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Twitter to Yell at Them, Facebook to Ask Questions and Instagram to Show Support? Exploring Platform Effects in Responses to Women Politicians On Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that women politicians are often subject to more incivility, hate speech, and sexualized abuse on social media. Until now, studies tend to analyze one platform, and there has been no research to establish whether these experiences are the same across different platforms. This study deploys a two-stage design to isolate a platform effect in online incivility and abuse. We selected 18 women politicians from a range of UK political parties because they shared identical posts across three platforms – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. We collected all identical posts and replies to them, across each platform. The replies were content analyzed for elements of incivility and legitimate criticism but also for support and respectful responses. Multi-level binary logistic models were run on these data to assess platform effect, controlling for party and whether the original post mentioned a gendered topic. The replies were then subject to a qualitative analysis. The results showed a clear platform effect with Twitter being the source of the majority of uncivil, insulting and othering replies to women politicians. Twitter posts also received the least support and the fewest polite messages. Conversely, Instagram appeared to be less hostile. The platform had more polite interaction and a high proportion of supportive responses, accounting for well over half of all supportive responses across the sample.

KEYWORDS

Incivility; online abuse; social media; women politicians; cross-platform

Introduction

Several women MPs in the UK have secured criminal convictions against individuals who harassed them online, and multiple women representatives have cited such abuse as a factor in their decision to leave office (Southern & Harmer, 2021). Consequently, gendered online abuse of women representatives remains firmly on the agenda, with questions remaining about its impact on the representation pipeline. Most studies in this field have found that women politicians experience significant amounts of incivility (Southern & Harmer, 2021), hate speech (Ward & McLoughlin, 2020), and sexualized abuse (Erikson et al., 2021) in their online interactions.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Until now, however, most studies in this area focus on just one platform, and most often study Twitter (now "X," although as our data were collected while the platform was still called Twitter, that is how we will refer to it throughout). There are no studies that establish whether there is a platform effect on online incivility or abuse toward women politicians, despite cross-platform studies emerging in many other areas of political communication (Bossetta, 2018; Hase et al., 2022; Yarchi et al., 2021). This is also despite an emerging body of work establishing that the different affordances and architectures of platforms impact on user behavior (Keller, 2019). To isolate for a potential platform effect, we selected 18 women politicians from the 6 main UK parties who had shared identical posts across three platforms – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. We identified all posts going back 1 year from the time of data collection. We collected a combined total of 186 original posts, which elicited 2380 replies. We therefore tested responses to the exact same text in each post and the exact same politician to isolate platform effect and assess whether this is a key factor in eliciting uncivil responses. A two-stage analysis was applied. To determine differences between platforms, the replies were manually content analyzed for elements of incivility and legitimate criticism, but also for support and respectful responses. Multilevel binary logistic regression models were used to assess platform effect, controlling for party and whether the original post mentioned a gendered topic. The same replies were then subject to a qualitative analysis to provide a deeper understanding of incivility, criticism, and support for women politicians on social media. The study contributes to our understanding of online incivility and abuse leveled at women in politics by assessing whether women receive different responses to the same posts on different platforms but crucially enhances our understanding of multi-platform media ecologies by widening our understanding of how variation across platforms can potentially contribute to more inclusive forms of political communication and democratic representation.

Online Incivility and Abuse

There is a growing emphasis on cross-platform studies in other areas of political communication, including news sourcing (Hase et al., 2022), political campaigns (Bossetta, 2018), and disinformation and polarization (Yarchi et al., 2021). Perhaps more pressingly, Twitter is potentially falling out of favor rapidly, given recent changes to its service. The advent of new platforms such as Threads and Bluesky, and politicians increasingly adopting other platforms like Instagram means assessing the cultures of different platforms is crucial to understanding the impacts of online incivility and abuse directed at politicians.

Recent research has established gendered patterns of online abuse of politicians across multiple contexts (Carson et al., 2023; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021; Gorrell et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2023; Southern & Harmer, 2021; Wagner, 2022; Ward & McLoughlin, 2020). These studies found a range of gendered patterns of communication aimed at politicians, as well as gendered impacts, with women politicians receiving misogynistic hate speech or sexualized abuse (Erikson et al., 2021; Esposito & Breeze, 2022; Esposito & Zollo, 2021; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021; Harmer & Southern, 2021). Moreover, minoritized women politicians are often receive abuse which highlights other aspects of their identity such as race or disability, for example (Calasanti & Gerrits, 2023; Southern & Harmer, 2019). Crucially, some research has established a direct link between women experiencing abuse and questioning whether they should leave office (Carson et al., 2023; Wagner, 2022), while others found it altered

their behavior, for example, taking time off or taking extra security measures (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; Phillips et al., 2023).

Despite the increased academic interest in politicians' experiences of online harassment, very few studies have analyzed multiple platforms, and the vast majority focus solely on Twitter. Methodologically, these studies either deploy a survey or interviews without asking about platforms separately (Collignon & Rüdig, 2020; Erikson et al., 2021; Wagner, 2022). Others use content analysis to categorize posts sent to/about politicians. Others take a qualitative approach or combine these approaches (eg. Southern & Harmer, 2021). The vast majority focus on Twitter (Esposito & Breeze, 2022; Gorrell et al., 2020; Southern & Harmer, 2019; Ward & McLoughlin, 2020), with some notable exceptions (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; Esposito & Zollo, 2021; Phillips et al., 2023). This is a significant limitation of the literature because research has shown that users will adapt their behaviors to different platforms (Chen, 2018; Lane et al., 2019).

