WOMEN LEADERS AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION: GENDER STEREOTYPING OF FEMALE POLITICIANS ON TWITTER

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ABSTRACT

Digital media has evolved into the most comprehensive space of political communication. Many politicians utilise social media platforms to extend their political discourse, and the public has exhibited divergent responses. However, female political leaders are often subjected to a unique pattern of reception distinct from that of their male counterparts. This research employs qualitative content analysis and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to draw gender-specific inferences from the Twitter discourse of three prominent female leaders in India: Priyanka Gandhi, Mayawati Smriti Irani. It explores the relationship between their digital discourse and the scope of performative gender in modern-day political communication. Through findings incorporating relevant points of intersection between attitudes of misogyny and the popular conception of leadership, it foregrounds the key concept of gender trolling in digital communication. In doing so, the research signifies a predominantly discriminative digital media that delineates the growth of egalitarian politics.

Keywords: **Female leaders, political communication, Twitter, gender, stereotyping**

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented growth of digital platforms in recent years has paved the way for the growth of political communication also. Politicians utilise the accessibility and popularity of social media to mobilise support for their political discourse. However, the ease of interpersonal communication on such platforms exposes public personas to the risk of becoming an object of ridicule. Female political leaders, in particular, are subjected to a different standard of evaluation compared to their male counterparts (Rheault et al., 2019, p. 2). Users isolate distinct aspects of their gender identity to create a discursive discussion that transgresses the boundaries of their political discourse. Female power-holders face denigration and belittlement for multiple reasons, the most important of which happens to be the social construction of feminine traits seen as an obstruction of political competence (Rheault et al., 2019, p. 2). Hence, although political communication should reserve itself to the precinct of socio-political dialogue, it has mushroomed into a repository of gender trolling and gender discrimination.

Much of the gender trolling evident in female leaders' political discourse results from gendered leadership stereotypes that automatically assigns women to an imaginary set of rules and regulations (Aaldering and Van Der Pas, 2018, p. 2). It presumes that an ideal leader should conform to the socially accepted conventions of leadership, which do not take into account female traits at all (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 308). Stereotypes attributed to women continue to lack the traits that citizens desire in their ideal leader, and the reinforcement of the same in political communication deems all female leaders unfit and/or undesirable (Aaldering and Van Der Pas, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, this usually finds its expression in digital communication in the form of internalised misogyny and sexist gender trolling. Female leaders are objectified based on their physical appearance and social conduct. The continuous cycle of reinforcing prejudiced gender identities and suppressing female leaders' attempts to overcome the same is a significant hindrance in developing a substantial political discourse surrounding women politicians.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Gendered Identity of Female Leaders
Feminism and the fight for equal rights have gained considerable momentum in recent

years. However, society has not seen equitable success in this sphere in establishing gender-neutral politics (Aaldering and Van Der Pas, 2018, p. 1). The discourse on female leaders and their political identity is based on the understanding that their public footing is not regarded in the same context as their male counterparts. Female leaders are often subjected to a distinguished reception that seems to overstep their authority as political decision-makers and question the particulars of their personal/familial space.

It is important to note that the media is an elaborate form of political communication (Gupta et al, 2020). It plays an essential role in the creation and propagation of an individual's political identity. Mainstream political communication tends to identify female leaders in a limited paradigm – particularly in terms of their role as daughters, sisters, mothers and wives, all of which bear no significance to their official discourse as political spokespersons. Gendered identity, in this sense, becomes an attribute that precedes and determines a female leader's contributions to any discursive situation (Ponton, 2010, p. 196). A leader's gender identity is further pushed to the centre stage when she is called a "woman prime minister" or "woman leader" (Trimble, 2018).

Furthermore, female leaders have to address the buzzing debate regarding their domestic responsibilities being compromised to promote their political objectives (Ponton, 2010, p. 199). The social construction of their identities is based on a communal scale of characteristics like compassion and warmth, whereas the same does not apply to their male counterparts (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 308). Moreover, female leaders risk representing an unconventional and pushy 'feminist' figure due to their public discourse as an ambitious female leader (Ponton, 2010, p. 199). Studies in social psychology place this social construction of women in the context of the female stereotype. Stereotypical gender identity becomes even more prominent when the discourse focuses on the female family members of male politicians, such as their wives, sisters or daughters. Transcending the boundaries of a familial role and entering into the public domain violates the established gender role attributed to a wife/sister/daughter (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 309). Thus, political dialogue involving

female leaders remains influenced by the social construction of their identity, which may or may not resonate with their proclaimed political identity.

Gender Stereotyping and Political Leadership

The aspect of strength and how the same is perceived differently regarding men and women plays a pivotal role in this discourse. Eagly and Karau (2002) contend that there is a prejudice towards female political leaders owing to the incongruency between the common understanding of 'leadership' and the stereotypical image of women as the "weaker sex" (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 307). Traits such as 'gentle', 'non-competitive', weak' and 'emotional' are levied against women to justify the assumption that they cannot handle the brute system of politics or take decisive action in matters of the state (Aaldering and Van Der Pas, 2018, p. 5).

