Insta-Hate Toward Female Political Leaders: Six Case Studies From Instagram

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Online hate is spreading rapidly across social networks and has become a growing concern in academic circles. Among various forms of hate speech, online misogyny specifically targets female users. This article investigates online hate speech toward high-profile female political leaders, examining manifestations of misogyny and identifying patterns in its expression. This study uses content analysis to identify hate speech (19 parameters) and misogyny (11 parameters) on the Instagram profiles of 6 female politicians across Argentina, France, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and the United States. The results reveal that hate speech is present in all posts of female politicians profiles analyzed in this research. Approximately 7% of the 4,200 comments analyzed exhibit elements of hatred, often conveyed through political ideology, irony, criticisms, contempt, and insults. Misogyny is also observed in the comments, primarily expressed through profanity, stereotypes, objectification, and discredit. These data not only illuminate the existing patterns of hate speech and misogyny toward female politicians on Instagram but also provide a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

Keywords: hate speech, misogyny, female politicians, Instagram

With the widespread adoption of Web 2.0 and the rise of social media platforms, users have increasingly shifted many of their daily activities to online environments (Van Dijck, 2013). Simultaneously, the emergence of new platforms has led to changes in the rules of online sociability. The interconnections of platforms have given rise to an ecosystem of connective media, fostering diverse styles of connection, self-presentation, and the expression of taste (Van Dijck, 2013).

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Instagram, a platform for sharing photos and videos, is owned by Meta Platforms (Facebook). Nearly one-third of the world's 4.8 billion active Internet users regularly use Instagram (Dean, 2023), with the majority falling between the ages of 18 and 34 years (Statista, 2023a). In this article, Instagram is categorized as a "social network site," similar to Van Dijck's (2013) definition, which describes platforms that "forge personal, professional, or geographical connections, and encourage weak ties" (p. 8). This social network continues to grow each year; in 2021, it reached 1.25 billion active users worldwide, followed by 1,280 million users in 2022, and as of 2023, it boasts 1,336 million monthly active users and is one of the most popular social media platforms globally (Statista, 2023b).

Instagram was chosen to examine the intersection between exposure to intimacy and everyday life with the political career of women added to the communication through images, and the possibility of posting comments by followers.

On Instagram, politicians increasingly showcase not only their political commitments but also glimpses into their day-to-day lives. This involves sharing personal moments, revealing faces, and displaying emotions—strategies that empirically demonstrate an increase in audience engagement among politicians (Peng, 2020). While Instagram may not be as dominant as platforms like X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook for politics and political discourse, it has proved to be useful for connecting with younger Western audiences, since in the United States, 71% of people aged 18–29 have active Instagram profiles (Dean, 2023).

According to Bast (2021), "What makes Instagram unique amongst social media platforms is its focus on visuals" (p. 195). The possibility of creating and sharing content may attract politicians to join this platform as "there is substantial evidence that visual communication matters in political communication" (Bast, 2021, p. 195). The images they post aim to portray authenticity and intimacy, almost resembling documentary footage (Parmelee, Perkins, & Beasley, 2022).

However, this exposure on digital platforms also exposes politicians to the potential risk of encountering verbal abuse from users that can sometimes lead to hate speech and even misogynistic commentary (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021). These two concepts (hate speech and misogyny) are key in this analysis as the goal is to objectively assess their presence in the comments posted on female politicians' Instagram profiles.

Meanwhile, hate speech is defined as,

> Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other identity factor. (United Nations, 2019, p. 2)

Misogyny can be defined as "the hate or prejudice against women, which can be linguistically manifested in various ways, including social exclusion, discrimination, hostility, threats of violence, and sexual objectification" (Pamungkas, Basile, & Patti, 2020, p. 3). In addition, Anzovino, Fersini, and Rosso (2018), and Frenda, Ghanem, Montes-y-Gómez, and Rosso (2019) assert that online misogyny encompasses a range of harmful behaviors such as discrediting, stereotyping, objectification, sexual harassment, dominance, derailing, vulgarity, and addressing issues related to femininity, sexuality, and the human body, among other aspects.

Ultimately, the aim of this study is to unravel the phenomenon of Insta-hate designed to silence these political figures. The primary goal of this research is to detect and analyze hate speech and misogyny expressed by users on the Instagram profiles of six prominent female politicians: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Giorgia Meloni, Irene Montero, Jacinda Ardern, Marine Le Pen, and Ofelia Fernández from the United States, Italy, Spain, New Zealand, France, and Argentina, respectively. This exploratory study is based on the content analysis method. To achieve this goal, eight parameters are used to detect hate speech (Losada-Díaz, Zamora-Medina, & Martínez-Martínez, 2021; Paasch-Colberg, Strippel, Trebbe, & Emmer, 2021), 11 parameters for thematically classifying hateful comments (López Gutiérrez et al., 2021), and 11 variables for detecting misogyny (Anzovino et al., 2018; Frenda et al., 2019). Subsequently, a comparative study of the results is carried out.

This study addresses the following questions:

RQ1:   How is online hate speech expressed toward prominent female political leaders of international exposure?

RQ2:   How is misogyny manifested in such speech?