Platform Vernaculars

It is therefore important to compare different platforms because each offer distinct ways for users to engage. Evans et al. (2017, p. 37) describe these as affordances or "possibilities for action" which enables or constrain potential actions or behaviors online. Others emphasize what Gibbs et al. (2015) have termed "platform vernaculars" which account for the "styles, grammars and logics" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257) of each platform. While platform vernaculars are constrained by the affordances of each platform, crucially they are "also shaped by the mediated practices and communicative habits of users" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 275). Platform vernaculars are then a broader phenomenon where users must negotiate between what they want to do online (vernaculars) and the features the platform allows (affordances). It is therefore impossible to discuss one without the other since they are interwoven and constantly evolving.

Online behaviors then result from different contexts and user perceptions. Clicking a button may have different meanings for different users. For example, Meier et al. (2014) found users had 25 different reasons for hitting the favorite button on Twitter. These ranged from the obvious show of support, a bookmarking function, or signaling the end of a conversation. Eranti and Lonkila (2015) found similar discrepancies when studying Facebook "likes." They found 16 types of "like" with extremely wide variation from surface level enjoyment to "liking" to maintain acquaintances. They also identified darker uses such as pity likes, ironic likes, and even harassment likes. These findings suggest that while platform features might seem straightforward, they are riddled with complications depending on context.

Research has also shown that participants often have a keen understanding of the diverging expectations on different platforms and how various affordances can shape their online experience. For example, Keller's (2019) ethnographic work with teenaged feminists found that participants suggested that the layout of Twitter makes it much easier to find yourself in an argument than other sites like Tumblr which offer the functionality to remove any comment directed at them. Therefore, if comments can be removed instantly, there is less incentive to make them in the first place. Participants also reported being more careful about the topics they posted about on Facebook because of the way the platform encourages friends and families as networks. These nuanced practices online demonstrate

why it is crucial to go beyond what the platforms allow to account for the actual practices that emerge in context, regardless of the possibilities which are offered (Kreiss et al., 2018).

Scholars have posited that users will seek out and use media in ways which provide them with a reward that will fulfil a certain need (Whiting & Williams, 2013). On politicized social media like Twitter, this can often come from "winning the argument." One way that users can be seen to "win the argument" is via what has become known as "the ratio." "Ratioing" can mean either a user's reply gains more likes than the original post, or it can refer to when a user gains many more replies than likes or retweets. For the first type, negative reactions will often gain more likes. For the latter, it can attract many more comments from those keen to join in on the "Ratioing." The ability to "ratio" a user becomes a goal, sometimes resulting in pile-ons. The ratio then has now reached a meta practice on political Twitter where people just reply "ratio" to things they disagree with to try and gain more likes than the original post (Harris et al., 2023). On Instagram and Facebook, this practice is also possible – one can reply to a post and gain more likes than the original – but it is less visible and therefore less prized which reduces users' motivation. It is crucial to consider then why some platforms attract harsher reactions and create a more hostile culture than others. In relation to the character of women politicians' replies, this leads us to ask:

RQ: *Is there a platform effect which accounts for some of the incivility and abuse received by women politicians?*

Platforms and Incivility or Hostility

Previous studies have sought to examine the relationship between affordances and incivility or intolerance by considering how key features, such as allowing anonymity, moderation practices, or type of social connection they encourage impact user behavior (Rossini, 2022). Twitter, for example, makes it easy to register anonymous accounts which are often associated with more uncivil posts in a variety of online fora (Coe et al., 2014; Santana, 2014). Some have argued that anonymity is particularly problematic because users may become disinhibited or disconnected and may express themselves more harshly than they would in another setting (Rossini, 2022). On Twitter, the fact anyone can reply could mean that politicians' tweets attract those who disagree to a greater extent. Furthermore, its typical 240-character limit for tweets (unless they subscribe) can also limit the nuance of messages and can therefore come across as more hostile. Twitter's addition of the automatic quote tweet function in 2015 may also contribute to a more hostile culture. Quote-tweets enable users to display another user's tweet while adding a comment. This sometimes leads to "dunking," where users make sarcastic comments, potentially encouraging other users to join in. We argue that such practices form part of the platform vernacular on political Twitter, which contributes to a more hostile environment for political posts.

Evidence from previous comparative studies also shows that incivility and intolerance are more prevalent on Twitter compared to other platforms (Oz & Nurumov, 2022; Oz et al., 2018; Rowe, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2024) and others have suggested that the platforms policies and terms of service can exacerbate abuse and hateful content (Kornikoff, 2021).

Although none of these studies incorporate a gendered analysis, the wealth of previous research means we still expect that:

H1: *Twitter will contain the most incivility and abuse compared to the other platforms.*

Facebook and Instagram, on the other hand, have very different architectures and platform vernaculars. Facebook requires users to comment as themselves, meaning they are a named individual rather than an anonymous account (Rossini, 2022). Various authors have claimed that this encourages more rational discussion and less hostility (Freiss & Eilders, 2015; Jaidka et al., 2019). The less strict character limit on Facebook comments also offers more space for productive political discussion (Oz et al., 2018). It is possible to add a comment to another's post on Facebook and share it, however, since the platform is about connecting with friends rather than "followers" the motivations are often very different. On Facebook, arguments tend to play out in the comments, rather than being performatively shared with a wider audience. Previous research also suggests that women politicians' Facebook pages mostly attract individuals who already support their politics (Ross et al., 2015) so they may be less inclined to be overtly abusive.