There is also a difference between the perception of a man's leadership and a woman's leadership. Female leaders are associated with better skills in handling "feminine" departments like education, environment and healthcare, whereas male leaders are entrusted with "tough" departments like defence military, foreign policy and security (Ritchie, 2013, p. 106). Socially constructed stereotypes like this favour men for leadership roles and restrict women to 'nurturing' ones (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 308). However, that does not necessarily mean that associating women with integrity and honesty instilled the belief of the same among citizens. In other words, citizens do not necessarily perceive female politicians as honest and decent (Aaldering and Van Der Pas, 2018, p. 6). When women usurp powerful roles that are generally assigned a masculine nature, they are perceived as violent and disruptive to the social spectrum. Some researchers note that female leaders have to compromise with their gender identity to become successful in politics because they ought to have qualities of 'toughness' and 'decisiveness' while simultaneously maintaining qualities of femininity to appease the public. Since emulating stereotypically male features attracts a negative impression for female politicians, they have to strike a balance between masculinity and femininity in their political discourse (Atkinson, 1984, p.

116). For instance, Margaret Thatcher, in an interview following her maiden speech in the House of Commons, explicitly discusses how she loves cooking and taking care of her kids when asked about how she manages her familial responsibilities along with her political ones (Ponton, 2010, p. 199).

The Female Face – Social Construction of Physical Attributes
Mainstream media heavily relies on female leaders' physical attributes, marital status, and personal qualities to report on their political discourse. The focus of media coverage dwindles from a leader's policy decisions to her attributes when the subject is female (Ritchie, 2013, p. 106). While the social construction of a prominent man's identity is exclusively based on his public discourse, women must be held accountable for their personality traits and physical appearance. The public assigns specific roles to men and women wherein physical stereotypes emphasise masculine identity as strong and feminine identity as weak but sexually superior/attractive (Diekman and Eagly, 2000). Close attention to women leaders' clothing, height, weight, and makeup is reflected in recent news coverage of political campaigns (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 313). Thus, physical appearance is an instrumental metric for candidate evaluation, particularly in female political leaders. This may stem from the "physical appearance stereotype", which contends that attractive people are inherently more poised, skilled and successful than non-attractive people (Hart, Ottati and Krumdick, 2011, p. 182).

If a female leader's appearance does not correspond to women's commonly held gender stereotype as compassionate and caring decision-makers, voters hold her accountable for being an ineffective leader. Words like 'ugly', 'senseless female' and 'baby' are often used to depict the discourse of women in politics despite the annotations being irrelevant to their political identity (Rego, 2018, p. 478). Moreover, the emphasis on physical attributes and the presupposed assumption that women only care about issues about 'hair, husband and hemline' undermines their accomplishments in public politics (Duerst-Lahti, 2006, p. 37). An explicit example of this situation was seen in Hilary Clinton's Presidential campaign, wherein she

was bid against her husband's successful 1992 presidency and regarded as a "threat" to American society. This was expressed through explicit cartoons and illustrative depictions of her as a shark, a deceiving liar "with a Pinocchio nose", an oversized head with a large mouth and so on. Clinton's female face was clearly used to suppress her political power through the means of physical and sexual aggression (Ritchie, 2013, p. 104).

Women Leaders and Their Presence in Political Communication
Digital media is the most classified source of political communication in the 21st century. Trimble (2018) explains how female leaders are subjected to stereotypical metaphors and robbed their political agency. Social media comments reinforce metaphors of love and marriage to justify the social construction of women's identity. Citizens often isolate aspects of individual identity and undermine the political agency of female leaders on the grounds of their personal life. Issues like their marital status, which have no role in their political campaign, are often isolated and targeted (Ritchie, 2013, p. 106). This reinforces the belief that women belong to the domestic sphere of the family and the home. By reiterating metaphors of love and marriage in a female leader's discourse, she is essentially pushed back into the domestic terrain even in the context of a public (political) one (Trimble, 2018).

Moreover, sexism and misogyny is a notable aspect of female leaders' presence in modern-day political communication. Their gender identity is used as an excuse to assume their lack of capacity to perform in a powerful position (Ritchie, 2013, p. 106). For instance, Donald Trump denied Hilary Clinton's calibre as his opponent in the 2016 General Elections by saying that she did not have the "presidential look" (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 305). Tweets, memes, comments and other common fields of political communication in social media were indeed found to foster gender stereotypes proclaiming women like Clinton to be unsuitable for a prominent leadership role such as that of the presidency. Clinton was awarded a sexist representation on traditional and new media during the election campaign (Ritchie, 2013, p. 114). This suggests that society is keen on propagating intransient gender codes through gender

stereotypes, metaphors of the weak and assumptions about the inferiority of women in politics.

Interrelation between Online and Offline Misogyny

While this paper primarily focuses on the online trajectory of gender trolling and misogyny, it is difficult to deny that social media platforms are an extension of offline gender-based violence in society. A 2017 poll conducted by Amnesty International contends that 41% of women who were victims of online gender trolling have also felt a potential threat to their physical safety on at least one occasion (Ging and Siapera, 2018, p. 516). Moreover, digital platforms not only facilitate the existing forms of misogyny but also create new ones that seemingly tend to trap women in the "neoliberal discourses of self-responsibility and surveillance" (Ging and Siapera, 2018, p. 517). It compels female leaders to monitor both their online and offline presence, thus making online manifestations of misogyny all too real.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Gender and Feminism

Gender is not a stable identity. It is defined regarding stylised repetition of activities attributed to particular sex constituted in a particular time frame. The social temporality of gender makes it a flexible attribute of human life. Moreover, gender is mainly dependent on the mundane activity of bodily gestures and movements, which creates the illusion of a gendered self (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Thus, gender as a medium of identity formation is neither fixed nor unchanging. The feminist theory recognises the temporality of gender and refutes naturalistic expectations of women's discourse in society. It is important to note that feminism does not deny the natural dimensions of sex but only reinstates that the same is distinct from how the body comes to bear societal and cultural meanings (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression (Hooks, 1987, p. 26).