RQ3:   Are there differences or similarities in hate speech and expressions of misogyny directed at these women?

Understanding Insta-Hate

The term "*Insta-hate*" is a neologism coined by Rajan and Venkatraman (2021), who investigated Islamophobia and right-wing nationalism on Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Insta-hate involves users posting hurtful, offensive, malicious comments, or content directed at others, often intending to demean, intimidate, or harm them emotionally (Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021). This behavior can target individuals based on their identity, appearance, beliefs, or other characteristics.

Bidirectionality in digital communication emerges as a crucial element, facilitating interaction and participation among users globally (Gil, 2020). In this sense, the Internet fostered the development of Web 2.0 platforms that brought about a 360-degree shift in communication, not only in the media but also on a personal level (Van Dijck, 2013).

The exponential growth of social media has led to an increase in the propagation of hate speech, given that these platforms serve as virtual communication channels where individuals feel a heightened sense of freedom in expressing themselves (Tontodimamma, Nissi, Sarra, & Fontanella, 2021). As has been explained before, hate speech implies hostility, rejection, and a wish to harm or destroy a specific target group (Parekh, 2006). In addition, cyber-hate modifies the way in which these discourses emerge, feed, and, above all, spread. This significantly affects the way these messages impact audiences and influences the overall outcomes (Losada-Díaz et al., 2021).

Hate speeches on social media have attracted the attention of communication researchers in recent years (ElSherief, Kulkarni, Nguyen, Wang, & Belding, 2018; Malmasi & Zampieri, 2017; Matamoros-

Fernández & Farkas, 2021; Mathew, Dutt, Goyal, & Mukherjee, 2019). When this online hatred is specifically directed against women because of their gender, misogyny appears in cyberspace. Numerous studies on this topic address the complex relationship between social media and misogyny (Barker & Jurasz, 2019; Ging & Siapera, 2018; Mantilla, 2013; Vickery & Everbach, 2018). Specific research focusing on hate speech on Instagram (Insta-hate) has gained some relevance recently although it remains limited, with studies especially focused on Islamophobia on this platform (Al-Rawi, 2022; Fawzy, Manaf, & Azzman, 2022; Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021). A study conducted by Mathew and colleagues (2019) on hate speech and post diffusion dynamics found that hateful content spreads faster, travels farther, and reaches a broader audience. The analysis of the research on hate speech in social media conducted by Mondal, Silva, Correa, and Benevenuto (2018) reveals the impact of anonymity and the tendency to target specific groups.

The increase in the dissemination of hate messages on social networks has aroused also the concern and attention of governments, institutions, and companies, which are driven by the urgent need to find effective measures to combat this issue (see e.g., Martínez Valerio, 2022; Miró-Llinares, Moneva, & Esteve, 2018; Pereira-Kohatsu, Quijano-Sánchez, Liberatore, & Camacho-Collados, 2019; Zhang & Luo, 2018, among others.) According to Martínez Valerio (2022), there is a connection between the role played by social networks and the increase in hate crimes.

Based on the literature reviewed, it appears that Twitter has received more extensive analysis in terms of hate speech (see e.g., Miró-Llinares et al., 2018; Mondal et al., 2018; Pereira-Kohatsu et al., 2019; Zhang & Luo, 2018, among others), while Instagram has been less thoroughly examined.

Female Political Leaders in the Digital Age

Digital platforms have proliferated as an alternative to traditional ways of communication (Flew & Gillet, 2020), and political parties use them for campaigning, fundraising, voter outreach, or policy promotion (among others). The absence of intermediation gives parties complete control of their discourse and immediate communication between candidates and potential voters (Bernárdez-Rodal, Requeijo Rey, & Franco, 2022).

Among social media platforms, Instagram's visual content is especially interesting in politics. "Instagram images can feel especially genuine, even intimate, because of the documentary feel afforded by the smartphones used to create the pictures and videos included in posts" (Parmelee et al., 2022, p. 3). A study on persuasive political personalization on platforms revealed that two key elements make a successful personalization: "Politicians participating in two-way conversations with followers and adopting a backstage pass aesthetic when showing what politicians do on the job and how they feel about it" (Parmelee et al., 2022, p. 1). Instagram, precisely, allows these two elements.

Over the past two decades, many researchers have been interested in the role of political leaders in the new political communication ecosystem of social media (e.g., Brady, Wills, Burkart, Jost, & Van Bavel, 2019; Shirky, 2011; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Winter & Neubaum, 2016; Zeitzoff, 2017).

Recently, studies investigating different aspects of the presence of women politicians on social media indicate that women often receive more interactions on networks than men (Brands, Kruikemeier, & Trilling, 2021) and are perceived as more authentic (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). These trends suggest

that it is possible to find in social media a more egalitarian platform that allows women greater participation and visibility compared with traditional media where men tend to receive more coverage (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018. Despite the apparent advantages, women have also suffered a "backlash," experiencing misogynistic hate speech, verbal abuse, and other multiple forms of sexist violence (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2020; Ncube & Yemurai, 2020). In addition, communication and treatment in social media between genders are different (Beltran, Gallego, Huidobro, Romero, & Padró, 2021). Gender-specific insults directed at female politicians are identified, including comments on their physical appearance and the use of infantilizing language (Beltran et al., 2021). Despite this reality, existing research has paid little attention to misogynistic verbal abuse directed at female politicians in social networks (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021). Once again, research focusing on women politicians and social media predominantly takes place on Twitter (e.g., Beltran et al., 2021; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021; Ncube & Yemurai, 2020) compared with other platforms, such as Instagram, which are less analyzed (e.g. Brands et al., 2021).

