‘Like’, Follow, & Elect: Instagram as a Tool to Increase U.S. Female Political Representation

Emma L. Harrington

Thesis submitted as partial fulfillment of the designation of Coolidge Otis Chapman Honors Scholar

University of Puget Sound
Abstract

Women are underrepresented across the globe in politics and while the U.S. has recently made historic strides, the gender gap continues to exist with repercussions that affect the effectiveness of U.S. democracy at every level of governance. The “ambition gap” is the current theoretical model which best explains why and how women continue to be absent from political discussion and to diminish this gap means to address the barriers that have traditionally disincentivized women from entering the political arena. The barrier specifically addressed is that of the traditional media, whose proven gendered and unequal coverage of political campaigns has dissuaded would-be female candidates from running for seats. Global research has identified social media platforms as a potential equalizer for female candidates but more research with practical implications is necessary in the U.S. Through an iterative analysis of ten profiles of female candidates who ran 2018 midterm congressional races, nine second orders themes (Endorsements, Traditional Media, Traditional Party Establishment, Directly Address the Audience, Call to Action, Behind-the-Scenes, Technical Skill, Use of Humor, and Appeals to Aesthetic) emerged to help explain the current usage of the under-researched but widely used platform of Instagram. By better understanding current usage, we can begin to craft best practices to ensure Instagram is a low-cost tool that contrasts the impediment of traditional media for female candidates.
'LIKE’, FOLLOW, & ELECT

‘Like’, Follow, & Elect: Instagram as a tool to increase U.S. female political representation

Although the U.S. is currently being governed by more women than at any other point in the nation’s history, the female population and the ensuing needs of women are grossly underrepresented in both American and global politics. This gender gap is academically explained through evidence that women lack the same “ambition” and desire men have to run for public office for several reasons. One such reason that women are less likely to hold political aspirations is the historically gendered and unequal coverage of female candidates by traditional media outlets. The emergence of social media platforms has not only changed everyday life in the 21st century but has also greatly altered the realms of politics and news, which may provide an opening for would-be female candidates to overcome the barrier that traditional media presents. A survey of global research on social media affirms that such platforms can be a tool used by female candidates in campaigning, under the right set of circumstances, to contend with traditional narratives, lessen the ambition gap, and ultimately increasing female representation. One of the major identified drawbacks to digital campaigning is a lack of how-to knowledge and understanding of best practices on social media sites. An iterative analysis of three case studies on hotly contested congressional races from the 2018 midterm elections helps to broaden the understanding of how candidates are currently utilizing the increasingly popular photo-sharing platform, Instagram. Such an understanding of current practices is the foundation on which to develop ways to increase how-to wisdom and knowledge on effective use. The widespread sharing of such knowledge may ultimately aid in increasing overall female representation in American politics.
Literature Review

*Where are the Women in Politics?: Female Underrepresentation in U.S. Politics*

Women may make up fifty-one percent of the total U.S. population (“U.S. Census Bureau,” 2019), however, the number of women in our political system is nowhere near representative of this near-even split. Female U.S. citizens have had the legal right to cast a ballot for just barely 100 years (even less when one looks at women identifying as members of ethnic minorities) and the progress for women holding political office has been just an incremental. The election of 1978 was the first year a woman was elected to the U.S. Senate who was not replacing a deceased male spouse and it was not until 15 years later in 1993 that, “more than two women serve in the chamber simultaneously” (Hayes & Lawless, 2016, p. 111). 2018 has replaced 1992 (in which a record-breaking number of female U.S. Senators were elected) as the ‘Year of the Woman’ given that a number of records for female political representation were broken after the November midterm elections. The 116th Congress, currently in session at the time of writing, has a record-breaking 102 female elected representatives. Additionally, 2018 not only saw a record number of female state legislators elected across the nation, but Nevada became the first state in U.S. history to have a legislature composed of 50% women (“Women In State Legislatures,” 2019).

However, even after a record-breaking election, “women continue to make up less than one-quarter of the elected officials in … state capitals and city halls” (Hayes & Lawless, 2016, p. 111). In total, only 44 women have served in the position of state governor and only 56 have served as senators (“Women In State Legislatures,” 2019). Even the record-breaking number of female members in Congress is misleading progress as it brings the share of women in Congress up to only 23.7% (Kurtzleben et al, 2019). These numbers are also less impressive and less
representative of the aforementioned U.S. population when compared to the 333 men serving in the House. It is also important to note the partisan disparities within the gender representation gap as there are only thirteen Republican Congresswomen (Kurtzleben et al, 2019). According to Kurtzleben et al. (2019), this gap appears to be widening as the 2018 midterms saw 35 Democratic women become freshmen in the House, while “there will be only one on the Republican side: Carol Miller of West Virginia” (par. 7).

While some parity has been made at the state and local level, it is the highest rungs of the political ladder which remain void of equal female representation. Although Hilary Clinton was the first presidential nominee for either of the major political parties during the recent 2016 election, the U.S. has never had a woman sitting behind the desk in the Oval Office while fifty-nine other nations have had women serve as heads of state (Willis et al., 2019). As two of the premier researchers on women in U.S. politics Lawless and Fox (2005) put succinctly, “Many enclaves of male dominance crumbled across the last half of the twentieth century, but high-level electoral politics was not one of them” (p.7). In fact, the World Economic Forum (2018) estimates that at the current pace, gender equality will not be reached for over a century.

The study of women in politics is relatively new and scholars involved “have fought to convince the political science community to take the women and politics subfield seriously” (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 5) and therefore “nearly all of the research that addresses gender and U.S. politics … tends to begin with a justification for studying women and elections” (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 5). The above justification relies on the same “normative underpinning” of underrepresentation as previous work, however, “it remains a potent reflection of reality; women’s presence in our political institutions bears directly on issues of substantive and symbolic representation” (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 5).
As cliché as the “underrepresented” argument may be, the literature suggests that “the inclusion of more women in positions of political power would change the nature of political representation in the United States” (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 7; Burrell, 2014). This change would mean more attention given to gender-salient issues and give the U.S. government a greater degree of legitimacy, “simply because it would be more reflective of the gender breakdown of the national population” (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 7). Additionally, a correlation has been found between the percentage of females in a state legislature and female citizen’s levels of external efficacy, or belief that the government will respond to their demands and needs (Atkeson & Carillo, 2007, p. 8). A similar positive relationship has been found between the presence of highly visible female politicians and adolescent girl’s expectations of political engagement (Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2016). Overall, female representatives in state-wide political positions have led to “higher levels of political knowledge, interest, efficacy and activity” in that state’s population (Ladam et al., 2018, p. 373).