Moreover, feminism is not a lifestyle or a ready-made identity that one can easily step into. Defining it as a movement that has a specific goal adds to its exploration and analysis, both of which are crucial aspects of feminism in its practical functioning in society

(Hooks, 1987, p. 27). Feminism has seen several mutations over time. Cyberfeminism, the early online manifestation of feminist struggle, advocates for the worldwide expansion of traditional feminist approaches through "unlimited online activism" (Willem and Tortajada, 2021, p. 63).

Misogyny

Misogyny is more than just a deep-seated hatred for women because this definition implies that misogynistic attitudes are a personal problem. Kate Manne (2017) explains that misogyny is a formalised set of reservations that women have to face because they are women in what is known to be a man's world (Yoon, 2017, p. 109). It is also important to note that misogyny is not the same as sexism. The latter is the school of thought that capitalises on the natural differences between men and women to inflict cultural/societal meanings. The former acts as an enforcement strategy which maintains the sexist discourse in society (Yoon, 2017, p. 110). Thus, although both are somewhat interdependent, this discourse shall view them as separate social concepts.

Locating Feminism in Politics

Patriarchal structures use the physiological aspect of sex to justify men's superiority and consequently, women's deprivation of opportunities. This is based on the understanding that men and women do not and should not enjoy equality of power and privileges. Simone De Beauvior illustrates the condition of women in places of authority by outlining the opposition between the sovereign self (male) and the objectified other (female). Men are considered as de-facto operators of power, whereas women are subjected to the experience of oppression that they intrinsically internalise in the form of a communal reality (De Beauvoir, 1953, p. 11). Feminism refutes this very internalised idea of men being the ideal bearers of power because women are different from men. It contends that women can be "different" yet can participate in political discussions at the same time (De Beauvoir, 1953, p. 175). Scholars like MacKinnon (1982) have also expressed similarities between Marxism and Feminism because both are theories essentially concerned with power and its distribution (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 516). Hence, it is interesting to see how feminism operates in

the institution of politics, primarily associated with the power play. Marxism contends that social arrangements of patterned inequality can be internally rational yet unfair. The same applies to the presence of women in politics because although their participation is meant to bridge disparities between male and female power-holders, the same often induces inequality in its practice. The aforementioned disparity between the treatment of men and women in positions of power can be studied to analyse a concept called 'gender trolling'.

Gender trolling

According to Whitney Phillips, trolling refers to a disruptive practice of adding incendiary comments or derogatory rhetorical questions to an online discussion to create strong emotional responses from the target audience. Gender trolling is a relatively new subset of online trolling whereby groups of people use sexist insults and pejorative terms to comment on an individual's physical or sexual identity (Mantilla, 2013, p. 564). Online gender trolling shares many commonalities with offline harassment because both patrol gender boundaries and isolate women in a male-dominated environment to prevent them from occupying equitable roles (Mantilla, 2013, p. 568).

Gender trolling is a significant part of this discourse that is elaborated upon through a careful analysis of tweets, comments, photographs, memes and online discussions on Twitter at large. Although there are many social media platforms considerable in this approach, Twitter in particular has been widely criticised for the normalised expression of hate speech and hostility in recent years. Its communicative structure is found to promote easy public tagging, which then leads to disproportionate trolling of female figures (Ringrose, 2018, p. 652)

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this research study are outlined as follows.
1. To examine if the discourse surrounding the three women politicians on Twitter constructs gender-based stereotypes.
2. To analyse the introductory discourse of the three women politicians in their first month of establishing an online presence on Twitter across different time frames.
3. To explore the forms of gender identity construction surrounding the three women politicians on Twitter.
4. To investigate if the women politicians are subject to gender-based abuse, harassment or threats.

METHODOLOGY

This research study employs a qualitative conventional content analysis method operating within the feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA). Qualitative conventional content analysis is ideal for research that aims to uncover a particular phenomenon, which in this case, is the public reception of three Indian female political leaders in digital communication. Unlike quantitative discourse analysis, qualitative research employs an inductive approach to uncover research themes and the inferences drawn in addition to that in a calculated method of data analysis. Its data sampling does not depend upon "probabilistic approaches" but on a purposively selected area of research that can effectively aid the resolution of research questions under investigation (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p. 319). At the same time, critical discourse analysis acknowledges the importance of linguistics and discourse in social scientific research (Lazar, 2005, p. 4).