Although digital spaces have the potential to challenge traditional discourses and sexist narratives, "women are often the targets of online sexual harassment and violence through these same platforms" (Lebel, Pegoraro, & Harman, 2019 in Krieger, Santarossa, Bours, & Woodruff, 2022, p. 5). Female politicians are frequent targets of hate, violence, and disinformation. In 2018, a study revealed that globally, 42% of female parliamentarians had seen humiliating or sexually charged images of themselves on platforms (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

Attacks on women using hateful language, rumors, and gendered stereotypes combine personal attacks with political motivations, making online spaces dangerous places for women to speak out. If left unaddressed, this phenomenon of gendered disinformation, spread by both state and non-state actors, presents a significant threat to women's equal political participation (Judson, Atay, Krasodomski-Jones, Lasko-Skinner, & Smith, 2020). This study concludes that gender disinformation (a) despite having a specific origin, ends up reaching extensive audiences through digital platforms; (b) includes consistent themes and behaviors; (c) feeds on news, rumors, and stereotypes; and (d) uses rhetorical figures to state that women are twisted, stupid, overly sexual, in need of protection, or immoral, and therefore unfit for public life (Judson et al., 2020).

Methodology

This study conducts a case study of six Instagram profiles of female political leaders, specifically an empirical content analysis of 4,200 comments to understand how online hate speech targets female political leaders and how misogyny appears within these expressions of hate speech and to compare the differences in hate speech and manifestations of misogyny directed at these women.

The case study approach has been chosen as a research strategy since it allows the researcher/s to explore deeply an event, an activity, or a process (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, identifying a representative case is challenging (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 294), making case selection the most complex activity during the research (Stake, 1994).

Sampling

These six cases were chosen based on the following criteria:

(a) diversity of political ideas; (b) different geographical regions (including Argentina, the United States, Spain, France, Italy, and New Zealand); (c) intersectional considerations, including diversity in age, race, and social class; (e) participation as candidates in a general election between 2019 and 2022; (f) language according to the interpretation possibilities of the researchers. This diversity serves to highlight whatever commonalities are found in the analysis. An intersectional perspective (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013) captures the interactions among multiple dimensions of identity and social categorizations (e.g., race, class, age) and understands how they impact experiences, viewpoints, and outcomes. Additionally, the politicians' profiles, including age, race, localization, and social class, among other dimensions from the intersectionality approach, will be varied. In addition, the represented political ideology of the parties associated with these women occupies both edges of the ideological spectrum (Right–Left).

These profiles chosen according to the selection criteria to achieve the objectives of the study are listed below.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from the United States is the youngest woman to serve in Congress in the country. Originally from the Bronx, Ocasio-Cortez is a progressive politician who defends feminist ideas and universal health. She is known for representing unheard communities, particularly the Latin community (Lopez, 2020). Since the early days of her political career, she has faced criticisms and expressions of hatred on social media (Lopez, 2020).

Ocasio-Cortez (as of December 18, 2023) has 8.4 million followers and 615 posts on Instagram. Her account, active since January 2012, initially featured personal content. From April 2017 until now, her posts shifted focus to include more political content, such as videos and interviews.

Giorgia Meloni from Italy has been the prime minister since October 2022 and is the first woman to assume this role. She supports anti-immigration policies, opposes same-sex marriage and adoption, and has audited same-sex associations, legalized in Italy in 2016 (Adams, 2022; Broder, 2023).

Giorgia Meloni (as of December 18, 2023) has 2.3 million followers and 8,593 posts on Instagram. She started using Instagram in November 2012, sharing content related to political themes right from the beginning.

Irene Montero from Spain has been the minister of equality in the Spanish government since January 2020 and represents the left-wing party Podemos. She has been involved in promoting two laws that stirred public opinion: (a) the "only yes is yes" law—a consent law eliminating the distinction between sexual abuse and assault; (b) the "Trans law," which is focused on real and effective equality for trans people and the guarantee of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and other rights (Arenales, 2023).

Montero (as of December 18, 2023) has 329,000 followers and 1,338 posts on her Instagram account. Most of her posts are related to her political profile and feminism.

Jacinda Ardern from New Zealand was prime minister of the country from 2017 to 2023. Her management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Craig, 2021) and the Christchurch mosque shooting (Chapman, 2020) gained public approval. Ardern represents a new style of leadership, of being charismatic and close (Chapman, 2020).

Ardern (as of December 18, 2023) has 1.6 million followers and has made 2,339 posts on her Instagram account. Her first post was in September 2012. The majority of her posts are related to her private life and work (more so in the initial posts) and politics.

Marine Le Pen from France is a lawyer and politician who ran for the French presidency in 2012, 2017, and 2022. She opposes equality policies and feminism, interpreting sexual violence as a racial issue rather than a gender issue (Della Sudda, 2022). Her image online is that of a family-oriented modern woman and a leader distancing herself from her father (Campus, 2017, p. 1).