On a global scale, increasing the number of female representatives has shown to not only “bring new perspectives to policy making” but to “make government more responsive -- not only to underserved populations, including the poor and children -- but to all strata of society” (Patterson, 2016, p. 7). Women’s equal representation in government has also been found to increase public trust in political institutions (Di Meco, 2017; Anzia & Berry, 2011; Dollar et al., 2001). These all seem like they would be positive advancements, which begs the question, why are women still so underrepresented in politics at all levels?

**Traditional Theories on Female Underrepresentation in U.S. Politics**

There are a few traditional theoretical strands that have come out of this emerging area of study to explain the discrepancy in female candidates and representatives in comparison to the
U.S. electorate. The earliest conclusion appears to be that “overt discrimination” against women was the primary causal factor (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 21; Githens & Prestage, 1977). However, as more extensive research was conducted, the kind of overt discrimination, bias, and sexism expected to cause the gap was not substantiated (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 21). In more modern research, Lawless and Hayes (2016), among others, find three main reasons why they believe that sex and gender bias or overt discrimination have come to “play a minimal role in the vast majority of U.S. elections,” particularly those in the twenty-first century (p. 7). The first being that the incentives have changed, leaving little reason for candidates of any gender to campaign or be evaluated by voters drastically differently (Hayes & Lawless, 2016, p. 7).

Second, women are no longer “novel” in politics and while there are still comparatively not many of them, this has leveled the playing field in some ways (Hayes & Lawless, 2016, p. 111). Finally, our current state of polarization between the Republican and Democratic parties means that “... voters’ views of candidates are shaped almost entirely by long-standing party attachments, leaving little room for sex to matter” (Hayes and Lawless, 2016, p. 7).

Utilizing a similar line of thinking, another group of scholars hypothesized the “pipeline” explanation. An analysis of the members of the 109th U.S. Congress found that prior to their roles as representatives, the leading professions that precede a congressional run were in law, business, medicine, and education (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 26). According to Lawless & Fox (2005), similar results were found at the state legislative level. These are careers and professional arenas which women have traditionally and historically been excluded from and has thus led to an exclusion from the political career “pipeline” at all levels of governance (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 26). Through the “pipeline” explanation, many scholars, including Lawless and Fox (2005) came to the more optimistic conclusion that because “... women have made significant
gains entering the formerly male-dominated professions of law, business, and medicine” similar gains in the political arena should not be far behind (p. 11). Many hoped that “as open seats emerge and women continue to move into the professions that precede political candidates, more women will seek and occupy positions of political power” (Lawless & Fox, 2005, p. 2). Although this theory was widely accepted, it has yet to come to fruition.

However, a new school of thought has emerged from a group of scholars led by Lawless and Hayes (2016) which focuses on the idea that the gender gap manifests as a gap in political ambition and this is the root of female underrepresentation in politics. They find that while “women are numerically under-represented at all levels of elective office” they are also “less likely than men to run for political office in the first place, not that they don’t win when they do (p. 6). In both federal and state races, female candidates have been found to have the same likelihood of success, get just as many votes, and raise the same amount of money as their male counterparts (Hayes & Lawless, 2016; Cook, 1998; Carroll & Fox, 2014; Seltzer et al., 1997; Smith and Fox, 2001; Kitchens & Swers, 2016). In fact, in the 2010 and 2012 primary elections, Democratic female candidates were able to fundraise more than male Democrats, while in the 2012 General Election they earned just as much as their seat status predicted (Kitchens & Swers, 2016).

It is important to note that those who have explored the “political ambition gap” explanation for the gender gap in political representation, do not mean to downplay or diminish the role gender plays or to suggest that the process is “gender-neutral” (Hayes and Lawless, 2016, p. 8). These researchers acknowledge the institutional hurdles that only women face when trying to enter the political arena as well as the asymmetrical recruitment of candidates by the major parties, as well as the sexism and misogyny women face if they make it to the campaign
trail (Hayes and Lawless, 2016). However, even with these caveats, the “ambition gap” is the most current understanding and it offers an interesting lens through which to identify what barriers exist that disincentivize women from throwing their hat into the political ring.

**Female Politicians & Traditional Media**

One such identified barrier is that of the traditional media which covers politics and political campaigns and is sometimes colloquially referred to as the “fourth” branch of the U.S. government. The evidence that media coverage of female political candidates is gendered and unequal to that of their male counterparts is supplied and backed “by more than thirty years of research by scholars from political science, journalism, and communication” (Bystrom, 2014, p. 246). The ways journalists cover and interact with female candidates varies from asking women questions they do not ask men, describing them “in ways and with words that emphasize their traditional role and focus on their appearance and behavior,” and holding them “accountable for the actions of their husbands and children, although they rarely hold male candidates to the same standards” (Bystrom, 2014, p. 244). These coverage disparities are often referred to as “gendered news frames” in which female politicians are described or “framed” as a woman first and a politician second wherein “their gender identity is always their “primary descriptor”, the most interesting thing about them” (Murray, 2010, p. 258). Some research has seen coverage of female candidates in local and state-level races has generally improved and become more equitable in terms of length and issue-focus since the 2002 election, but disparities remain (Bystrom, 2014, p. 248). However, in contradiction to those research trends, a study in 2008 found that “women running for governor and mayors of cities of 100,000 of more received less media coverage than their male opponents” (Major & Coleman, 2008, p. 315). Additionally, the Global Media Monitoring Project, the largest and longest longitudinal study regarding gender and media, found
that in 2015, only 16% of people globally included in the news regarding politics were women (Macharia, 2015). There is not just a disparity in who is covered by traditional media, but in who is producing the coverage as well, with male authors contributing “at least twice as much” as female authors in media discussions of political leaders (Barboni et al., 2018, p. 9). It should also be noted that any measurable equity and progress in media coverage has failed to affect higher-level positions such as that of Congress or Commander in Chief in the U.S. (Bystrom, 2014, p. 246).

While there may be debatable progress regarding the coverage of female politicians on some levels of American politics, things have proven to “worsen particularly as female politicians try to break the highest glass ceiling” and especially when running against a male candidate because they are then “openly defying societal expectations of women as supportive rather than competitive, best fit for a place behind every great man” (Kittilson & Fridkinm, 2008; Brystrom, 2014, 246). The gendered stereotypical media coverage of women occurs even “if two women are running against each other rather than a male opponent” where the candidates “weight, wardrobe, and hairstyles” are a “constant source of media comment” (Bystrom, 2014, p. 245-6). Newspaper coverage in the 1990s and 1980s often questioned women’s viability or ability to win, the implications of which were illustrated in a 1992 study in which “fictitious female candidates were given the kind of media coverage usually accorded to male incumbents, respondents rated them equally likely as men to win” (Khan, 1992, p. 497-500; Brystrom, 2014, p. 246).