Moreover, the FCDA also promotes a complex understanding of a political perspective on gender, which operates within the framework of power and ideology. It critiques discourses that allow the sustenance of a patriarchal social order, thus uncovering the gendered functioning of social groups (Lazar, 2005, p. 5). The research carries out qualitative content analysis through the lens of feminism and other critical discourse theories. It employs thematic analysis to draw meaningful inferences about the public's immediate response to the political persona of three female leaders, namely Mayawati, Smriti Irani, and Priyanka Gandhi, as witnessed on a popular social media platform (Twitter). Tweets from the official account of three national-level female leaders and the replies in the form of words, memes, photographs, gifs, hashtags were used for the data collection of this research to analyse the implications of the discourse surrounding women as power-holders in political communication from May 6, 2010 to Feb 22, 2019.

The collection was carried out over a period of their introductory month on the Twitter platform. Misogyny detection of tweets was based on the classification of comments into active offensives to a specific person and/or generic offenses to a category of persons. Certain large-scale themes applicable to the researched included stereotyping and objectification of women, derailing discourse from political to other agendas, discrediting women due to gender characteristics, downplaying positive qualities only due to gender stereotyping and so on (Shushkevich and Cardiff, 2019, p. 1161).

All relevant tweets and their replies that served the purpose of the study were extracted, classified, categorised and coded into three categories. First, the research focuses on the social construction of gendered physical attributes specifically in the case of female leaders. Second, it focuses on the discourse of the public response to female leadership in politics. Third, it focuses on the development of a gendered identity of female politicians and its reception in the mainstream online user base.

Physical attributes serve as a socially accepted criterion of judgement to form an opinion on public figures. In this case, the digital argument surrounding female leaders' physical appearance is taken as a reference to study the role played by the same in the reception of their political discourse. Belittlement based on selective physical traits is also a common trope of internalised misogyny, which is why the social construction of gendered physical attributes is a necessary code in this research. Assessment of a political leader is always concerned with his/her leadership attributes. Hence, the second code aims to establish a link between gendered leadership stereotypes and the public reception of female leaders' leadership qualities.

Lastly, the third code is essentially targeted towards analysing the role played by gender in female leaders' digital discourse. Thus, it is important to note how digital communication is/is not generating distinct gender identities that propagate sexism and misogyny.

CODE CATEGORIES	THEMES
Social Construction of gender-based physical attributes	Fair, attractive, masculine, ugly, dark, fat
Social Construction of gender-based leadership attributes	Tough, decisive, strong, Weak, feeble, inefficient
Social Construction of gender-based identity	Wife, Daughter, Sister, Mother

A total of 70 original tweets made up the corpus of the primary data based on which the researcher classified distinct themes for analysis. The extracted data was filtered to collect valuable data about the public discourse on female leaders in political communication and serve the specific purpose of the study. User attitudes towards the online presence of female leaders distinct from their male correspondents were analysed to contribute to the research findings. A comprehensive discourse was built based on said findings, and a conclusion regarding the focus area of the research topic was reached.

6. Analysis

The research explores three female political leaders' initial social media discourse and its reception in mainstream Indian society. Tweets from the official Twitter handles of Priyanka Gandhi, Mayawati and Smriti Irani have been taken as references for the purpose of this study.

The three politicians mentioned above are essentially regarded as thought leaders and political personalities of importance. Their public discourse is targeted towards social/political events, and any research excluding the filtered consideration of misogyny and sexism should expect public criticism based on their political discourse only. However, studying the same in the context of a gendered social order reveals multiple findings of the position of female leaders in political communication.

Codes
The researcher selected three codes to represent the instances of misogyny, sexism and gender stereotyping in the public reception of female political leaders in their first month of activity on Twitter.

Table 1. Reception of Priyanka Gandhi

Code Categories	Keywords and Phrases
Physical Attributes	"like Indiraji" "Suit boot wali", "Kabhi Tiger Shroff toh kabhi fardeen khan" (Sometimes Tiger Shroff sometimes Fardeen Khan), "Lady Kejriwal", "nose resembles her granny's",
Leadership	"दूसरी इंदिरा" (second Indira), "Female pappu", "Indira the dictator", "Man with vision", "Pappu pinky", "chorni", "Bahen Priyanka"
Gendered Identity	"Rani sahiba" (queen), "madam, "Chor ki biwi", "Pinky", "Didiji", "daughter of moblyncher", "Gaddar ki biwi" (traitor's wife), "प्यारी पोती" (dearest granddaughter)

Table 2. Reception of Mayawati

Code Categories	Keywords and Phrases
Physical Attributes	"Hathi", "hathni", "behenji", "ugly lady", "daravana" (scary), "photoshopped Mayawati", "bhains" (buffalo)
Leadership	"Iron lady", "Future of India", "future PM", "Jai Bhim", "Dalit neta", "boss behen", "anpadh gawar" (uneducated illiterate)
Gendered Identity	"दौलत की बेटी", "behenji", "buaji", "behen maya", "auntiji", "sushri"

Gender-based Physical Attributes

Replies to Priyanka Gandhi's Twitter discourse display a dominant focus on her physical attributes, particularly towards her short hair, "fair" skin (Apr 10 2019) and the shape of her nose. (Mar 12, Mar 17, Mar 21, Mar 25, Mar 26, Apr 6 2019) Her political existence is reduced to her physical resemblance with her grandmother (former PM Indira Gandhi). Moreover, comments aggressively troll her for having a masculine appearance by comparing her to male politicians and Bollywood actors. (Mar 12, Mar 25, Mar 26 2019).