Le Pen (as of December 18, 2023) has 364,000 followers and 1,082 posts. Her first post was in March 2015. The majority of her posts are related to her work in politics.

Ofelia Fernández from Argentina became the youngest member of parliament in Latin America at only 19 (Feinmann, 2021). Social platforms, particularly Instagram, played an essential role in shaping her image as a political leader (Feinmann, 2021). Her political stand has been prominently marked by feminism and her fight for abortion rights in Argentina.

Ofelia Fernández (as of December 18, 2023) has 592,000 followers and 403 posts. Her first post was in March 2015. According to Feinmann (2021), she underwent a transformation before, during, and after her candidacy, where she was first an activist, next a candidate, and third, a celebrity (pp. 19–21).

The study analyzed 4,200 comments across the six Instagram profiles. Since we decided to examine the same number of comments for each candidate, we used the post with the fewest comments as a benchmark (Irene Montero, 739 comments). We then decided to analyze 700 comments per politician based on our limitations in tackling larger corpora. The analyzed posts were published on the election day, except for the posts pertaining to Georgia Meloni and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—in these two cases, the posts from the day the results were announced were chosen since they did not publish any posts on election day.

Table 1. Preliminary Corpus and Spatiotemporal Delimitation of the Study.

Name	Country	Political Party	Total Comments	Period
Irene Montero	Spain	Podemos	739	11-10-2019
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	The United States	Democratic Party	3,446 + 5,137 (2 posts)	11-07-2020
Giorgia Meloni	Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	5,193+5,010 (2 posts)	09-26-2022
Marine Le Pen	France	Rassemblement National	2,078 + 5,289	04-24-2022
Ofelia Fernández	Argentina	Frente Patria Grande	2,286	10-27-2019
Jacinda Ardern	New Zealand	New Zealand Labour Party	5,056	10-17-2020

Data Collection

The gathered comments—700 per politician—were processed and analyzed in a structured procedure. First, comments were exported with the ExportComments program to a database created by us. Then, a manual filtering process was applied, where positive comments were removed manually from the database to keep only potential hateful and misogynistic comments for detailed examination and comparison.

Once the database was completed, a set of variables was used to classify text containing hate and misogynistic speech.

First, 11 thematic categories of hate speech issued by the Ministry of Interior of the Spanish government (López Gutiérrez et al., 2021) were used: (1) racism/xenophobia; (2) political ideology; (3) sexual orientation or gender identity; (4) religious beliefs; (5) gender matters; (6) disability; (7) anti-gypsyism; (8) anti-Semitism; (9) aporophobia; (10) generational discrimination; (11) discrimination based on illness.

Second, a method to detect hate speech was developed according to the five parameters of hate speech outlined by Losada-Díaz and colleagues (2021) and the labeling scheme that measures three critical elements of hate speech in the text by Paasch-Colberg and colleagues (2021).

Table 2. Definition of Hate Speech Variables According to Losada-Díaz and Colleagues (2021) and Paasch-Colberg and Colleagues (2021).

Variable	Definition	Authors
Criticisms	"Negative analyses or statements aim to judge the recipient and sometimes inflict harm or offense."	Losada-Díaz and colleagues (2021, p. 200)
Contempt	"Negative attitude that considers something or someone below their real value."	Losada-Díaz (2021, p. 200)
Derision	"Actions or words that are intended to ridicule something or someone."	Losada-Díaz and colleagues (2021, p. 200)
Insults	"Words that directly offend or humiliate a person, especially with hurtful messages."	Losada-Díaz and colleagues (2021, p. 201)
Threats	"Comments warning of potential danger or risk from an event that has not yet occurred."	Losada-Díaz and colleagues (2021, p. 201)
Negative stereotyping	"Referring to everybody, most people, or the average or typical person. Social groups, religious groups, professional roles, or nationalities are generalised."	Paasch-Colberg and colleagues (2021, p. 176)
Dehumanization	"Humans are equated as or compared to animals, inanimate or inhuman things."	Paasch-Colberg and colleagues (2021, p.176)
Violence and killing	"Violence/killing as only effective means or remedy," and as an "appropriate solution."	Paasch-Colberg and colleagues (2021, p. 176)

Then, a method for detecting misogynistic speech was elaborated according to two studies: (a) the five categories designed by Anzovino and colleagues (2018), and (b) six features developed by Frenda and colleagues (2019; see Table 3).

Table 3. Definition of Misogyny Variables According to Anzovino and Colleagues (2018) and Frenda and Colleagues. (2019).