The gender disparity and regularly negative coverage of female politicians has been shown to have a real impact within the political sphere on female representation. A study out of Australia found that after seeing coverage of the nation’s first female Prime Minister that was
described as largely unfair and negative, a full 80% of female respondents over the age of 31 reported they were then “less likely to consider a political career” (Williams, 2017, p. 553). Additionally, Sara Blanco, the Communications Director at Running Start, a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization working to prepare young women to run for office, finds that:

“We hear from young women all the time that one thing that sometimes makes them hesitant to run for office is that they fear how they will be treated in the media. They see how women leaders face all kinds of sexist coverage (focusing on appearance, doubting qualifications, criticism of parenting choices, and more) and understandably, being the object of all of that really doesn’t appeal to them.” (Di Meco, 2019, p. 11)

Given that traditional media’s coverage and treatment of female politicians has not encouraged women to seek public office, it is important to explore how women’s experiences with new media, such as social media platforms, might tell a different story and minimize the political “ambition gap.”

**What Makes Social Media Different?**

Social media, defined as “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), has grown in prominence as internet accessibility has increased. An estimated 2.65 million people were active on social media platforms in 2018, a number which is anticipated to increase to 3.1 billion within the next two years (Clements, 2019). This explosion of use, there were less than 1 billion active users of social media at the beginning of the decade (Clements, 2019), has made these platforms not only an active place for political discussion but also a revolutionizing factor in campaigning. Multiple studies pinpoint the 2004 Presidential election as the year in which blogs were first utilized as campaigning tools, however, the idea of
the ‘social media election’ was first ushered in by Obama’s 2008 campaign (Enli, 2017). In both the 2008 election and 2012 re-election campaign, Obama’s team “pioneered” the use of voter records and data mining in conjunction with social media platforms to mobilize voters (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). Social media platforms have been integral to the campaigning process since, but the 2016 U.S. presidential election was marked by an increased focus on images and videos, mostly in part to the growing popularity and influence of Instagram, an online mobile photo-sharing platform (Enli, 2017).

The rise of social media platforms has also led to shifts within the academic world. Communication scholarship has typically made a distinction between interpersonal communication and mass media communication. Mass media has traditionally been distinguished as “(a) one-way, (b) technologically mediated messages, (c) delivered to large audiences (d) of individuals not known personally by the sender,” which can be best exemplified by cable news or radio broadcast (O’Sullivan and Carr, 2018, p.1162). Whereas interpersonal communication has been defined as “(a) two-way, (b) nonmediated message exchange between (c) a very small number (usually two) of participants, (d) who have personal knowledge of each other” (O’Sullivan and Carr, 2018, p.1162) and most typically refers to one-on-one, face-to-face conversations. However, new media, in particular, have opened new doors in which users can easily send personalized messages to mass audiences and vice versa utilize mass channels for interpersonal communication, or do both simultaneously. To bridge the divide between mass and interpersonal, and create a theoretical model to explore new media, O’Sullivan and Carr (2018) propose the masspersonal communication model (MPCM). This new model redefines types of communication by variation among two dimensions: “(a) perceived exclusivity of message access and (b) message personalization” (p. 1165). Masspersonal communication melds elements
of both and is best exemplified by social media platforms where messages can be very accessible and easily personalized. The media defined as masspersonal has been found to be “... reducing the gatekeeping role of traditional television and radio stations in the media environment” (O’Sullivan and Carr, 2018, p. 1171).

This bypassing of editorial media was another development during the 2016 presidential campaign in which social media platforms were seen as a direct source of news (Enli, 2017). Candidate profiles on social media platforms have surpassed campaign websites as the main online information channel for communicating political information and “being able to speak to an infinite public out there on their Facebook page, via their Twitter feed, or in their personal blog is both personally and politically liberating but also good for democracy” for political actors historically marginalized by mainstream traditional media, “such as women and members of smaller political parties” (Ross, 2016). Additionally, while there is an academic consensus that the structural allowances for higher levels of participation on social media do not necessarily translate to higher levels of political participation (Ancu, 2015; Boulianne, 2015; Effing et al., 2011; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Wallack, 1981), a study conducted in the Netherlands concerning their local and national elections found that more social media engagement (“likes,” “follows,” or “comments”) translated to a relatively higher vote count (Effing et al., 2011).

However, there is no conclusive evidence that masspersonal communication platforms have completely replaced other traditional channels such as rallies, door knocking, press conferences, televised debates, and TV commercials (Craig, 2015; Enli, 2017). In part, the maintained importance and primacy of channels like television campaign ads is the fact that people who already consume news on/from the internet are already statistically more politically informed and politically active (Devine, 2017). This means that television marketing still targets
the large swath of the population who are not. However, while they remain relevant, all of these traditional channels have been changed and impacted by the rise in social media use. Most noticeably, any activity on a traditional channel is then “documented, debated and mentioned on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram by the campaigns and those who follow them” (Enli, 2017). This overview of how social media platforms differ from traditional media sources and their massperonal capabilities is important to understand their potential as a tool for female candidates, principally the ability of these new mediums to bypass “editorial media” as a direct source of new and the narrative control they offer to candidates (Enli, 2017).

Global Research on Social Media’s Effects for Female Politicians

It is not a completely original or unique idea to think that social media might be a tool to utilize when striving for more female representation in politics, but much of this thinking is taking place outside of the United States and in just the past few years. In a first of its kind study, Women in Parliaments (WIP), a non-profit foundation focused on increasing the number and influence of women in international politics, sought to answer whether social media can help advance the positionality of women on the global stage (Patterson, 2016, p. 4). The gender representation gap that exists within the U.S. is also present abroad with, “only 22.8% of national members of parliament are women, and there are still 38 countries in the world with parliaments in which men account for more than 90% of its members” (Patterson, 2016, p. 4). In a 2015 study, completed by the same group, found that “traditional media was highlighted as one of the obstacles to gender parity” and the reasons substantiating this finding are extremely similar to those outlined above which were specific to the American media landscape (Patterson, 2016, p. 4).
Their 2016 survey of the social media use of over 900 female Parliamentarians from 107 countries confirms, “that social media are a political equalizer. They are a resource with an incredible political impact, and unlike other resources (such as campaign financing, professional networks or traditional media coverage), they have a very low entry cost” (p. 4). According to the WIP’s report, social media use allows female politicians to subvert the obstacles of traditional media because on social media sites the primary audiences they are reaching are “the voters that support them, their campaign workers, and their constituents” (Patterson, 2016, p. 10). Meanwhile, “elite audiences”, including the producers of most traditional media channels and news reporters, are “of decidedly secondary importance” (Patterson, 2016, p. 10).