Empirical studies provide a mixed picture of Instagram. Research has shown that women politicians have found Instagram particularly effective in campaigning and circumventing gendered stereotypes (Bast et al., 2022; Brands et al., 2021). There is evidence to suggest that it hosts abuse and harassment directed toward women in politics and does a poor job of moderating such content (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2024). Instagram comments also often give users the opportunity to harshly criticize women politicians (Pérez-Tirado et al., 2024). However, other studies argue that its affordances offer more opportunities to carefully curate political engagement to avoid backlash, such as posting on Instagram Stories which disappear after 24 h by default (Caldeira, 2021). There is also evidence that Instagram can host also offer a supportive environment for women politicians (Guidry et al., 2020; Pérez-Tirado et al., 2024). We therefore expect that:

H2: *Facebook and Instagram will contain more robust criticism, genuine questions and polite replies than Twitter.*

There is also a wealth of empirical evidence which demonstrates that social media can be a particularly hostile environment for women whereby women are often disproportionately targeted for online abuse and harassment (Fox et al., 2015; Jane, 2014; Megarry, 2014). Other studies have found that this is especially the case when they discuss feminist issues (Mendes et al., 2018; Sobieraj, 2020). Research has also demonstrated that certain platform affordances and architecture, such as content moderation policies of algorithms can enable social media platforms to become vehicles for misogynistic content (Fox et al., 2015; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Massanari, 2017). Moreover, research into platform differences suggests that sensitive topics might attract more incivility (Oz et al., 2018). We therefore expect that:

H3: *Original posts about gender or gendered issues will increase uncivil responses across all three platforms.*

Next, we outline our methodological approach to appraising how women politicians are treated on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Method

Data Collection

Our dataset contains 2380 replies to 186 posts from selected women politicians, 62 posts for each platform studied here. These politicians were selected if they were an elected member of the United Kingdom, Scottish or Welsh Parliaments, were active on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and if they posted identical posts across all three platforms. These three platforms were chosen as they are the most-used platforms by UK MPs (Statista, 2023). Politicians were deemed active if they had posted in the previous month. We included at least one politician from each of the main parties that have a national-level presence in their nation's parliament. This resulted in 18 MPs being included in the dataset – eight Labour MPs, four Conservative MPs, two Scottish National Party politicians, two Liberal Democrat MPs, one Plaid Cymru Member of Senedd (the Welsh Parliament) and one Green Party MP. The demographics of each MP in the dataset can be seen in Appendix.

The dataset was designed to capture all responses to the previous 10 posts by our selected politicians. Only post texts which had been posted identically across all three platforms were included. All MPs had open accounts across all three platforms, with no restrictions to replies on any platform. Ensuring that only identical posts were included in the dataset, however, was integral to our research design since we were aiming to account for any differences between platforms and isolate any potential platform effect in online abuse against women politicians. For example, if identical posts attract opprobrium on Twitter but not, say, Facebook, and this pattern was repeated at scale, this suggests that the platform affordances, cultures, or users, rather than the content of posts, or even the characteristics of the original poster, may be the key influencing factor in the way users respond to women politicians online. We note here, however, that this was based purely on the text of the post. As Instagram was included, there were very often the same images on the same posts on Twitter and Facebook also. However, as Instagram allows 10 pictures per post and Twitter only allows four, there may have been differences in the images overall which we do not account for here. We aimed to include the responses to the 10 most recent posts; however, for most women in our dataset, we gathered fewer than 10 because posting identically across all three platforms seemed to be relatively rare. Moreover, some politicians had only set up an Instagram account relatively recently, producing another limiting factor. However, each politician in the sample had posted at least one identical post across all three platforms, producing 186 posts, 62 per platform. All responses to each of these posts were included in our dataset, resulting in 2380 replies in the dataset. Across all platforms, there were an average of 13 replies per post. The highest number of replies to a post was 133, and the lowest was one. For Twitter, the average number of replies was 17, and the highest number of replies to a post was 133, and the lowest was one. For Facebook, the average number of replies was 15, and the highest number of replies to a post was 55, and the lowest was one.

Table 1. Krippendorf's Alpha scores for each variable

Uncivil	Insults	Competence/ Positon	Othering	Robust Criticism	Genuine Question	Polite	Support	OP Mentions Gender
0.8569	0.8530	0.7207	0.8057	0.6641	0.7240	0.7217	0.8759	0.9789

For Instagram, the average number of replies to a post was six, with the highest number of responses being 55 and the lowest being one. None of the original posts were uncivil or provocative. The original posts covered issues such as their views on proposed legislation, their everyday activities as representatives or personal posts about their home life.