Variable	Definition	Authors
Discredit	"Slurring over women with no other larger intention."	Anzovino and colleagues (2018, p. 59)
Stereotype and objectification	"To make women subordinated or description of women's physical appeal and/or comparisons to narrow standards."	Anzovino and colleagues (2018, p. 59)
Sexual harassment and threats of violence	"To physically assert power over women, or to intimidate and silence women through threats."	Anzovino and colleagues (2018, p. 59)
Dominance	"To preserve male control, protect male interests."	Anzovino and colleagues (2018, p. 59)
Derailing	"To justify abuse, reject male responsibility, and attempt to disrupt the conversation in order to refocus it."	Anzovino and colleagues (2018, p. 59)
Vulgarity	"Vulgarities and offensive adjectives that aim at offending and humiliating."	Frenda and colleagues (2019, p. 4747)
Femininity	"To match the woman as the target of offences."	Frenda and colleagues (2019, p. 4747)
Sexuality	"Sexual context, perversion and prostitution."	Frenda and colleagues (2019, p. 4748)
Human body	"Content referred to women's bodies."	Frenda and colleagues (2019, p. 4748)
Hashtag	"Hashtags referring to stereotypes, inferiority of women and sexual harassment."	Frenda and colleagues (2019, p. 4748)
Abbreviations	"Such as idgaf ('I don't give a fuck'), wtf ('What the Fuck!')"	Frenda and colleagues (2019, p. 4748)

After these variables were discussed, a deductive codebook was created based on them.

This study shows the inherent limitations of the tools and methods used. Analyzing Instagram, a platform where celebrification and personalization engender familiarity, implies that most users are followers of these public figures. Not exploring other digital platforms is a limitation. The time frame is also a limitation since we had to choose posts near election day. Another limitation is not analyzing male profiles to assess whether there was variability in the results. From a methodological perspective, a key limitation of quantitative methods is their lack of interpretative richness and deep contextualization of environments and experiences (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza Torres, 2018).

Future research should complement this study with another one focused on content production, examining the types of posts that the candidates publish.

Results

Our study confirms that while the majority of the comments on the six Instagram profiles of the political leaders analyzed were supportive, there was still a notable percentage of hate speech present in all of them, with misogyny being relatively minimal. Of the total number of comments (4,200) analyzed, 284 were identified as hateful, constituting 6.76% of the total. Furthermore, only 34 comments were categorized as misogynistic, representing 0.81% of the total comments.

Comparing the six political profiles analyzed, Georgia Meloni stands out as the most targeted with hate speech, receiving 100 such comments, followed by Marine Le Pen with 54. On the other end is Jacinda Ardern, who received only five hate speech comments. In terms of explicit misogyny, variations are observed, with Marine Le Pen receiving the most (11 comments) and Ofelia Fernandez following closely with eight. Notably, Fernandez received a relatively high percentage of misogynistic speech in proportion to the total hate speech received. The visual representation of these results can be observed in Figure 1.
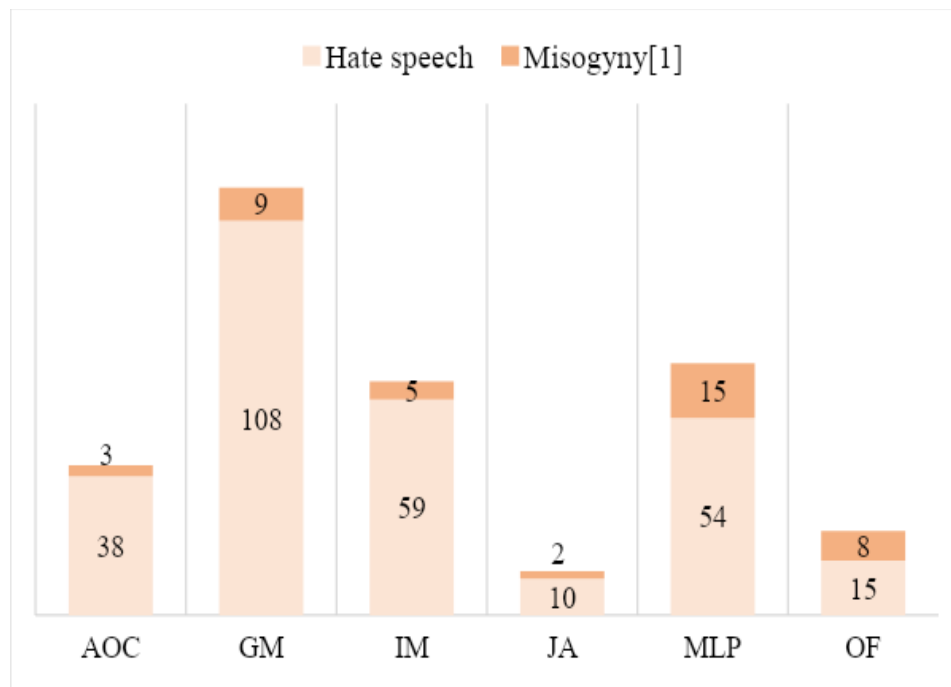

Figure 1. Frequency relationship between female politicians and hate speech and misogyny.[1]

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[1] Although misogyny is marked in a different color, it is still part of hate speech.

Table 4. Frequency Relationship Between Female Politicians and Hate Speech and Misogyny.