One of the most substantial findings of the WIP regards the so-called “motherhood penalty.” The term has arisen in anthropology and sociology research to describe “the job-related disadvantages faced by mothers relative to non-mothers” (p. 11). WIP and their collaborators found that this social penalty “does not apply to female politicians’ social media use” because study respondents both with and without children utilized social media sites to the same high degree (p. 11). The flexibility and mobility allowed by social media sites mean that they “can be employed while in the office, traveling, or at home” in ways that traditional campaigning tools cannot and which helps open up more of the political playing field to women who also have child-rearing responsibilities (Patterson, 2016, p. 11). Also found to support this is that “poorly funded candidates were as active on social media as their well-funded counterparts” making social media the only campaign tool where “the two groups stood on nearly equal ground” (Patterson, 2016, p. 11).

On pace with the WIP study, Di Meco (2019) that utilized “personal interviews and conversations with over 85 women leaders in politics (including three former Prime Ministers
and one former president), civil society, television, journalism and technology and a review of over 100 publications” to take stock of the current placement and treatment of female politicians in both new and traditional media (p. 4). Among Di Meco’s (2019) findings were multiple studies that demonstrated female politician’s ability to generate more ‘likes’, ‘followers’, and higher levels of engagement on social media than their male peers, as well as gender differences in the content shared (“Politics is Personal,” 2016; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018; McGregor & Mourao, 2016; Evans et al., 2014; Meeks, 2016). Women have been found to post “fewer personal pictures and statements about themselves” which is presumed to be due to “the heightened scrutiny of their physical appearance and image,” instead they publish content that focuses on policies and mobilizing voters through encouraging donations, volunteering, and voting early (Evans & Clark, 2015). These differences in both content and levels of activity enable female candidates to not only “attract more attention and mobilize more support” (“Politics is Personal,” 2016; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018) but also has been found to have “positive effects on their likeability” as candidates (McGregor & Mourao, 2016; Meeks, 2016).

There is just one other piece of recently published work in the existing literature on social media as a positive tool for female political candidates. Barboni et al. (2018) used case studies from three continents and had three major findings in regard to the benefits of social media for female candidates (“digital campaigning”). The first being that social media platforms allow candidates to extend the reach of their campaign and messaging past their local and geographical confines to “connect with out-of-area supporters who might want to donate or spread the message” (Barboni et al., 2018, p. 56). Additionally, the type of content popular on social media and the instantaneous nature of sharing available on the platforms helps “humanize” candidates for their followers (Barboni et al., 2018, p. 56). Barboni et al. (2018) found that “being immersed
in the weekly, sometimes even daily, habits of the people elected to represent you can make it more difficult to ‘other’ them,” something that has historically been an issue for female candidates (p. 57).

Finally, the new avenues that social media opens for candidates and politicians to connect with journalists have given women an unprecedented ability to “set the tone of public discourse around elections and politicians” (Barboni et al., 2018, p. 57). The growing popularity of social media has not just affected politics, but have changed the demands on journalists who now face “pressure to publish multiple times a day and always have the latest news” and has been found to have led to an increase in coverage of social media posts themselves (Barboni et al., 2018, p. 57). The changing nature of both of these fields has created an opening for female politicians to have more influence on public opinion through their content on social media platforms than they did through the traditional media structure (Barboni et al., 2018, p. 58). Barboni et al.’s (2018) work is best summarized in a quote by Republican political consultant Andrea Bozek regarding the positive of “digital campaigning,” in that it:

... sort of takes off the plate the smoke-filled back-room of the good ol’ boys club.

Digital can open a lot of new worlds for female candidates that maybe they wouldn’t have been able to connect with before the advancement of a lot of these technologies. So yes, absolutely, I think it can be a powerful tool that women candidates can use to not only get their message out, but to also reach low-dollar donors or more grassroots supporters that identify with their message (p. 57).

While all of the research currently on the table regarding the tool social media can be in the larger work of gender political representation equity mainly looks towards the global context,
their findings are important to take into consideration when exploring this in a U.S. specific context.

**Major Drawbacks to Social Media Use by Female Politicians**

There are two major drawbacks to female politicians utilizing social media as a campaigning tool that have been identified by global studies, a lack of how-to knowledge and vile “trolling” online. While the participatory nature of social media is one of its most attractive qualities, it is also a drawback. Outside of the political arena, women are twenty-seven times more likely to face abuse online than men and it is fear of this kind of abuse, online threats, and concerns about security and privacy that have been blamed for the gender social media usage gap (Di Meco, 2018). Women make up “the majority of the targets of some of the most severe forms of online assault—rape videos, extortion, doxing with the intent to harm…[and are] victims of nonconsensual pornography, stalking, electronic abuse and other forms of electronically-enhanced violence” (Women’s Media Center, 2016). While a 2014 report out of Europe found that “one in ten women have already experienced a form of online violence since the age of 15” (Kjaerum, p. 93), it can be particularly bad for women in the political arena. Some of these forms of online abuse occur every thirty seconds to female politicians and journalists in the United States and the United Kingdom (Amnesty International, 2018). Barboni et al. (2018) had similar findings, including that women were “three times more likely than men” to receive what were considered “gender-related derogatory comments” on social media platforms (p. 2). Additionally, on online platforms, “74.1% of comments related to political leaders’ appearance and 71.8% of comments related to their marital status,” the vast majority being negative in valence, were directed at women rather than male politicians (Barboni et al., 2018, p. 8). Based on their findings, they concluded that the negative comments, bias, and abuse faced by women
politicians online are not necessarily worse than that sustained in traditional media channels, however, “the anonymity and instantaneous nature of social media has simply made the worst aspects easier to see” (Barboni et al., 2018, 56). While there are many ways in which social media opens doors for female politicians that were non-existent through traditional media channels, this is one way in which new media heightens some pre-existing issues for women’s involvement in politics.