The responses were then content analyzed. The first three variables drew upon Papacharissi's (2004) typology of incivility and measured whether the response was generally uncivil, whether it contained insults, and whether it questioned the competence or integrity of the politician. To capture gendered or intolerant responses, we furthermore measured whether the replies "othered" the MP in some way, based on our earlier work (Southern & Harmer, 2021). To capture other types of messages women politicians may receive, we also measured whether the replies contained what we term robust criticism and whether the messages contained genuine questions for the politician. Genuine questions refer to those which a representative can reasonably be expected to answer, even if they are rhetorical or pointed questions, such as questions about their work or views as opposed to unreasonable questions about their private life, for example. Finally, we measured whether the messages were polite and whether they contained support for the politician. We also measured whether the original post focused on gendered policies or issues.

All codes were coded as a binary by [author], for the presence of the communicative function being measured. For example, if the reply contained an insult toward the politician, it was coded as a 1 and if it did not it was coded as a 0. Ten percent of the sample was also coded by a second coder [author] to ensure intercoder reliability, after extensive meetings to pilot and refine codes and a separate sample of data. Krippendorff's Alpha inter-coder agreement scores were calculated. These results appear in Table 1. There was an acceptable level of agreement across each variable. As all Krippendorff's Alpha scores reached the acceptable level of agreement of over 0.66 (Krippendorff, 2004), the original codings by coder one were used to calculate the results here.

Data Analysis

Frequencies for each message type and cross-tabulations by message type were then produced. Finally, we produced multilevel binary logistic regression models for each message type as the dependent variable, controlling for Party and whether the original post explicitly mentioned gender or gender-related policy. A control for number of replies to each post was also added to the models. These were run in Stata 14, and all coefficients reported are odds ratios.

To better contextualize the kinds of abuse or incivility, we conducted a qualitative content analysis. We used the content analysis categories as a guide to help identify broad themes. To familiarize ourselves with the data, we read and re-read the replies carefully. Each post was qualitatively coded independently by the authors. This means

Table 2. Multilevel logistic regression models of factors associated with each message type (MP as group level).

	Uncivil (SE)^{sig}	Insults (SE)^{sig}	Competence (SE)^{sig}	Othering (SE)^{sig}	Robust Criticism (SE)^{sig}	Genuine Questions (SE)^{sig}	Polite (SE)^{sig}	Support (SE)^{sig}
FB (Ref)								
Instagram	0.33 (0.07)***	0.59 (0.15)*	0.84 (0.28)	0.30 (0.09)***	0.49 (0.11)***	0.50 (0.12)***	1.23 (0.18)	2.30 (0.32)***
Twitter	1.99 (0.23)***	2.18 (0.32)***	2.71 (0.54)***	1.78 (0.29)***	1.17 (0.17)	0.81 (0.13)	0.59 (0.07)***	0.53 (0.05)***
Con (Ref)								
Green	2.59 (1.98)	1.93 (1.42)	1.83 (1.67)	8.74 (8.50)*	0.18 (0.09)***	0.77 (0.23)	1.53 (1.21)	2.06 (1.12)
LD	0.42 (0.28)	0.24 (0.19)	0.29 (0.29)	1.26 (1.18)	0.29 (0.14)**	0.35 (0.18)*	1.87 (1.23)	3.43 (1.64)**
Lab	0.95 (0.41)	0.60 (0.27)	0.8 (0.51)	2.00 (1.23)	0.13 (0.04)***	0.51 (0.10)***	2.78 (1.28)*	4.16 (1.38)***
PC	0.38 (0.28)	0.31 (0.23)	0.24 (0.23)	1.23 (1.23)	0.10 (0.05)***	0.55 (0.14)*	2.08 (1.63)	3.74 (1.99)*
SNP	0.54 (0.35)	0.72 (0.48)	0.82 (0.69)	1.50 (1.34)	0.24 (0.11)***	0.99 (0.28)	1.03 (0.73)	2.99 (1.40)*
OP Mentions Gender	1.31 (0.37)	1.00 (0.39)	0.23 (0.16)*	4.37 (1.72)***	0.95 (0.37)	1.87 (0.48)**	0.48 (0.12)***	1.61 (0.36)*
Replies per post	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.01 (0.02)***	1.00 (0.02)***	1.00 (0.12)***	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.10)***	0.99 (0.08)***
Constant	0.24 (0.08)***	0.11 (0.04)***	0.03 (0.02)***	0.03 (0.02)***	0.50 (0.12)***	0.17 (0.03)***	0.26 (0.10)***	0.29 (0.08)***
N	2380	2380	2380	2380	2380	2380	2380	2380
McFaddens R^2	0.07	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.09	0.01	0.04	0.11
Rho	0.10	0.10	0.14	0.16	0.04	0.00	0.12	0.05

*= significance at ≤ .05 **= significance at ≤ .01 ***= significance at ≤ .00.