	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	Giorgia Meloni	Irene Montero	Jacinda Ardern	Marine Le Pen	Ofelia Fernández
Hate speech	38	108	59	10	54	15
Misogyny[2]	3	9	5	2	11	8

The most salient results of the six analyzed profiles are briefly discussed below.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

In our analysis of Ocasio-Cortez's Instagram post on the day the election results were announced, we identified 38 comments that displayed hate speech or misogyny. These offensive remarks made up only 5.4% of the comments we reviewed. Among the 38 hate speech comments identified, 78.9% were thematically linked to political ideology issues. This indicates that political differences and ideological conflicts played a significant role in the manifestation of hate speech within the comments section. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and certain comments may fall under more than one category. For instance, the comment below is categorized as political ideology, insults, and contempt: "Aoc is the dumbest person in politics, communism does not work!!" (Braydenk21, 2020).

When examining the misogynistic aspect of hate speech comments, it was found that only three of the 700 comments were misogynistic. These comments specifically targeted Ocasio-Cortez's sexuality and femininity, and, in some instances, they show a disrespectful and objectifying attitude toward her—for example, "@aoc let's organise a mess in the sheets. My house or yours—I'm easy" (Shityerbrainsout, 2020)

Although negative stereotyping comments were limited in number compared with the overall comments analyzed, it is worth asking why Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was attacked with those comments: Was it because of her gender, or because she does not come from a wealthy family? This is also a theme that was addressed by her in an election campaign video in 2018 (Morales, 2018).

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[2] Misogyny is a part of hate speech, and hate speech frequency includes misogyny.

Table 5. Frequency of Occurrence of Hate Speech and Misogyny Variables in the Comments of Ocasio-Cortez's Publications.

Variables	Frequency (Codes)	Percentages (Comments)
Political ideology	30	78.9
Contempt	15	39.5
Criticisms	10	26.3
Derision	9	23.7
Insults	7	18.4
Negative stereotyping	7	18.4
Irony	3	7.9
Aporophobia	1	2.6
Age discrimination	1	2.6
Dehumanization	1	2.6
Discrimination based on illness	1	2.6
Gender matters	1	2.6
Racism/xenophobia	1	2.6
Femininity	2	5.3
Sexuality	1	2.6
Total codes (absolute)	90	100
Total hate speech comments	38	

Georgia Meloni

In the analysis of Meloni's Instagram posts, of the 700 sampled comments, 108 contained hate speech and/or misogyny, constituting 15.4% of the total analyzed and making her the recipient of the most hateful comments among the six profiles. The majority of the hateful content, approximately 65.7%, was linked to political ideology and specifically targeted Meloni. For instance, some users compared her to fascism, with one referring to Meloni as "*L'erede di Mussolini* [Mussolini's heir]"[3] (ven0mtoxic_, 2022) and others associating her with the fascist salute: "*Si vede dalla faccia che sta per alzare il braccio destro* [You can tell by her face that she is about to raise her right arm]" (manuel.siniscalchi_, 2022). In addition, it is worth mentioning that 36.1% of the total hate speech was insulting toward Meloni, such as "*Sei una merda umana* [You are a human shit]" (aantoniomatera, 2022).

Moreover, 10 of the 247 codes related to hate speech were misogynist content. Most of them were categorized as stereotyping and objectification and were directed not only to Meloni but also to other female users commenting on Meloni's posts: "*@silvia.lampa e sei pure una donna* [@silvia.lampa and you are also a woman]" (_dearsomebody_, 2022).

There was a high percentage of insults compared with the others, and they reveal misogynistic undertones by including the word "woman" and referring to their gender.

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[3] All translations are produced by us.

Table 6. Frequency of Occurrence of Hate Speech and Misogyny Variables in the Comments of Meloni's Publications.

Variables	Frequency (Codes)	Percentages (Comments)
Political ideology	71	66
Insults	39	36
Contempt	38	35
Criticisms	27	25
Derision	13	12
Claims	10	9
Personal attack	8	7
Gender matters	7	6
Negative stereotyping	6	6
Irony	4	4
Violence and killing	4	4
Sexual orientation/gender identity	3	3
Dehumanization	2	2
Threats	2	2
Aggression	1	1
Generational discrimination	1	1
Racism/xenophobia	1	1
Stereotype and objectification	3	3
Abbreviations	2	2
Profanity	2	2
Discredit	2	2
Obscene	1	1
Total codes (absolute)	247	100
Total hate speech comments	108	

Irene Montero

Montero's social media account has the second-highest number of hate posts. During election day, 59 comments were identified as containing hate speech and misogyny (8.4%). Most of the hateful comments (74.5%) focused on political ideology, often intersecting with other factors: "*Buena suerte con el desempleo y la inflacción* [Good luck with unemployment and inflation]" (cballesta92, 2019a) alluding to Montero's supporters. In this case, political ideology interacts with other variables. Both economic and political issues as well as derision and contempt are appreciated. Nevertheless, comments supporting opposition parties, inciting hate speech and political conflicts, were visible in the comments analyzed, such as "*Voto a Vox. No se me ocurriría votar a un partido feminazi* [I vote for Vox. I wouldn't dream of voting for a feminazi party]" (jorgeespanol1, 2019). Furthermore, criticisms and insults were repeatedly manifested in the comments, representing 37.2% and 30.5%, respectively, of the total number of hateful comments, such as "*hija de la gran puta* [motherfucker]" (chemavallruda, 2019).