The second “major limitation” singled out by Patterson (2016) was “female parliamentarians personal knowledge of how to use social media effectively” (p. 7). They found that “those who were knowledgeable in the effective use of social media were more than twice as active as those who were least knowledgeable” however, only one-fourth of their respondents were highly knowledgeable (Patterson, 2016, p. 12). Patterson (2016) concluded that these findings pointed to an underutilization of social media by female legislators, but they also highlight the importance of groups such as Women in Parliaments and Emily’s List, Running Start, Higher Heights, Get Her Elected, She Should Run, and even Atalanta (although based out of the UK) who, amongst other forms of support, offer programs and resources to help teach female candidates effective social media skills and best practices. Also emphasizing the importance of these groups and political party was the finding that of the factors that played a role in how and why female politicians use social media as a campaign tool, “none was more important than whether female legislators perceived themselves to be treated equally in their political party” (Patterson, 2016, p. 11). Candidates who believed they had the backing and support of their party were the most active on social media sites, whereas the “perception of women’s equality in their country was only weakly related to their level of social media activity” (Patterson, 2016, p. 11). This appears to be the one identified “cost” to the low-cost resource that
social media can be and through more sharing of knowledge and better systems of support even this can be eliminated. However, in order to address this second barrier to social media achieving its full potential as a productive tool, we must first understand how candidates are currently utilizing social media. With this information, we can begin to develop programs that increase how-to knowledge and ensure that candidates, particularly female candidates, are employing best practices and most effective tactics on these platforms.

Methods & Data

In an attempt to examine how social media is currently used by politicians in the U.S. political sphere and eventually develop strategies to increase knowledge of best practices, ten case studies have been selected to analyze through an “iterative” approach. The iterative analysis methodology finds its roots in “grounded theory” but has evolved into a more flexible and reflexive form (Tracy, 2013). Grounded theory analysis, first introduced and developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is a “systematic and rigorous framework for researchers who desire an inductive, emic approach to data analysis” (Tracy, 2013, p. 184) and originally aided in legitimizing forms of qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Although originating in communicative health research (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), a generation of social scientists have relied on the grounded theory since its introduction and subsequent renovations (Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). However, the rigidity of the grounded theory method means that most modern researchers end up utilizing a version of the grounded theoretical model in their work rather than the original framework.

Such a version is that of iterative analysis which importantly borrows from grounded theory the idea that “the study’s emphases develop from the data rather than from research questions or existing literature” (Tracy, 2013, p. 183). This approach is typically “marked by
delaying the literature review until after the data are collected” (Tracy, 2013, p. 183) rather than the traditional process. Specifically, an iterative analysis “alters between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an epic use of existing models, explanations, and theories” (Tracy, 2013, p. 183). This approach is well-suited to the question at hand because the completely emergent nature of grounded theory bars reflecting on the findings of existing global literature while the mixture of both emic and emergent within an iterative approach allows for both this reflection and for U.S. specific trends to emerge.

For the purposes of the work, the iterative analytic approach will be used to analyze Instagram posts, both photos and/or videos with their accompanying captions, posted by candidates and their campaigns in the fourteen weeks leading up to the 2018 midterm election. Instagram posts are the chosen unit of analysis because while Facebook is the most popular social media platform overall and Twitter is the platform most commonly associated with political discussion, Instagram is the fastest growing platform with over 1 billion users (Clements, 2019) and the least studied arena in regard to politics. There are a number of studies that utilize versions of grounded theory and/or iterative analysis on Instagram posts which can be used as a precedent for the present work (Terri & Munoz, 2016; Ward, 2016; Morton, 2016; Reece & Danforth, 2017).

Case Selection

Ten cases from the 2018 midterm congressional U.S. elections were chosen as the data for this iterative approach for multiple reasons and the selected cases can be seen in Figure 1 below. Congressional elections have been selected due to the proven importance of symbolic representation and the “legacy effect” which means that having a female politician serving at one level of government impacts the number of women who run in subsequent years at lower
levels (Kuta, 2018; Ladam et al., 2018). Congressional seats serve as important symbols of female representation and have a large “legacy” trickle down impact on representation at state and local levels because it is the highest level of elected political office at which female candidates have been broadly successful. In addition, Congress is a level of the U.S. government with which parallels parliamentary systems, and thus the existing global literature can be easily drawn upon (Patterson, 2016; Di Meco, 2019; Barboni et al., 2018).

Figure 1

*Visual Representation of Instagram Profiles Selected for Analysis*

**The Cases:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Instagram Handle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Heng</td>
<td>R - CA 16</td>
<td>@elizabethheng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn Bourdeaux</td>
<td>D - GA 7</td>
<td>@carolyn4congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena Epstein</td>
<td>R - MI 11</td>
<td>@lennepstein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Mcbath</td>
<td>D - GA 6</td>
<td>@lucymcbath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jana Lynne Sanchez</td>
<td>D - TX 6</td>
<td>@janalynnetx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Elvira Salazar</td>
<td>R - FL 27</td>
<td>@maelvirsalazar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Kim</td>
<td>R - CA 39</td>
<td>@youngkimca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xochitl Torres Small</td>
<td>D - NM 2</td>
<td>@xochforcongress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail Spanberger</td>
<td>D - VA 7</td>
<td>@abigailsphanberger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim Schrier</td>
<td>D - WA 8</td>
<td>@drkimschrier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Figure 1 illustrates the 10 cases selected for analysis including the candidate’s name, the congressional district in which they ran, their Instagram handle (@), and their Instagram profile picture.

These ten specific cases have been selected because while with this type of analysis and given the restraints of the project, there is no way to control for all variables, these cases illustrate a wide cross variety of variable and campaign scenarios. All cases fell within a 16%
victory margin, making them some of the closest congressional races in the nation in 2018. Carolyn Bourdeaux of Georgia 7th Congressional district, a selected case study, was the closest race in the nation during the midterms although Incumbent Rob Woodall (R) kept the seat. Cases were also selected in an attempt to get a wide cross variety in regard to party affiliation, campaign success, incumbency effect, regions, and gender of the opposition candidate. The cases include six registered Democrats and four registered Republicans and the discrepancy here reflects an on-going phenomenon and the reality of 2018 that while the number of female Democrats serving in political office is increasing, the opposite is occurring within the GOP (Kurtzleben et al., 2019; Freeman, 2008; Norrander & Wilcox, 2014; Sanbonmatsu, 2002). The selected cases also include six successful candidates and four losing candidates, although this does not correlate to the same partisan divide. The cases also illustrate scenarios in which there are both open seats and incumbents in the race to begin exploring any incumbency effects on social media use.