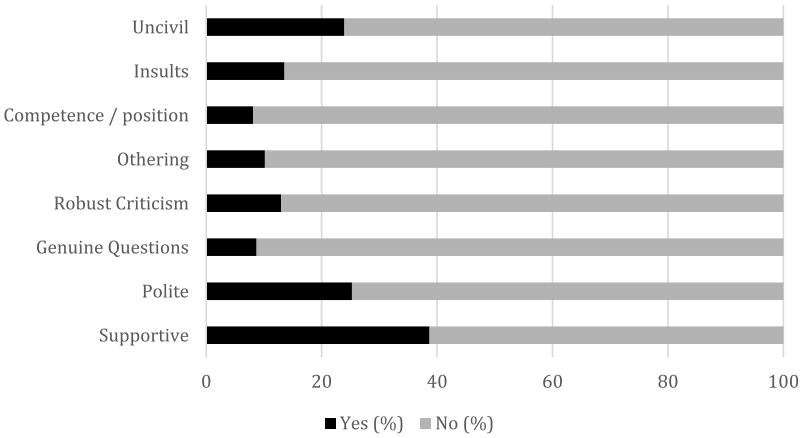
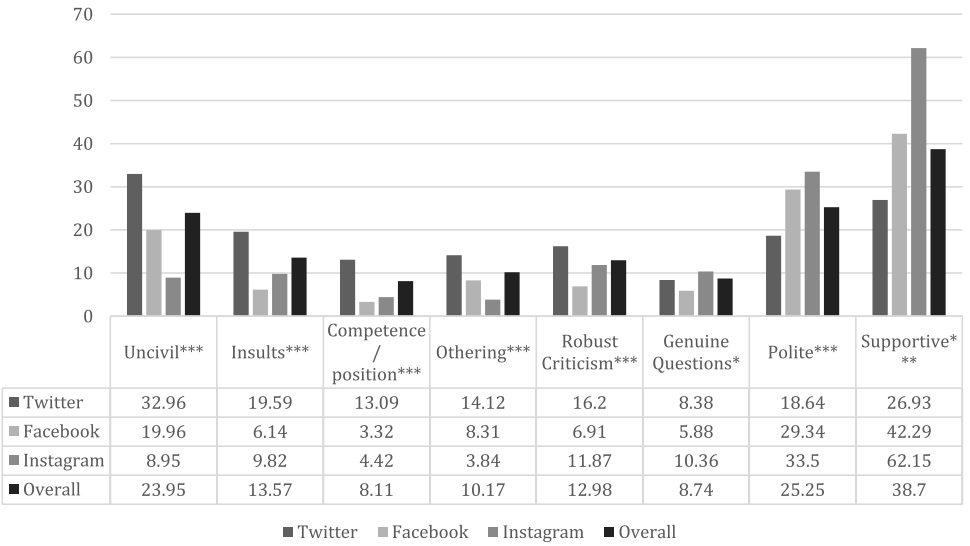


Figure 1. Response type frequency.

we produced informal notes highlighting instances where posts were hostile or supportive (for example). To ensure that the analysis was well founded and rigorous, the authors held frequent discussions where we adjudicated any disagreements, and discussed what the qualitative codes meant, and how they fit into the broader themes which corresponded to the content analysis. All replies to the original messages were analyzed in this way.

Results

Figure 1 displays the frequency of each message type in the sample. Around a quarter (24%) of all messages fell into the broad category of generally uncivil responses. This is higher than



	Uncivil***	Insults***	Competence / position***	Othering***	Robust Criticism***	Genuine Questions*	Polite***	Supportive***
Twitter	32.96	19.59	13.09	14.12	16.2	8.38	18.64	26.93
Facebook	19.96	6.14	3.32	8.31	6.91	5.88	29.34	42.29
Instagram	8.95	9.82	4.42	3.84	11.87	10.36	33.5	62.15
Overall	23.95	13.57	8.11	10.17	12.98	8.74	25.25	38.7

Figure 2. Percentage of each reply by message type and platform.

the headline number that has been seen in other studies; however, it is in line with evidence that suggests women politicians receive a higher level of incivility and particularly those with a higher following on social media (Harmer & Southern, 2021). Since all the women selected here were active across all three platforms and generally had a high following, this is not unexpected. Messages questioning the MPs' competence or position as an elected representative, insulting them in general, and messages that othered them and their identities were all fairly common, at between 8% and 14% overall. There was also some evidence of productive discussion in the comments received by MPs. Around 13% of messages received contained robust but civil criticisms of the MP or their political stances. Almost 10% contained genuine questions about their work or political views.

The results also indicated that a slightly higher proportion of messages were considered polite than were coded as uncivil. This would include messages politely asking questions, inviting politicians to events, or making them aware of other related information. Crucially, an even higher proportion of messages – almost 40% - were messages which showed support toward them. These messages included expressions of support for policies the women were advocating, speeches they had made, or simply supporting them personally by saying they appreciate their work. These results provide an important counterweight to previous work on women politicians' social media use (including our own) which, understandably, has tended to foreground negative experiences, and will be expanded upon in the qualitative analysis.

The analysis now considers the message type by platform. As Figure 2 shows, a clear pattern emerges. Twitter is the platform that attracts the majority of uncivil and othering replies to women politicians. Twitter is also where women received the least support, and where the fewest polite messages were found. This confirms our first hypothesis that Twitter would be the most hostile platform. Instagram, on the other hand, demonstrates a different pattern. Instagram appears to be a platform where most of the more "positive" interactions occurred. For example, most genuine questions were asked in Instagram replies, with around 10% containing these. There was also a lot of polite interaction and a high proportion of supportive responses, accounting for well over half of all responses on Instagram, partially confirming our second hypothesis. This is not to say that there was no incivility and insulting content; however, such messages accounted for considerably less than other platforms, more than a third less than Twitter and half as many as on Facebook. Overall, it appears that Instagram could provide a respite from the harsher communicative environment of Twitter and could perhaps be a space that is easier for women representatives to cultivate supportive networks.