The findings reveal a prevalence of misogyny in Montero's post comments, representing a higher percentage (8.4% of the hateful comments) than in other politicians' publications. Not all the comments were directed at Montero; some were also targeted at her supporters: "*@j_belop a ella le ha costado muchísimo jajaja. A mi si, sin manipular nadie, sin follarme a nadie* [It has taken her a lot of effort hahaha. Me, without manipulating anyone, without fucking anyone]" (cballesta92, 2019b). Misogyny was expressed through body discrimination, stereotyping and objectification, and profanity.

Table 7. Frequency of Occurrence of Hate Speech and Misogyny Variables in the Comments of Montero's Publications.

Variables	Frequency (Codes)	Percentages (Comments)
Political ideology	44	75
Criticisms	22	37
Insults	18	31
Derision	16	27
Contempt	14	24
Negative stereotyping	7	12
Claims	4	7
Gender matters	4	7
Body discrimination	2	3
Dehumanization	2	3
Highlighting opposing parties	2	3
Racism/xenophobia	2	3
Violence and killing	1	2
Irony	1	2
Criticisms towards men	1	2
Religious beliefs	1	2
Stereotype and objectification	3	5
Profanity	1	2
Discredit	1	2
Femininity	1	2
Human body	1	2
Total codes (absolute)	148	100
Total hate speech comments	59	

Jacinda Ardern

For the New Zealand candidate, the hate detected toward her only represents 1.4% (10 of 700) of the sample reviewed. Her profile was dominated by massive support for her, aligning with her high popularity rating. Jacinda Ardern has been less criticized and more recognize by her "kindness and political control" (Craig, 2021, p. 288), which might have aroused less hate from her adversaries. It raises the question of

whether hate also has a cultural component and if the geographical location of this candidate, as an intersectional axis, influences the tendency to disseminate hate speech.

The hate speech identified in the analyzed posts was expressed through "irony," resulting in 70% of the published comments: "Congratulations on your sin" (alexandershee, 2020); "The word we're getting here in the US is LANDSLIDE" (dianamunaron, 2020).

The misogyny identified is also minimal (three; same as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) concerning the total sample, accounting for 0.6% (four of 700). Here, we find some comments that include supposedly feminine emoticons to discredit or ironize the candidate, as well as comments that despise the feminist cause: "@p2charles get over the egalitarian thing" (anusha_nanda, 2020).

It should be noted that while misogyny has limited presence in the analyzed sample, its proportion within the hate comments is significant, accounting for 25%. Quotes coded as discredit, femininity, stereotype, objectification, and vulgarity express the identified misogyny.

Table 8. Frequency of Occurrence of Hate Speech and Misogyny Variables in the Comments of Ardern's Publications.

Variables	Frequency (Codes)	Percentages (Comments)
Irony	7	70
Contempt	1	10
Derision	1	10
Gender matters	1	10
Political ideology	1	10
Threats	1	10
Discredit	1	10
Femininity	1	10
Stereotype and objectification	1	10
Profanity	1	10
Total codes (absolute)	16	100
Total hate speech comments	10	

Ofelia Fernández

Fernández's Instagram post shows widespread enthusiasm for her victory and the renewed hope that this new political leader was seen as bringing. However, in the analyzed sample, we identified 15 hate speech comments, representing 2.1% of the total. These comments predicted a deplorable future for the nation: "@leandrocicchinelli se dice presidente . . . y si es pibita llega a ser presidente el país está terminado definitivamente [she calls herself president . . . and if this little girl becomes president, the country is definitely finished]" (gonzimediina, 2019).

Regarding misogyny, its codes entail 19.3% of hate speech, and they include discredit, human body, stereotype, objectification, and profanity. Allusions to Fernández's physique or age were a frequent means of delegitimizing and denigrating her figure. First, the comments included allusions to women's bodies, criticism, insult, and objectification. Second, age discrimination became evident such as "*Ofe deberías lavarte los dientes* [Ofe you should brush your teeth]" (luccagoda, 2019) as well as "*Está contenta porque con 19 años va a cobrar 300 lucas* [She is happy because at the age of 19 she is going to receive 300 *lucas*]" (carlosortiz.caceres, 2019).

Table 9. Frequency of Occurrence of Hate Speech and Misogyny Variables in the Comments of Fernández's Publications.

Variables	Frequency (Codes)	Percentages (Comments)
Political ideology	11	73
Criticisms	9	60
Contempt	6	40
Insults	6	40
Derision	3	20
Body discrimination	2	13
Gender matters	2	13
Generational discrimination	2	13
Negative stereotyping	2	13
Age discrimination	1	7
Claims	1	7
Threats	1	7
Profanity	5	33
Discredit	2	13
Human body	2	13
Stereotype and objectification	2	13
Total codes (absolute)	57	100
Total hate speech comments	15	

Marine Le Pen

Le Pen's Instagram account attracted numerous hateful comments, ranking her as the third most disliked candidate among those analyzed. On the Instagram profile, 54 comments of the total (7.7%), contained hate speech. Political ideology was the most recurrent variable. Some hate speeches were formulated with allegations of rigging at the polls, such as "*Y' a du trucage dans les urnes* [The ballot boxes are rigged]" (marathonsolitaire, 2022), and others contain insults and contempt as well in the same comment: "I'm from the US and I have to say you're disgusting and hope you lose" (8blackorchid8, 2022).