It should also be noted that the pool of cases from which to select is constrained by the real-world politics at play in 2018, one of the repercussions of which is that the Northeastern portion of the United States is not represented here. Additional constraints were placed by those who kept campaign Instagram accounts or the posts regarding their campaign publicly accessible after the 2018 election. The phenomenon of deleting or placing posts or whole accounts on "private" was most widespread amongst defeated candidates but was not strictly limited to losers. These cases were also chosen to exemplify a number of scenarios involving both major political parties and to explore ways in which the incumbent’s partisanship may or may not skew emerging themes.
Post Analysis

Instagram posts were analyzed utilizing a two-level iterative analysis (Tracy, 2013; Way & Tracy, 2012), beginning with emic-level categories that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Through reading and rereading the captions and viewing 1,172 posts for a total of four analytic iterations, 74 first-level open codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), such as “humorous hashtag (#) use,” “address of policy issues,” “photo with constituents,” “use of video,” and “reference to political party establishment.” After engaging in open coding, relationships amongst codes were identified and second-level analytic themes, which were more etic-level categories based on existing research and theory, emerged. The results of this second wave of coding was the creation of 9 second-order categories: 1) Endorsements, 2) Traditional Media, 3) Traditional Party Establishment, 4) Directly Address the Audience, 5) Call to Action, 6) Behind-the-Scenes, 7) Technical Skill, 8) Use of Humor, and 9) Appeals to Aesthetic. Each of these second-order categories are described and connected to theory in the results and discussion section.

Results & Discussion

Themes related to the Warranting Effect

Brief summary of themes and the Warranting Effect. Warranting theory is presented by Walther and Parks (2002) who adapted the terms and concept from Stone (1995) and originates out of online dating and impression formation research. Walther and Parks (2002) reposition “the warranting value of information” as “being derived from the receiver’s perception about the extent to which the content of that information is immune to manipulation by the person to whom it refers (p. 552). Warrants are cues then that receivers utilize to measure how much the presentation online of an individual matches the individual’s real identity and some
“warrants” hold more weight than others. When forming impressions of others, we give less weight to information that is controlled by the target, or who the information is about, and more weight to the information that the target has no control over and therefore cannot as easily manipulate (Walther & Parks, 2002). In regard to politicians on social media, the candidate has control over their campaign profile which has positives. However, this also means that the information a candidate chooses to share is low warranting information because it is susceptible to manipulation by the candidate themselves. Therefore, voters still need the traditional media to provide both information that perceived as higher warranting and to “fact-check” the information provided by the candidate themselves. The second-order themes discussed here, 1) “Endorsements,” 2) “Traditional Media,” 3) “Traditional Party Establishment,” all illustrate and reinforce the notion that social media platforms cannot completely replace other more established mechanisms of campaigning.

**Endorsements.** Posts in this second-order theme include an endorsement, which is defined by the Oxford Dictionary (n.d) as “an act of giving one's public approval or support to someone or something.” This public approval of the candidate can come from either another candidate, a political or community organization, a constituent, and/or celebrity. An example of this type of post is seen in Figure 2. This theme also includes the novel idea of “pseudo-endorsement” which involves a candidate posting a photo of them (selfie or group) with a recognizable political figure such as Beto O’Rourke, Joaquin Castro, or Joe Biden, but was not accompanied by any official endorsement of the candidate by that particular figure. An example of such a post is included in Figure 3. Both endorsements and pseudo-endorsements help validate a candidate’s campaign and serve as a cue to voters regarding the values of a campaign. In this way, true endorsements can potentially be valued by the audience as higher warranting
information because it is confirmation from an outside source. Additionally, the prevalence of “pseudo-endorsements” in the cases illustrates an awareness by campaigns of the need for external validation and confirmation from sources other than the candidates themselves, even on social media.

**Figure 2**

*Example of ‘Endorsement’ Post by @youngkimca*

![Example of ‘Endorsement’ Post by @youngkimca](image)

*Note.* Acting Congresswomen Mimi Walters publicly endorses Young Kim’s candidacy.
Figure 3

*Example of ‘Pseudo-Endorsement’ Post by @lenaepstein*

Note. Photo features the candidate and current Vice President Mike Pence but does not include a public endorsement.

**Traditional Media.** Included in this second-order theme are Instagram posts that redirect their audience and followers off of the Instagram platform to coverage of the candidate on traditional media channels such as to a cable TV interview, television campaign advertisement, or newspaper article. An example of this redirection can be seen in Figure 6. Posts within this category may also include redirection to coverage on newer mediums other than Instagram such as Twitter and YouTube as is exemplified in Figure 7. The emergence of this theme reinforces previous findings on the continued role of traditional media that cannot yet be eclipsed by social media platforms (Craig, 2015; Enli, 2017; Devine, 2017) and that traditional platforms may provide higher warranting information.
‘LIKE’, FOLLOW, & ELECT

Figure 6

Example of ‘Traditional Media’ Post by @drkimschrier

![Image of a candidate in an interview setting with a radio show host. The caption encourages followers to “tune in.”]

Note. Photo features the candidate in the midst of an interview with a local talk radio show and caption encourages followers to “tune in.”

Figure 7

Example of ‘Traditional Media’ Post by @carolyn4congress

![Image with an endorsement announcement for Carolyn Bourdeaux. The text talks about her endorsement by MoveOn and its support in Georgia's 7th Congressional District.]

Note. The candidate is congratulated on her endorsement by MoveOn and its support in Georgia’s 7th Congressional District.
Note. Photo features an endorsement for the candidate, but more notably includes links/handles to a website, Twitter account, and Facebook profile for the candidate.

**Traditional Party Establishment.** In this second-order theme are posts that actively tie a candidate to the national establishment of their political party (DNC -Democratic National Committee, RNC - Republican National Committee) either through images at party-backed events, ties to other prominent or local candidates belonging to the same party, and captions that support a goal or policy of the national party or promote a message that opposes the opposition. Two examples of posts categorized in this theme can be seen in Figures 4 and 5. There is a body of literature illustrating that voters tend to use partisanship and party affiliation as a cue or heuristic when voting rather than understanding true policy positions (Alvarez et al., 2018; Schaffner & Streb, 2002) and posts within this category serve to signal those cues to voters. Similar to the traditional media establishment, party affiliation can serve as a warrant or cue to voters that can confirm and validate the candidate.

**Figure 4**

*Example of ‘Traditional Party Establishment’ Post by @lucymcbath*
Note. Photo shows the candidate at a rally hosted by the Democratic party and both features and tags and 44th U.S. President Barack Obama as well as three other local Democrat (and female) candidates.

**Figure 5**

*Example of ‘Traditional Party Establishment’ Post by @lenaepstein*

Note. Photo features the candidate and 45th U.S. President Donald J. Trump and the caption reflects on the candidate's history working for the Republican party at the state level.

