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# Gendered campaign tweets: The cases of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump

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### ABSTRACT

Studies have found that female politicians tend to emphasize their masculine personality traits and feminine issues to counteract damaging gender stereotypes. As Twitter has emerged as a major digital PR tool for politics over the last decade, it provides a text to examine political candidates' PR strategies. Focusing on the cases of the two then-front runners for the 2016 U.S. presidential election – Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the present study examines differences in the ways in which they self-present and communicate with voters through their websites and Twitter. Content analysis of their websites and sampled tweets ( $N = 1295, C228$ ) reveals significant differences in their emphasis on traits and issues, main content of tweet, main source of retweet, multimedia use, and the level of civility. While Clinton emphasizes her masculine traits and feminine issues more than her feminine traits and masculine issues, Trump gives more weight to masculine issues, paying no particular attention to his traits. The differences were found consistently on their websites and on Twitter. Trump utilizes user-generated content as sources of his tweets significantly more often; while three quarters of Clinton's tweets are original content, half of Trump's tweets are retweets of and replies to citizens. The most popular content is opinion about public issues for Clinton, and others' endorsements or supportive quotes for Trump. One out of ten (10.5%) Trump tweets include uncivil wording. While Clinton actively utilizes multimedia such as graphics, videos, and photos, or links to other webpages (58.3%), 79.3% of Trump tweets are text-only.

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## 1. Introduction

In the recent decade, social media have been recognized as major public relation tools in many communication domains (Evans, Twomey, & Talan, 2011; Frame & Brachotte, 2015; Hong & Nadler, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Smitko, 2012). Twitter, in particular, has emerged as an essential part of political campaigning in the U.S. since Barack Obama's successful social media-driven campaigns in the 2008 and 2012 presidential races (Conway, Kenski, Wang, 2013; LaMarre & Suzuki-Lambrecht, 2013). As of the first quarter of 2016, Twitter has approximately 310 million monthly active users worldwide (Twitter, 2016). With their high penetration rate and information-sharing nature, political candidates' tweets can reach those who would be otherwise unreachable by conventional campaign tools. Candidates use Twitter to create favorable

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images, inform potential voters of their policies, and build a strong relationship with them. Research shows that candidates who used Twitter during the campaign received more votes than those who did not, particularly when Twitter was used in an interactive way (Kruikemeier, 2014). In particular, out-group candidates who gain little media visibility in the traditional media environment can benefit greatly from the new campaign tool (Christensen, 2013). Women candidates are more likely to have Twitter accounts, tweet more frequently, and emphasize different issues and personality traits than those of male candidates' (Evans & Clark, 2015; Gainous & Wagner, 2014).

The present study investigates if and how gender-specific strategies are reflected in current U.S. presidential candidates' biographies and issue lists on their campaign websites and tweets. In particular, we focus on the cases of Hillary R. Clinton and Donald J. Trump – the then front runners for the Democratic Party and the Republican Party nomination, respectively, and explore their differences. Based on content analysis of their websites as well as their tweets, we examine (1) if and how the two candidates differed in their selection and emphasis of personality traits and issues, (2) if the differences appeared consistently on campaign websites and Twitter, and (3) what other differences exist in terms of their tweeting styles.

## 2. Literature review

American politicians strive for self-promotion, voter interaction and mobilization through Twitter and other social media. In the 2016 U.S. presidential race, social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are called key battlegrounds (McCabe, 2015). Democrats have been generally considered more social-media savvy than their Republican counterparts particularly in presidential races (Pew Research Center, 2012), but the party gaps seem to be disappearing in the Congress (Peterson, 2012).

Gender is a key factor that can influence politicians' social media campaigns. Traditional social role theory posits that men and women are assumed to have different personality traits; men are expected to be strong, tough, assertive, competent, instrumental, and achievement-oriented (so-called masculine traits), whereas women are assumed to be warm, caring, understanding, compassionate, expressive, and family-oriented (so-called feminine traits; Banwart, 2004; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). These stereotypical gender role perceptions, which are often reinforced by media coverage, generally work to female politicians' disadvantage as politics is a domain for masculinized behaviors and communication styles (Meeks, 2012). Voters think so-called masculine characteristics such as aggressiveness and leadership are more vital than so-called feminine traits to perform the role of high-ranking officials (Banwart, 2010; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Smith, Paul, & Paul, 2007), and uninformed voters use candidates' gender as a cue to judge if they will win elections (Rosenwasser & Dean, 1989) or if they are able to perform well in office handling tough political issues (McDermott, 1998).

To counteract the unfavorable gender bias, female politicians tend to actively describe their favorable personality traits and particularly emphasize their masculine traits while downplaying their feminine qualities (Brooks, 2013; Lee, 2013). For example, congresswomen in the U.S. were found to strategically frame themselves as tough fighters through their official biographies (Lee, 2013). Female politicians are more likely than male politicians to put on formal suits, post professional-looking photos, and use male voiceovers in their campaign ads and websites (Trent & Friedenberg, 1991; Williams, 1994).

Women candidates discuss political issues more actively than their male counterparts to demonstrate their expertise (Evans, Cordova, & Sipole, 2014). However, voters tend to evaluate issue skills based on candidates' gender; so-called masculine issues that are stereotypically assumed to be better handled by men include economy, military, foreign affairs, technology, science, crime, terrorism, and gun problems, while so-called feminine issues for which women are perceived to be more suitable include education, health, human right, women's rights, animal right, child care, poverty, arts, environment, and social welfare (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Witt, Paget, & Matthews, 1994). While masculine issues are typically regarded as more important, particularly for higher offices, Major and Coleman (2008) have found that candidates are perceived more positively by voters and the news media when they deal with gender-congruent issues (e.g., women deal with feminine issues) regardless of their real abilities or experiences. This allows some female candidates to use the stereotypes to their advantage; by highlighting feminine issues, women can distinguish themselves from men and gain more favorable perceptions (Herrnson, Lay, & Stokes, 2003; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Petrocik, 1996; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). Studies show that women candidates are more likely than their male counterparts to discuss policy issues on Twitter, particularly focusing on women's issues (Evans & Clark, 2015). As women are still at disadvantage in politics, it is likely that female candidates adopt different strategies in deciding on what personality traits and issues to emphasize during campaigns.

Although gender stereotypes affect voters for both Republican and Democratic candidates (Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009), the effects are limited by the relevance of party cues (Hayes, 2011). Female politicians are perceived as more liberal than their male counterparts (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; King & Matland, 2003), and voters often unconsciously associate women with the Democratic Party because feminine issues have been generally "owned" by the party (Petrocik, 1996). Due to these double assumptions from gender and party, it is said that Democratic women discussing feminine issues are at more of an advantage in terms of perceived expertise than Republican women who emphasize the same issues (King & Matland, 2003; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009).

Hillary R. Clinton, the then-front runner of the Democratic Party for President in the 2016 U.S. election, has been known for her strong image (McGinley, 2009). When she first ran for presidential nomination in 2008, she criticized her rival Barack Obama for not being tough enough to do the job, while keeping her strong stance toward Iran. It was said that she could gain white males' support because she was "willing to battle and engage in rough play like one of the boys" (Eisenstein,

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