As regards misogyny, of the 174 codes, 13.8% (i.e., 24) are misogynistic messages. Among the variables with which we have analyzed misogyny, the labels used are discredit, dominance, sexual

harassment and threats of violence, sexuality, stereotype and objectification, and profanity. The most frequent discredit comes from the constant relationship with her political adversary, Emmanuel Macron, and with her link and affinity with the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin: "Marine looser Macron Winner" (monange99, 2022), or "*Putin's prostitute! Shame on France*" (niezgodaroman, 2022).

Table 10. Frequency of Occurrence of Hate Speech and Misogyny Variables in the Comments of Le Pen's Publications.

Variables	Frequency (Codes)	Percentages (Comments)
Political ideology	43	80
Contempt	17	31
Criticisms	17	31
Derision	17	31
Insults	17	31
Claims	7	13
Aggression	6	11
Irony	6	11
Threats	5	9
Gender matters	4	7
Negative stereotyping	4	7
Racism/xenophobia	3	6
Generational discrimination	2	4
Religious beliefs	1	2
Sexual orientation or gender identity	1	2
Profanity	10	18
Sexual harassment and threats of violence	4	7
Sexuality	4	7
Stereotype and objectification	4	7
Discredit	1	2
Dominance	1	2
Total codes (absolute)	174	100
Total hate speech comments	54	

Conclusions and Discussion

The content analysis of six Instagram profiles belonging to prominent female political leaders revealed three main findings.

First, addressing RQ1 (*How is online hate speech expressed toward prominent female political leaders of international exposure?*), this study confirms that even though the majority of the comments posted by followers to the different electoral candidates are positive, hate speech is present in all of them. Specifically, of 4,200 comments, 284 (i.e., 7%), contain elements that can be interpreted as hate speech.

The most common expressions of contempt and hatred in these comments were through political ideology, irony, criticisms, and insults.

RQ2 addresses misogyny: *How is misogyny manifested in such speech?* In this case, although it is present in a limited manner, misogyny was detected in the analyzed comments. Thirty-four misogynistic comments were identified, representing 1% of the total sample (4,200) or 12% of the comments containing hate speech elements (284). Misogyny was mainly expressed through profanity, stereotypes, objectification, and discredit.

This study is in line with the consensus about the role that digital platforms' lax environments play in the proliferation of hate speech. However, there are differences in the prevalence of hate speech across platforms. For example, Instagram profiles created by political figures are designed to engage their electorate (Parmelee et al., 2022), and, at the same time, users' primary motives for "following political leaders on Instagram are for information and guidance" (Parmelee & Roman, 2019, p. 7). This could explain the relatively low percentage of detected hate speech and misogyny, 7%, which is a fact that cannot be ignored.

RQ3 asks the following: *Are there differences or similarities in hate speech and expressions of misogyny directed at these women?*. Comparing the six political profiles analyzed, Georgia Meloni received the most hate speech comments (108 of 700). In her profile, the misogynist content (nine) was associated with stereotyping and objectification and directed not solely at Meloni. On the opposite end is Jacinda Ardern with only five hateful comments representing only 1.4% (10 of 700) of the sample reviewed.

Marine Le Pen and Ofelia Fernández stood out as significant recipients of explicit misogyny. In Le Pen's posts, political ideology was the most frequently appeared variable; and in terms of misogyny (13.8%,), the comments were associated with discrediting, dominance, sexual harassment and threats of violence, sexuality, stereotype and objectification, and profanity. Hate speech comments directed at Fernández represent 2.1% of the total, and in the context of misogyny, they were related to discredit, body discrimination, stereotype and objectification, and profanity. Also, Ofelia Fernández's physique and age were objects of criticism. In Ocasio-Cortez's profile, the misogynistic aspect of hate speech comments (three of 700) were sexuality and femininity. In Irene Montero's posts, 59 comments contained elements of hate speech and misogyny, and were related to body discrimination, stereotyping and objectification, and profanity.

The relatively low percentage of hate speech and misogyny detected can be related to the fact that public profiles of political figures on Instagram are used to approach their electorate and the potential electorate.

Misogyny was manifested across different topics in a wide range of criticism toward women, from their age to their appearance, including a lot of discredit and sexual harassment, among others. We can see issues that women experience in their daily lives as reflected in discourses directly tied to their gender. So, we can conclude that one of the main contributions of this article is to address the target of the recipients of hate speech on social networks, in this case, women politicians, a topic that has received little attention in prior research (Parekh, 2006). Furthermore, using Instagram as a data source fills a gap in the literature as most of this research has been conducted on platforms like Twitter (e.g. Beltran et al., 2021; Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021; Ncube & Yemurai, 2020).

These data open future research lines and raise new questions to continue analyzing this phenomenon: Does the assault on the rights of specific groups and minorities lead to increased resistance and hate? Are audiences associated with center and left-leaning governments more active on social networks? Additionally, is the prevalence of hate and misogyny speech linked to a country's profile? In conclusion, these data not only shed light on the existing patterns of hate speech and misogyny but also propel us toward a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

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