Mayawati's physical appearance is a major focal point in the replies to her Twitter discourse. Users accuse her of using a photoshopped image in her display picture (Jan 22, Feb 9, Feb 11, Feb 13, Feb 14 2019) and trying to look younger through the same (Jan 22, Feb 7, Feb 13 2019). They often use derogatory animalistic terms to define and demean her appearance.

Gender-based Leadership Attributes

The majority of the comments on Priyanka Gandhi's tweets address her resemblance with Indira Gandhi to draw parallels between her tough, decisive grandmother and herself. (Mar 12, Mar 14, Mar 18, Mar 25, Apr 10 2019) Her leadership is seldom viewed independently because she is constantly equated with other notable figures of her family, i.e. her brother Rahul Gandhi and husband, Robert Vadra.

Comments on Mayawati's tweets address her as the saviour of Indian Dalits and hail her discourse as a victory of Ambedkarism ("Jai Bhim"). Users regard as "Buaji" out of respect and express their desire to see Mayawati as the Prime Minister. However, comments also troll her for tweeting in English, supposedly calling her "uneducated" and incapable of the same (Jan 22, Jan 26, Feb 7, Feb 9, Feb 12, Feb 13, Feb 19, Feb 20 2019). Many users accused her of corruption and accused her party of using Dalit vote bank to appease the public.

Gender-based Identity

Replies on Priyanka Gandhi's tweets reiterate her identity as Rahul Gandhi's sister, Robert Vadra's wife and Indira Gandhi's granddaughter. The keyword "behen Priyanka" (Mar 25, Apr 4) is common in her Twitter reception. The comments also question her for Rahul Gandhi's political motives and her husband's corruption charges, thus leaving her identity side lined.

Mayawati's gender identity is a huge part of her Twitter discourse. The majority of the users regard her as "Behenji" and "Buaji" which seems to have both positive and negative connotations. The terms "behenji" and "buaji" have been used to motivate her political discourse and ridicule her indigenous personality online.

233

Furthermore, the researcher finds that none of the above codes formulated to study gender trolling and feminism in political communication is applicable in Irani's limited discourse. Poor internet accessibility, the unpopularity of Twitter in political communication and Irani's limited role in politics are some of the key reasons behind her underwhelming Twitter discourse.

Role of Gender in Political Communication

The research study reveals many aspects of gender politics playing within the field of political communication. Studying user behaviour in response to the Twitter discourse of prominent female political leaders establishes distinctive social practises and prejudices that deem women's political discourse undeserving of serious consideration. Users tend to isolate gendered aspects of female leaders' identity to side line their political discourse and shift focus onto relatively irrelevant matters of interest. Hence, stereotypical perceptions about women and female leadership continue to govern political communication today. Gendertrolling appears to be a significant aspect of modern-day political communication, which was not the case a few years ago. Analysing Smriti Irani's Twitter discourse alongside that of Priyanka Gandhi and Mayawati substantiates the same. A UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women recently summarised the implications of sexism and misogyny, wherein it was said that public denigration of women primarily aims to preserve traditional gender roles and maintain structural inequalities between the sexes. The same can either take the shape of sexist verbal attacks seen in present-day digital communication or commonplace acts of sexual harassment of women (Barker and Jurasz, 2019, p. 102).

Thus, while digital communication does provide an accessible space for political leaders to report information of interest and mobilise popular support, gender politics and its social consequences on the public discourse of women do not conform with the idea of political communication as a level-playing field for all.

FINDINGS
Name-calling
1. Female leaders like Priyanka Gandhi and Mayawati are labelled with distinct names to either criticise their political discourse or address it sarcastically.
2. Priyanka Gandhi is termed as "fake" and a "cheater" with regards to her association with the Gandhi family (Dec 3 2019). People also deem her as a thief, a corrupted leader, a scammer, an anti-national.(Mar 12 2019, 71).
3. Users call Priyanka names like "female pappu", "ladies pappu", "pappu pinky", "pinky aunty" and "chor ki biwi" as demeaning slurs concerning her relationship with Rahul Gandhi (brother) and Robert Vadra (husband). Mayawati is also accused of corruption by using words like "chorni" and "bhrashtachari ki devi."
4. Users sarcastically denote Priyanka as "madam", "rani sahiba" and "suit boot wali" to mock her apparent high-class status. Similar terms like "madam", "mohtarma" and "ma'am" are used with a sarcastic tone to mock Mayawati's discourse.
5. Comments call Priyanka a "witch" in response to her tweet expressing solidarity with female Aanganbadi workers (Mar 24 2019). In contrast to this, users depict Mayawati as the "iron lady", "boss behen" and "next PM" of India.
6. Users accuse Priyanka of using the Gandhi family name to mobilise political support despite being married to Robert Vadra. Comments deem that she does not have the right to use her maiden name anymore.
7. Users use gendered references such as "behen", "aunty", "sister Priyanka","didiji", "jijji" and "bitiya" to address Priyanka Gandhi. Similar terms like "buaji", "sushri", auntiji", "BMW" (Behen Mayawati) and "behenji" are used to address Mayawati too. While Priyanka being referred to as "behen" points to her relationship with Rahul Gandhi, Mayawati's reference as "buaji" is used to address her public discourse and mock her physical appearance.

