpret Lujan Grisham's racial identity. The Governor herself may be aware of her adaptable racial identity and may choose to emphasize different parts of her identity. This phenomenon is not unique to Lujan Grisham, or to Hispanic and Latinx women. Brown (2014), for example, describes the case of Delegate Wood, a light-skinned African American woman, who was perceived as having a different racial identity by different groups of constituents. According to Brown (2014, 303), Wood "admitted she did not readily disclose her racial identity but allowed voters to assume what they wanted," which may have helped secure electoral success.
9. Southern and Harmer (2021) similarly identify a pattern of "gendered othering," which includes misogynistic abuse, demonizing tweets, and objectifying tweets. We take a narrower view of othering, in which users positioned Tam and Lujan Grisham as un-American and un-Canadian. This is most similar to the sub-category of demonizing tweets, although we identify intersectional discourses driving the responses.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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