**Themes related to the Hyper-personal Model**

**Brief summary of themes and the Hyper-personal Model.** A secondary theory synthesized by Walther (1996) is that of the hyper-personal model which originates from findings that relational intimacy can be reached faster in some computer-mediated forms of communication rather than through traditional face-to-face communication. The theory posits
that computer-mediated forms for communication, which includes social media platforms, offer message senders more opportunities and ability to selectively and strategically edit their message and thus the way they are presenting themselves online and to message receivers. This means that users can more easily highlight their positive or appealing attributes when communicating via the computer than in person. The following three second-order themes, 1) “Directly Address the Audience,” 2) “Call to Action,” and 3) “Behind-the-Scenes,” highlight some of the ways in which candidates utilize this ability to selectively self-present on the Instagram platform.

**Directly Address the Audience.** As the title insinuates, Instagram posts within this theme break from traditional platform use by directly acknowledging the audience viewing the post. This address typically occurs through the language in the caption such as through posing a rhetorical question. As emphasized by global research, a positive of social media platforms are the channels it opens for candidates to subvert traditional media narratives (Barboni et al., 2018; Patterson, 2016). Speaking directly to their audience online is one way in which this subversion can happen and work to personalize candidates but allows them to select when and how these interactions occur, which cannot happen in traditional campaigning.
Figure 8

Example of ‘Directly Address the Audience’ Post by @lucymcbath

Note. Photo features the candidate with a family of constituents and the caption poses a rhetorical question to the audience about early voting.

Call to Action. While similar to posts within the “Directly Address the Audience” theme, posts within this theme both directly address the audience in the caption and additionally urge viewers of the post to take a specific action. These actions are related to the campaign such as asking their audience to vote, volunteer for the campaign, canvass for the candidate, or pick up yard signs. The accompanying photo in Figure 9 both urges followers to take action in the caption and demonstrates the act the audience is being called to partake in with the photo. This theme similarly holds the positives of a candidate’s ability to speak directly to their audience online and select when and how this occurs (Barboni et al., 2018; Patterson, 2016). While also
reinforcing the finding that social media allows female candidates to “attract more attention and mobilize more support” (“Politics is Personal,” 2016; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018).

**Figure 9**

*Example of ‘Call to Action’ Post by @abigailspanberger*

![Example of ‘Call to Action’ Post by @abigailspanberger](image)

*Note.* Photo features a young constituent with a yard sign supporting the candidate while the caption instructs the audience on how to acquire and display their own sign.

**Behind-the-Scenes.** Posts with “Behind-the-Scenes” content use the photo and/or the caption to pull back the curtain on the campaign and the candidate in two ways. The first being content that reveals the inner workings of a campaign such as traveling around the congressional district, canvassing, and training volunteers, which is illustrated in Figure 10. The second being content that is personal about the candidate themselves and reveals something about their personality that would not be publicized through traditional campaigning as is exemplified in
Figure 11. This personal content can sometimes still clearly propel the campaign by revealing elements of personal history to address a policy issue or illustrate qualities that make the candidate fit for office. This use of the ability to self-present on social media works to combat the findings that women are more easily “othered” and “dehumanized” in comparison to male candidates (Barboni et al., 2018; Patterson, 2016) as this “Behind-the-Scenes” content helps with the likeability and humanization of the candidate.

**Figure 10**

*Example of ‘Behind-the-Scenes’ Post by @elizabethheng*

*Note.* Photo features the candidate working at an outdoor table while the caption discusses the realities of life on the campaign trail.
Note. Photo features a “selfie” of the candidate and their husband outdoors while the caption wishes him a ‘Happy Birthday.

Themes related to the Affordances of Social Media

Brief summary of themes and Affordances. Bucher and Helmond (2018) put forth the concept of affordances which stems from the idea that “a feature is clearly not just a feature. The symbols and the connotations they carry matter. Pressing a button means something; it mediates and communicates” (p. 234). In relation to this idea, the concept of affordances describes “what material artifacts such as media technologies allow people to do" (Bucher and Helmond, 2018, p. 235). Specifically, regarding social media platforms, the work of Bucher and Helmond (2018) does not focus on the platforms or technologies themselves, but rather “on the new dynamics or
'LIKE’, FOLLOW, & ELECT

36
types of communicative practices and social interactions that various features afford” (p. 243). An example of this focus provided by Bucher and Helmond (2018) is that of the Twitter platform’s change from the favorite button, which was symbolized by a star, to “a much more generic like button, indicated with a heart symbol” (p. 233). This was not just a functional switch on the platform but shifted the messages conveyed by users when utilizing the function on Twitter. Affordances are also conceptualized along two dimensions: high-level or low-level affordances (Bucher and Helmond, 2018, p. 243). On social media platforms, low-level affordances are typically located in the physical medium while high-level affordances are the communicative dynamics and conditions that the platforms enable (Bucher and Helmond, 2018, p. 243). The following themes, 1) “Technical skill,” 2) “Use of Humor,” and 3) “Appeals to Aesthetic” all exemplify content and Instagram platform-specific affordances, in addition to technical aspects which appear to potentially make a more successful candidate profile.

**Technical Skill.** This second-order theme refers to both individual posts and/or the overall use of an Instagram profile that illustrates proficient knowledge of technical skill specific to the platform. Acts that exemplify this technical skill and knowledge include tagging other profiles (both in the photo and in the caption), reposting posts from other profiles, and use of the carousel feature to post multiple photos. An example that illustrates this type of skill can be seen in Figure 12. This theme can also refer to illustrating cultural knowledge such as slang, customs, and norms, which are specific to the Instagram platform. This theme relates to both high and low-level affordances of the platform because posts can both illustrate functions based in the physical medium (tagging, reposting) and cultural norms created and enabled by the functions of the platform (slang, funny hashtags).
Use of Humor. This second-order theme emerges from the plethora of posts analyzed in which candidates attempt to use or convey humor to connect with their audience. These attempts occur through funny poses in photos, the use of a meme or culturally relevant hashtag, or a joke in the caption as is illustrated in Figures 13 and 14. However, it is important to note that not all of the uses of humor seem to effectively engage the audience as is illustrated in Figure 15. This theme illustrates the use of the high-level affordances of Instagram by candidates as the platform as these types of humorous interactions can occur through the functions available on the platform and may not be possible in traditional face to face campaigning. We also know anecdotally that humor is an important tool for politicians (Shapiro, 2012) and helps to do some of the “humanizing” work that we know female candidates struggle with (Barboni et al., 2018).
Figure 13

Example of ‘Use of Humor’ Post by @janalynnetex

Note. Photo is a “repost” of a New York Times cartoon comparing fantasy football leagues to a “Fantasy Congress.”