Mockery of Lingual Expression and Education
1. Priyanka Gandhi's initial digital communication was in English. She was ridiculed and attacked for using English as a medium of expression instead of Hindi. Names like "pappu" and "pinky" were

used to chastise her for not inheriting her grandmother's intelligence.

2. Priyanka quickly moved to post tweets in Hindi, which did not resolve users' primary concerns. She was mocked for using Hindi with particular emphasis on her elitism and "English lineage".

3. Interestingly, Mayawati was mocked for her tweets in English. However, she did not shift her language of tweets to Hindi completely. She continued to swap her digital communication between Hindi and English tweets throughout.

4. Mayawati was trolled for using English owing to users' distrust in her lingual capacity. Users deem her as uneducated and unsophisticated, as a result of which they cannot accept that her English Twitter discourse is legitimate. Other negative comments prevalent in her early political communication subsided, but comments targeting her lack of education and literacy were consistent.

5. While users criticised Priyanka Gandhi's expression in English as a symbol of her elitism, they criticised Mayawati's expression in Hindi as a symbol of her "illiteracy." Thus, both the leaders experienced a hostile reception of their lingual expression in political communication on Twitter.

Objectification of Appearance

1. Users explicitly reduce Priyanka Gandhi's social and political worth to her physical resemblance with her grandmother (Mar 12 2019, 45). The similarity of her appearance with that of Indira Gandhi constitutes a significant chunk of users' reception of her Twitter discourse. There is an odd fascination with the leader's nose and its apparent likeliness with her grandmother's.

2. Priyanka is frequently compared to male actors and politicians based on her allegedly "masculine" appearance. Both Priyanka and Mayawati's short hair can be interpreted as an important factor in this observation.

3. Users often relate her physical appearance with that of Indira Gandhi while relating her intellectual capacity with Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. Indira's "dictatorial" image and Rahul's "dumb" image consolidated mainly in popular discourse by the opposition are projected on Priyanka.

4. Comments explicitly use her physical resemblance with Indira Gandhi as a justification of her political prowess in the Congress party, thus indicating that she is not deserving of the same.

5. Priyanka's occasional sari attire is used to question her political intentions and depict her as a seasonal campaigner. Users question her "nationalism" arising only during election campaigning and her purpose in the Congress party.

6. While Priyanka Gandhi is chided for her western clothing and regarded as an elite "madam" on account of the same, Mayawati, who predominantly dresses in traditional attire, is portrayed as a native and indigenous figure. The latter is regarded as "buaji", "buaji", "iron lady" and hailed with "jai Bhim" slogans in her Twitter discourse. Mayawati was able to shift focus from her appearance gradually, but Priyanka was not.

7. Mayawati's introductory communication on Twitter is flooded with negative comments focused directly on her appearance. Users use degrading animalistic connotations to describe her as "ugly" and "scary". Users directly accuse her of having an unsound mind because of her unsound appearance (Feb 12 2019, 170).

8. Users also accuse Mayawati of deceiving her audience by trying to look younger than she is. There is a major focus on the potential usage of photoshop and filtered edits on her Twitter profile picture. The aspect of deception in digital communication is quite evident here.

Misplaced Projection of Attributes and Allegations

1. Priyanka Gandhi is frequently trolled and ridiculed for her brother's political decisions. His perceived incompetence is projected on Priyanka's discourse despite her being an independent Congress spokesperson. Users also direct their criticism of Jawaharlal Nehru towards her.

2. Comments project all of the Gandhi family's political decisions on her. Users arbitrarily link her to Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency and Rajeev Gandhi's persecution of Sikhs. It can be understood that the comparison between her and her grandmother is used to allocate the latter's attributes onto her. For example, "dictator-like Indira", "intelligent like Indira", "violent like Indira", etc.

3. The projection of Robert Vadra's corrupted activities on her political presence is a major part of her Twitter discourse. She is constantly regarded as "chor ki biwi" and questioned about the alleged economic wrongdoings of her husband, the Gandhi family and the Congress party as a whole.

4. Netizens blame her for the decimation of Congress in UP, where she is originally based. They contend that although she looks like Indira Gandhi, she could not maintain the same political influence of Congress in her home ground. She is also blamed for the lack of development in the Gandhi family's home constituencies-Raebareli and Amethi.

5. A major chunk of Mayawati's Twitter discourse regards her as a symbol of honesty and the hope for Indian Dalits on account of the Bahujan Samaj Party agenda. She is also called the "future PM of India" and the "lion of Indian politics". At the same time, critics also accuse Mayawati of corruption and theft. They blame her for allegedly pursuing money and power rather than uplifting the Dalit community.

Cultural Condemnation
1. Priyanka Gandhi is condemned for her promotion and propagation of Western ideals. Her introductory discourse in digital communication shows ample instances of users mocking her for sharing Western anecdotes and supporting role models like the Joan Of Arc while not doing the same for Indian freedom fighters.

2. Her clothing is heavily criticised in the context of a Western versus Indian narrative. Her inclination towards Western ideals echoes in users' depiction of her as "madam".

3. Mayawati, on the other hand, is regarded highly for her cultural conformation to Indian norms. Her support to the Dalit community is greatly rewarded in political communication.