Facebook, on the other hand, appeared to sit somewhat in the middle between the hostility of Twitter and the more supportive environment of Instagram. Politeness and support, however, did still outweigh uncivil responses which offers further partial support for our second hypothesis. Somewhat surprisingly, and contrary to our second hypothesis, the more politically productive aspects measured here were least common on Facebook. Robust criticism and genuine questions were both only half as common on Facebook as they were on Instagram. On some measures, Facebook was even less hostile than Instagram, having fewer insulting messages and slightly fewer messages questioning their competence. Overall, however, a clear pattern emerges that there is a platform effect for women politicians who are likely to experience the most hostility on Twitter and the largest degree of support on Instagram.

Next, we assess these patterns by running a series of multilevel binary logistic regression models, as seen in Table 2. These show that platform effect does hold when controlling for political party and whether the original post contained a reference to gender or a gendered issue, as well as the number of replies to each post. For each of the more "negative" message types modeled here, these were significantly more likely to be found on Twitter. Polite and supportive responses were far more likely to be found on Instagram and were statistically significant.

When it comes to the political party women belong to, there were few significant results for the more "negative" types of response, with the exception that Green MPs seemed to attract more othering responses than other party MPs. An important caveat, however, is that there was only one Green politician in our sample – Caroline Lucas, the Green Party's only MP, at the time of sampling. Overall, MPs from all other parties received less robust criticism and genuine questions than MPs from the Conservative Party, with the exception of SNP and Green MPs for genuine questions where the results were not significant. MPs from the Labor party appeared to receive almost twice as many polite responses compared to MPs from the Conservatives. Finally, MPs from the Liberal Democrats, Labor, Plaid Cymru and the SNP received between three and four times more supportive messages compared to Conservative MPs. This suggests perhaps that women from more "progressive" parties may receive more othering but also more support, suggesting a mixed picture for such representatives online. For Conservative women, the results show they receive more robust criticism but also less support, again suggesting a somewhat nuanced picture.

Contrary to our third hypothesis, the pattern of responses when the original post mentioned gender or gendered issues showed no statistically significant effect on incivility or insults. However, posts about gender did, in contrast, result in hugely increased examples of othering in the responses. Most of these replies came from people posting sexist messages, which will be expanded upon in the qualitative analysis. Such messages were almost twice as likely to attract supportive messages. They also seemed to spark other "positive" types of responses, being almost twice as likely to have genuine questions in response. This suggests that posting about gendered issues is perhaps somewhat polarizing in that it can attract more support but also more intolerant responses. There were fewer polite responses, also. Posting about gendered policy ideas and initiatives was, therefore, a double-edged sword for women politicians in the sample, attracting both supporters and haters. It should be noted here that the R^2s in all the models are relatively small, suggesting that there are other factors which may explain the differences and associations here. Still, overall, there is enough evidence here to support our first hypothesis, which is that Twitter is where the majority of negative responses toward women politicians can be found.

To some extent, coding comments for incivility, othering, insults, or support offers an overview of the kinds of replies politicians receive, however there can also be a good deal of variation in these broad categories. To demonstrate the complexity of the responses to women politicians, we conducted a qualitative content analysis to provide show the complexity of the data and to demonstrate the diversity within categories such as "othering" or "support." Contextualizing our results in this way is important because it gives more insight into how particular cultures can impact women in different online spaces.

Reading the Replies: A Qualitative Analysis

There is scant space to introduce a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the replies. In this section, we present some results which coalesced with three of the categories in the content analysis. These themes include "insults and othering," "genuine questions" and "support." These three themes have been chosen because they were identified more closely with the three platforms. The original spelling and grammar of comments have been retained.

Twitter: Insults and "Othering"

The content analysis showed that these categories were most obviously present on Twitter. Some "othering" messages were straightforwardly insulting and appeared to dehumanize the recipient:

"Parasite"

"Disgusting maggot!"

"Silly [cow emoji]"

Comparing politicians to animals was one way that the replies "othered" politicians. The third example here also shows that such "othering" can often be gendered, since "cow" is an insult reserved specifically for women in British English. Targeting representatives' identities is common in previous studies and shows that "othering" women often targets characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, or age amongst others (Southern & Harmer, 2019). Gender was the most prominent, as these examples demonstrate:

"Read the room, Torygirl."

"Deluded woman"

"Stop with the jealousy [name redacted], no body is going to pick you for a mistress . . . "

These examples refer explicitly to the politicians' gender, albeit some are potentially more abusive than others. The first infantilises the recipient by calling her a girl, while the second explicitly calls them a woman. The final comment is particularly problematic because it undermines the recipient by simultaneously sexualizing and calling her unattractive. Sexualizing references have been observed in several studies and serve to undermine women's political position (Esposito & Breeze, 2022). Some Twitter messages also women's intelligence and job performance:

"The problem is also the hopeless opposition. Nobody takes this wittering silly person seriously!"

"This entire speech was total gibberish from beginning to end."

"You're a hypocrite of the highest order."

"#ThickAsMince"

These comments all insulted the women in question, although they once again range from mild language to more abusive responses. The final comment is particularly harsh, accusing the politician of being stupid, while other comments refer to their perceived deficiencies as political representatives. These types of messages serve to undermine women politicians and have also been observed in the previous research on Twitter (see Southern & Harmer, 2019). Twitter, then, seems to be an environment where the cruder forms of incivility and abuse take place.