Figure 14

Example of ‘Use of Humor’ Post by @elizabethheng
Note. Photo features the candidate at a parade while the caption includes the hashtag “#HengTogether” which is a pun using her last name.

Figure 15

Example of ‘Use of Humor’ Post by @janalynnetex

Note. Photo is of 45th President Donald J. Trump’s star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame which has been ended to feature a white hood similar to those historically worn by the Klu Klux Klan.

Appeals to Aesthetic. The choice to categorize posts within this theme typically relates directly to the image portion of the post. The “appeal to aesthetic” can occur either through aesthetically pleasing posts such as high-quality images, cohesive color palettes or through images featuring conventionally “cute” content such as children and animals. An example of a high-quality post that is part of a cohesive color palette is exemplified in Figure 16 while conventionally “cute” content is illustrated in Figure 17. This theme similarly occurs due to the high-level affordances of Instagram which have created a culture of norms regarding what the
photos posted should look like, which some even label as “Instragramism” as an aesthetic style along the lines of surrealism or modernism (Manovich, 2016; Colliander & Marder, 2018).

Figure 16

Example of ‘Appeals to Aesthetic’ Post by @youngkimca

Note. Photo features the candidate on an edited background graphic which matches the overall color scheme of her other campaign materials.
Figure 17

Example of ‘Appeals to Aesthetic’ Post by @youngkimca

Note. Photo features a dog dressed in a campaign t-shirt.

Practical Implications

While these findings are largely exploratory and tied to theoretical frameworks, there are some practical implications for current and future female candidates. First, even with the emergence of new media platforms, the influence and usefulness of the traditional media apparatus and the backing of the political party establishment are not to be underestimated. Social media does offer new opportunities for voters and candidates to connect but cannot replace traditional media or political parties in terms of political information and cues. However,
this analysis does illustrate ways in which candidates can bypass the gendered news frames of traditional media by selecting how they self-present and talking directly to their voters and constituents. Finally, the affordances of Instagram allow candidates to not only speak directly to voters but to do so in platform-specific ways such as personalizing them and appealing to voter’s senses of humor.

Limitations and Future Directions

Political research on Instagram is only just emerging as an area of focus and a number of areas necessitate further inquiry to fully understand how to successfully operationalize the platform to benefit and incentivize female candidates. Political research on Instagram is only just emerging as an area of focus and a number of areas necessitate further inquiry to fully understand how to successfully operationalize the platform to benefit and incentivize female candidates. One area being partisan differences. This piece made numerous references to partisan discrepancies in regard to the gender representation gap and here is a growing body of research and evidence illustrating that the gender gap is much wider within the Republican party (Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Freeman, 2008; Norrander and Wilcox, 2014). The structural and cultural barriers specifically placed on women in the GOP deserve and are attracting research in their own right and given the differences in their voting bases also require further exploration of party-specific digital campaigning.

Similarly, the barriers to entry in the political arena look different for women of color and these specific barriers warrant additional research, as well as how they may translate to social media behavior and campaigning. Along similar lines, the academic and public understanding of gender as a binary between male and female has been shifting in recent years and the prominence of non-binary and transgender individuals in politics is slowly increasing in the United States
The political barriers for those who identify as female, present as female and are biologically female, then those who identify outside of the gender binary vary and not only need further research but will also require specific messaging on social media platforms that are not yet fully understood. In addition to exploring intersectional issues regarding political representation and social media as a campaign instrument, future researchers should look to quantitative evaluations of engagement with different types of posts to further establish best practices for female candidates online.

**Conclusion**

At the end of their global studies, Barboni et al. (2018), Di Meco (2019), and Patterson (2016) concluded that social media could serve as an equalizer in regard to some of the obstacles facing female candidates. This work finds a similar emergent conclusion that Instagram can not only act as an equalizer for candidates already in races but also help incentivize potential candidates who might otherwise have been deterred by the bias of traditional media and thus fall into the “ambition gap” (Hayes and Lawless, 2016). One of the most commonly cited drawbacks to using social media as such as a tool, particularly for female candidates, has been a lack of how-to and best practices knowledge, without which the running of a campaign social media account can become a waste of precious resources rather than a way to get a leg up. In order to address this drawback and equip female politicians with this kind of knowledge, we must first understand how social media accounts are being used today on the campaign trail. The case studies included here offer a foundational glimpse into how candidates are currently using the social media platform of Instagram and what tactics, humorous tones, and aesthetic choices resonate with and seem to connect them best with voters. Understanding what aspects of social media, such as having a cohesive, high-quality aesthetic look to posts that reference popular
culture, work both in favor and against candidates is the first step to endowing candidates with
the knowledge to make these platforms a more effective tool. It is the hope of this work that by
disseminating this information, social media can become more of a low-cost tool for candidates
to control their own narratives, connect with voters and potential donors far and wide, and
ultimately view traditional media as less of an impediment to becoming a political representative.
Under the right circumstances and through more effective use, social media has the potential to
encourage more women to run for political office and increase female representation both in the
U.S. and around the globe.
References


Beachum, L. *Transgender political candidates are increasingly common. The money backing them is not*. The Center for Public Integrity. https://publicintegrity.org/politics/elections


Press.


## Appendix

### Codebook Chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Endorsements</td>
<td>Posts include an endorsement of the candidate.</td>
<td>a. Endorsement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(@youngkimca)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Pseudo-Endorsement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(@lenaepstien)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directly Address the Audience</td>
<td>Directly acknowledges the audience viewing the post.</td>
<td>(@lucymcbath)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Party Establishment</td>
<td>Post actively ties candidates to the national establishment of their political party.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind-the-Scenes</td>
<td>Behind-the-Scenes content reveals the interworkings of a campaign or something personal about the candidate themselves.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| a. Campaign                   | (atlizabethheng) |
| b. Personal                   | (xochforcongress) |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appeals to Aesthetic</th>
<th>Appeals to aesthetics include both aesthetically pleasing posts and conventionally “cute” content.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Aesthetically Pleasing</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Example of aesthetically pleasing post" /> (@youngkimca)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. “Cute”</td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Example of cute post" /> (@youngkimca)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls to Action</td>
<td>Call to action posts urge the audience to take a specific action related to the campaign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Example of call to action post" /> (@abigailspanberger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Humor</td>
<td>Many Instagram posts attempt to use or convey humor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Media</td>
<td>Post redirects the audience off of the Instagram platform to coverage of the candidate on traditional media channels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Skill</td>
<td>Specific post or overall use of profile illustrates proficient knowledge of technical skills and cultural knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>