Moral Character Assassination
1. Trolls ridiculing Priyanka Gandhi's moral character based on her husband's corrupted demeanour and the Congress party's failures constitute a large portion of this observation. Her conformance and non-conformance to socially accepted norms of clothing and beauty are used to insult her moral character.

2. Some users use digital communication to deem Mayawati as a corrupt and self-absorbed leader. However, a large proportion of the tweets support her discourse and her representation of the Dalit community.

3. Both Priyanka and Mayawati are initially accused of using public sympathy for their seasonal campaigns. They are denigrated for the same.

Smriti Irani's Twitter Discourse
This study analyses Smriti Irani's Twitter discourse in the introductory month of her joining from Apr 6 2010 to May 6 2010. The researcher finds that none of the three codes formulated to study gender trolling and feminism in political communication is applicable in Irani's limited discourse. There are numerous contributing factors to the same.

The researcher finds that the most crucial reason behind the low engagement on Irani's posts is the lack of adequate internet penetration in India during her introductory discourse. An India Online Landscape report of 2010 states that India only had about 50 million "active" internet users, out of which 40 million were urban, and the rest were rural (Singh, 2020). Poor speed and affordability of web services was a major constraint in net availability. Thus, citizens' lack of access to stable web connectivity contributed to their absence in digital communication on Twitter.

Twitter was not a sought-after platform to engage in political communication for the

average Indian user. Twitter had a total of only 54 million users across the globe in 2010 (Dean, 2021). The development of Twitter as a popular microblogging website has gained traction in recent years, resulting in the platform's user base growing beyond 353 million as of 2020 (Dean, 2021). A cursory observation of Twitter's growth over the last decade shows how Irani's initial tweets do not correspond to a present-day political leader's Twitter discourse. Perhaps one can observe the rising popularity of political communication on Twitter during and after the 2014 Lok Sabha elections only.

Twitter's unpopularity is coupled with its changed function among internet users. During Irani's initial month on Twitter, only websites like Facebook and Orkut were, to an extent, widespread among the masses. A 2010 study conducted on leading social media platforms in India confirms that Facebook was the most popular networking website with the highest time spent by users, followed by Orkut (Centre, 2010, p. 5). However, the utility of all such platforms was limited to the self-reportage of user activities, and it primarily served as a medium of entertainment rather than information.

Despite Irani's entrance into politics in 2003 and her appointment as the National Secretary of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2010, she was not publicly recognised as a political leader during her introductory discourse (Subromonian, 2014). Her identity in mainstream society was primarily based on her experience in the television industry (Subromonian, 2014). Nevertheless, this does not indicate her lack of social acclaim and her relevance in political communication, which may have contributed to low engagement on her tweets.

The prevalence of mobile applications and the resultant ease in online user interaction is a recent development that was not the case in Smriti Irani's initial discourse. Studies show that out of the limited population with access to the internet, only 1 out of 4 users accessed it on their mobiles (Singh, 2020). This is in sharp contrast to present-day figures, stating that there are approximately 630 million active mobile internet users in India (Keelery, 2020). Social media platforms have seen a revolution in recent times, and mobile apps have

certainly played a significant role in expanding access to social media.

Irani's tweets were unplanned and devoid of any external agenda targeted to influence her following. However, present-day social media communication involving political leaders and people of interest utilises targeted social media strategies to advance specific goals. Since social media platforms allow political leaders to communicate with their audiences directly, they have become useful in running targeted political campaigns online (Malnar, 2020). The majority of tweets are now curated and published by dedicated social media managing agencies rather than individual actors.

There are approximately 17.5 million Twitter users in India as of data recorded in 2021 (Tankovska, 2021). While Smriti Irani's introductory discourse in 2010 did not win massive support on account of the reasons stated above, social media researchers can contend with the unprecedented growth of Twitter as the most popular platform of political communication in modern-day India.

Mayawati's Twitter Discourse
Mayawati's political communication on Twitter seemed to be unaffected by its discourse. Her Twitter communication seemed to shift the discourse from slurs, mock and insults to dialogue and engagement. Thus, she seems to have successfully managed to shift the discursive movement of text to the themes of leadership from physical attributes. The tweets continued to be mainly in English, even after repeated mockery and insults. The Twitter discourse here also indicates that the electorate has strong political opinions about her- both supportive and critical. She is majorly seen as a harbinger of Dalit rights and welfare. Jai Bhim remained the most recurring discourse throughout her timeline. Her leadership skills and work gradually became the subject of discussion wherein her work as CM of UP and her prospects of being a future PM were heavily stressed.

It is important to note that her support base seems to be strong. Although users often criticise her appearance or political discourse, a fair share of them supports her political communication. Jai Bheem, Jai Bahujan, Jai BSP discourse also seems to indicate that

people support her cause, the issues she stands for. However, it cannot substantiate that they stand for her leadership. Gender trolling was gradually reduced, and the legitimacy of her digital discourse flourished. Supporters counter-attack trollers with information about her. For example, when she is repeatedly addressed as uneducated, her support base counters by telling that Mayawati was a school teacher before she joined politics, or that she was an excellent orator before her surgery, but she speaks little during the parliamentary sessions because of the same.