Facebook and Instagram: Genuine Questions and Civil Political Discussion

The content analysis also showed that people made use of social media to ask questions about political issues or engage in constructive political discussion. Although there was evidence of this across all three platforms, it was most common on Instagram, with Facebook a close second. Genuine questions refer to those a representative can reasonably be expected to answer, even if they are rhetorical or pointed questions. For example, asking, "how can people be expected to afford this policy?" could be interpreted as a rhetorical question. However, it is also a valid question to ask someone in public office, as opposed to questions about their private life or abusive questions such as "why are you so stupid?" Some comments ask questions related to the original post or policy positions in general:

"[name removed] is it possible to get any links to the amendments, documentation, etc., to share to friends who are enquiring about the contents?"

"Please tell me how ppl on average wage will pay for Heat pumps which are 5 times the cost of a boiler and less efficient?"

These messages demonstrate that followers on social media were keen to gain additional information about proposed policies that may affect them or what they can do to respond. While the second example might also be interpreted rhetorically, it is also the kind of question that citizens are entitled to ask their representative, which is why we have identified it as a "genuine question" despite its pointed nature. Other replies enquired about politicians' positions on various issues:

"Are you one of the 48 MPs supporting the #childrenfirst movement to get kids back to normal in schools? . . . "

"Are you gonna support all them old people whos houses are freezing in another beast from the east? . . . "

These examples demonstrate that political engagement often takes place on social media platforms and that polite or civil questioning is an important means of achieving it. The replies were also used to signal disagreement or to present criticism in a constructive way:

"Not on board with a citizen assembly. We need expertise in decision-making. We need proportional representation and more devolved government . . . '

"whilst there are some excellent proposals; there is also a lot of 'looking at this and looking at that!' That is unacceptable . . . "

These examples show that disagreement and criticism are often expressed in respectful and polite ways online, which can sometimes be forgotten in research that focuses on women politicians' experiences of social media. Our final theme demonstrates the even more underappreciated ability of social media platforms to allow users to express support for politicians whom they agree with or whose work they appreciate.

Instagram: "Support"

In many ways, "support" was the most interesting theme of them all, not least because it captured a range of responses to politicians. As the content analysis also showed, supportive comments were more likely to appear in replies to Instagram posts. Some messages expressed support for various issues that the politicians were posting about:

"This would make such a difference. So many dangerous men go on to harm women again and again with no consequences."

"Signed and shared. Thank you for your support of such crucial issues."

In these examples, people used the reply function to demonstrate their agreement and show appreciation that the politician is advocating for issues that posters perceive as important and beneficial. The replies also contain responses that acknowledged the hard work politicians' expressing appreciation for the contribution women make to the political process:

"And this is why I will always support you. Showing genuine support for your constituency. I will love to help in any way possible . . . ❤"

"[name removed] you and your team helped me regarding a disability matter which is still ongoing but your support did help, did fast forward things and did make people take me seriously! You have an amazing team and I'm always really thankful x."

These messages often seek to thank politicians for their work or praise their performance in parliament or during a broadcast interview. The final example is particularly instructive of supportive messaging, where the poster takes time to highlight a particular incidence of help that they received as a constituent. Some Instagram commenters go even further and express real affection or attachment to the politician to whom they are replying:

"Absolute star 🙌"

"You should be out prime minister."

"Well you are the rose we are lucky to have!"

Here, people offered praise and support on a more personal level, demonstrating Instagram's potential to allow politicians to generate and maintain a rapport with their followers and constituents. Although messages of support were present on all three platforms, Instagram seems to have attracted more supportive commentary in this sample.

Discussion: Different Platforms, Different Experiences

The content analysis showed that around a quarter of messages across all three platforms were categorized as uncivil and that while swearing, comments on appearance and hate speech were relatively infrequent, messages which were insulting, questioned the competence or position of women politicians, or targeted their identities were much more evident. When we compared across the platforms, Twitter appeared to attract the majority of uncivil, othering and hateful replies to women politicians. It was also where women received the least support and the fewest polite messages. In contrast, Instagram was less hostile, attracting more polite replies and a lot fewer uncivil and insulting messages than Facebook or Twitter. Well over half of all responses on Instagram were supportive of the MP in question.

Evidently, social media users feel particularly entitled to reply to those who are elected to represent them in whatever manner they see fit due to the perception that politicians ought to be responsive to criticism and questioning (Southern & Harmer, 2021; Ward & McLoughlin, 2020). Coupled with differences in political outlook and beliefs, this can make for adversarial interactions across the board. Given our results that show a disparity between replies to identical posts being displayed on three different sites, it is important to consider why Twitter is such a problematic space for women politicians to interact with the public, and why Instagram might offer an alternative experience.

One consideration is the user base of each platform. Research has shown that social media users are not representative and that certain platforms might attract younger people, while others are mainly populated by those who are already politically engaged (Hargittai, 2018). Data from the UK suggest that Twitter users are disproportionately male and middle or upper-class (Sloan, 2017). In contrast, Instagram use tends to be more associated with younger and female users (Caldeira, 2021; OFCOM, 2023). While there is some evidence to suggest that male users are more likely to be uncivil or exhibit trolling behavior on social platforms (Craker & March, 2016; Park et al., 2016), it is also important to consider other factors as well.