Priyanka Gandhi's Twitter Discourse
Priyanka Gandhi is not as favourably viewed in political communication as her counterparts. Her social, political and cultural identity is reduced to being a sister, daughter and wife. The discourse on her timeline indicates that she is not taken seriously as a leader and rather chastised as a seasonal campaigner. She is repeatedly mocked for her appearance. Her masculinity and resemblance to Indira Gandhi remained a major part of her Twitter reception.

Her twitter communication moved from English to Hindi as she was ridiculed for the former and made fun of for the latter. Her shift in the medium of communication indicates her digital discourse to be intimidated by the trollers. Her tweets were tailored as per the discourse on the former tweets. She moved from quoting 'Joan of Arc' to Chakravartin Ashoka Samrat in an attempt to pacify her followers.

Even after a month and nearly 30 tweets, the discourse on her timeline seems to be impetuous. However, one can notice frequent photos of her with young girls and women being posted, indicating that she is seen as a potential leader who may work for women rights. While some users do appreciate her political discourse, the majority of comments troll and criticise her for the reasons outlined above.

DISCUSSION
By engaging with specific findings extracted from the introductory Twitter discourse of three prominent Indian female leaders, the researcher establishes that:

Social Enforcement of Gender Identity
Gender plays a crucial role in defining the outcome of digital communication if/when female leaders use it to extend their political discourse. Digital platforms harbour relative ease in creating a discursive political communication as they enforce socially accepted gender norms to fortify distinctive gender identities. The embeddedness of patriarchal structures in society facilitates the propagation of a "one size fits all" analogy in political communication.

Breakdown of Political Leadership
The social construction of leadership is heavily gender-specific owing to its stereotypical perception in society. Strength is a misunderstood entity in political communication associated with gender attributes despite having no relation with the same. Chamorro-Premuzic, in an article discussing the link between competence and leadership, contends that male hubris (Greek tragedian notion of over-confidence) is responsible for the inequity of leadership opportunities between men and women (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). The FCDA framework of the study consolidates this inequity through its findings.

Objectification and Emphasis on Physical Attributes
Indian political communication objectifies female figures based on their physical attributes. Digital platforms reinforce conventional standards of beauty through the machinery of gender trolling and misogynistic gaslighting. Sexist remarks on particular aspects of women's physical appearance coupled with public denigration of their moral, social and political discourse is a common observation throughout the study.

Sexism and Misogyny
Negative persuasive strategies that influence public opinion about female political leaders constitute functioning principles of sexism and misogyny. A similar media campaign discriminating against the representation of the female candidate (Hilary Clinton) as a way of uplifting her male counterpart (Donald Trump) was also seen during the 2016 US Presidential elections (Nee and De Maio, 2019, p. 305). Bell Hooks' definition of feminism as "a movement to end sexist oppression" becomes instrumental in discussing free and

fair political communication of female leaders and their experience of sexism online.

Gender trolling

It is evident that female leaders are subject to scrutiny and discrimination, only surviving to gradually expect a shift in popular discourse from trolls to more pertinent socio-political and economic issues. Gender trolling makes political communication an unfair fight for female leaders owing to the constant evaluation of their gender identity. Thus, gender trolling is a real hindrance in the development of female representatives in digital communication.

CONCLUSION

A qualitative analysis of engagement on a digital communication platform, namely Twitter, revealed many key findings of the relationship between performative gender and political communication in India. Social media platforms have made it easier for political figures to create a "public yet personal" discourse to engage the electorate (Bali and Jagan, 2017, p. 244). Digital platforms allow politicians to reach a wide but niche audience corresponding to their expansion agendas. The two-way communication also facilitates the reconstruction of popular agendas, thus, making it easier for them to control the direction of their political discourse (Bali and Jagan, 2017, p. 244).

While analysing the Twitter discourse of three national female political leaders, the researcher found that Smriti Irani's Twitter discourse was insufficient for drawing valuable inferences. However, a careful analysis of Priyanka Gandhi and Mayawati's Twitter discourse generated three repetitive patterns of user behaviour in the context of gender politics. First, netizens attribute a considerable level of importance to female leaders' physical appearance, which is evident in the form of insults, jibes, and trolls. Second, netizens often relate a female politician's leadership qualities with aspects of her gender identity that do not pertain to the same. As a result, her political communication weakens when faced with stereotypical images associated with female power-holders. Third, netizens promote and propagate a discursive discussion on varying aspects of gendered identity. Female leaders must cater to their independent political discourse and their

social identity as a woman, a mother, a sister, a daughter, etc.

The Twitter discourse of the aforementioned female leaders also reveals a common experience of internalised misogyny and sexism. Women are treated with humiliating gendered remarks, often for aspects of their identity that they cannot control. For example, the researcher finds that Mayawati's lingual sophistication and Priyanka Gandhi's association with the Gandhi family remained a crucial focal point of user behaviour throughout their digital discourse. Such targeted focus on specific aspects of their identity was not only used as a ploy of gender trolling but also as a justification for their incompetence as political leaders. By employing Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), the researcher was able to isolate instances of gender stereotyping and the consequent occurrence of gender discrimination.

While supervision of digital communication is necessary to prevent gender-specific humiliation of public personas, it is not nearly sufficient for the same. Increasing awareness about egalitarian gender politics and adapting the public discourse to a more accommodating space is essential for establishing fruitful political communication.

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