Our results, and those from previous studies, indicate that platform architectures are clearly important. As discussed earlier, the platform affordances on Twitter such as allowing anonymous accounts, character limits, and public posting can increase the likelihood of incivility and abuse online (Coe et al., 2014; Rossini, 2022; Santana, 2014). In contrast, Facebook encourages the use of real names and friends and family networks. Facebook and Instagram offer a range of different "reactions" options that users can call upon to express themselves including "like," "love," or "angry" to posts allowing for more nuanced responses (Highfield, 2016). Crucially, though, affordances can only offer a means for engagement and do not explain users' motivations for being more hostile on one platform than another, which is where platform vernaculars are an important consideration whereby users adapt their behavior not only to the affordances but also to the norms and cultures set by other users (Gibbs et al., 2015). Therefore, offering more positive ways of engaging with other users may contribute to a more supportive and civil culture on social media platform.

The results indicated that a slightly higher proportion of messages overall were categorized as polite than were coded as uncivil and an even higher proportion of messages – almost 40% - showed support toward women politicians. While there has been some research attempting to account for factors that drive the popularity of politicians online (see Vaccari and Nielsen, Vaccari & Nielsen, 2013) and other work on how political participation functions as a form of fandom around specific politicians (Dean, 2017); less attention has been paid to the ways online spaces offer opportunities for politicians to receive more mundane and ordinary messages of support and encouragement from their constituents or members of the public. As this study shows, the evidence we do have often comes from studies which sought to measure something else (see Guidry et al., 2020; Pérez-Tirado et al., 2024). The content analysis findings indicate that social media users (particularly on Instagram) do use platforms as a means of showing their support and appreciation for the work of individual politicians. This relatively under-researched phenomenon is therefore worthy of far more academic attention, particularly as it may help to bolster politicians' who otherwise feel that the social media landscape is hostile.

The small-scale nature of this project means that it necessarily has several limitations which make it difficult to generalize the results. Our sample was relatively small compared to other studies of online incivility directed toward politicians, because we were limited to comparing politicians who use all three platforms. It also means there could be some contextual factors which lead these women to receive particular kinds of abuse or support online, which cannot be accounted for in a study such as this, such as how the intersectional nature of online abuse. Additionally, our sampling strategy of selecting posts (and their replies) which were replicated across all three platforms resulted in a relatively low number of replies. This suggests that this practice (posting the same post across all platforms) might

not be a widespread, meaning that it might be difficult to replicate on a larger scale. The predominance of Twitter as a platform in British politics could also mean that these findings may not be as relevant beyond the UK. Again, further study in other international contexts is crucial here. Despite these limitations, we argue that this analysis suggests that there could be platform differences in online incivility and abuse which warrant further academic attention.

Crucially, these findings also highlight the importance of multi-platform research when it comes to studying the online harassment or exclusion of women in politics because politicians, much like other social media users, do not engage with platforms in isolation – they are part of a vibrant and heterogenous social media landscape where they use multiple platforms, at times simultaneously. If, as our analysis suggests, Twitter is particularly hostile, and by contrast Instagram may offer a safer space where constructive politics can cut through, this has important implications for the democratic function of social media and for representation more broadly. Politicians could therefore shape their communication strategies toward platforms which foster more constructive criticism or more polite and supportive messages, allowing them to connect with the views of their constituents but also cultivate spaces of support, making social media use more sustainable for them. This could be particularly important for the retention of a diverse range of political representatives in public life.

Conclusion

This study of responses to identical posts made by women politicians on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram showed a platform effect which contributes to higher and lower levels of incivility and abuse aimed at women politicians. The results showed that Twitter attract the majority of uncivil, othering and hateful replies and the least support. Instagram, in contrast, attracted more polite messages and a higher proportion of supportive responses than the other two platforms.

The findings show the need to consider incivility against political representatives across more platforms rather than just Twitter, as some platforms seem to offer some respite from the harsh environment that can be experienced on Twitter and may even be particularly useful for women politicians in finding a community of supporters. Facebook and Instagram may also be a space where some constructive engagement and discussion can take place in a less hostile environment than Twitter. These differences across platforms have important implications for the democratic function of social media and for political representation by enabling a more sustainable approach for women to engage online.

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

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [RS], upon reasonable request.

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Appendix. Demographics of the MPs in the Dataset (At Time of Data Collection)

MP Name	Party	Ethnicity	Age
Stella Creasy	The Labour Party	White	47
Rosena Allin-Khan	The Labour Party	WoC	47
Abena Oppong-Asare	The Labour Party	WoC	41
Emily Thornberry	The Labour Party	White	63
Dawn Butler	The Labour Party	WoC	54
Emma Hardy	The Labour Party	White	44
Alison McGovern	The Labour Party	White	43
Anneliese Dodds	The Labour Party	White	46
Mims Davies	The Conservatives	White	49
Dehanna Davison	The Conservatives	White	30
Caroline Dinenage	The Conservatives	White	52
Andrea Leadsom	The Conservatives	White	61
Layla Moran	Liberal Democrats	WoC	41
Daisy Cooper	Liberal Democrats	White	42
Hannah Bardell	Scottish National Party	White	41
Mhairi Black	Scottish National Party	White	29
Leanne Wood	Plaid Cymru	White	52
Caroline Lucas	The Green Party	White	63

WoC = woman of color.