Young Women's Political Discussion on Social Media in the 2016 Presidential Election

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Gender was particularly salient in the 2016 election with the first female presidential candidate from a major party running against a candidate accused of sexism and sexual assault. This provides a unique opportunity to study how gender salience influences women's political engagement and the gender gap in political engagement. Informed by role model theory, we explored gender differences in online political discussions during the 2016 election. Using survey data (N = 1020), we examined how often young men and women post about politics on Facebook and Twitter, the types of posts made, and how conflict is handled. Supporting the role model theory, we found women and men were equally engaged in political discussion online, an important finding considering women's engagement typically lags behind men.

Introduction

On January 21, 2017, half a million people crowded the streets of Washington D.C. to participate in the Women's March, and millions more took part in marches across the United States and worldwide. The march was a reaction to the sexism and misogyny on full display during Donald Trump's presidential campaign against the first woman major party nominee, Hillary Clinton. The campaign and Trump's ultimate victory left many women feeling powerless. Then, a woman in Hawaii shared on Facebook the idea of a pro-woman march and soon millions of women used the social networking site to organize the largest ever march on Washington D.C. (Stein, 2017).

Indeed, gender and social media were central themes in the 2016 presidential campaign, and the Women's March demonstrates the role they both played in the aftermath. This unique context begs the question, did the gendered nature of the 2016 campaign influence the participation of voters, and women in particular? Generally speaking, women's political engagement is significantly lower than men's (Verba et al., 1997; Winfrey, 2018). On the other hand, over two decades of research on the effect of political role models suggests visible and viable female candidates increases the political engagement of young women (Atkeson, 2003; Atkeson & Carillo, 2007; Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017). That said, other studies have found female candidates having limited or no effect on engagement (Dolan, 2006; Lawless, 2004). Related to the idea of political role models, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), and specifically gender group identification, indicates that women, particularly feminist women, are more politically engaged when their gender identity is politicized (Rinehart, 1992; Winfrey, 2018). In this way, the salience of gender identity may increase participation.

The 2016 presidential election politicized gender like no election ever before. Hillary Clinton was the first woman presidential candidate from a major party, and Donald Trump had a record of making sexist verbal attacks on women, was accused of physically assaulting several women, and was recorded bragging about such attacks. Gender was front and center in 2016, and this campaign provides an excellent opportunity to examine gender and political engagement. In fact, Campbell & Wolbrecht (2020) found that adolescent Democratic women were more likely to feel a sense of disillusionment with the American political system after the 2016 election, but they were also more likely to anticipate engaging in political protest in the future. Our study examines the role model effect on political engagement before Election Day, when many still predicted a victory for Clinton. We focused on the gender dynamics of online political discussion because numerous studies have found political discussion on and offline increases knowledge,

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interest, and other forms of engagement (e.g., Conroy et al., 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Hively, 2009; Lane et al., 2017; Mcleod et al., 1999; Tian, 2011).

In addition, we focused our analysis on young voters for two main reasons. First, young voters are still learning about politics and finding their political identity, so their behaviors are more open to change than older voters who have become more set in their political ways (Beck & Jennings, 1991; Stoker & Jennings, 2008). Second, young people are more likely than older voters to use social media for political information. A Pew study (Gottfried et al., 2016) found that 18-29-year-olds said social media was the most helpful source for learning about the 2016 election, while cable TV news was rated as most helpful by all other age groups. Furthermore, our focus on social media stems from its growing importance as a platform for news, (mis)information, and engagement (Duggan & Smith, 2016; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).

Online political engagement also includes some important and interesting gender dynamics. In 2016 Facebook and Twitter were the social media platforms most commonly used for news, and women used both more often than men (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). For some, social media was not just for passively consuming news; about one-third of social media users were actively participating in political discussions online (Duggan & Smith, 2016). However, previous research suggests it is men who are more likely to participate in public behaviors like making political posts (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Van Duyn et al., 2019), and decades of research indicates women are less politically engaged than men (e.g., Verba et al., 1997; Winfrey, 2018). While previous research has found women to be less engaged offline and online, we also explore whether this holds during a campaign where sex and gender were central themes and the tone of political discussion was often heated.

Despite the increase in research on social media and politics in recent years, relatively little has examined the role gender plays in online political discussion. Furthermore, we are aware of no published studies that have examined these activities when a visible and viable woman is running for a high-level office. This study attempts to fill this void, and since women's political engagement offline tends to lag behind men's, this is an important area of research for understanding how and when women's engagement might match or exceed men. We start with an examination of previous research, then we report the results of our study and discuss how frequently and in what ways women and men used social media for political discussion in 2016, with a specific focus on how conflict was handled.

Literature Review

Gender and the Effect of Role Models

Campbell and Wolbrecht's (2006) role model theory suggests the presence of women candidates can positively influence women's political engagement. Their research found a high-profile woman candidate can increase political discussion in the homes of girls and increases girls anticipated political involvement when they are older. Atkeson (2003) also found that the presence of female candidates can increase political engagement among adult women. This is noteworthy because, despite voting in higher rates than men, women lag behind men in virtually every other type of political engagement. Verba et al. (1997) found women reported lower levels of political interest, political media use, and less political discussion. Winfrey's (2018) analysis of data from 2000-2012 found women reported significantly less interest in elections and public affairs, less political news consumption, less political discussion with friends and family, and were less likely to try to influence others' votes. Among young people, Wolbrecht and Campbell (2017) found less political discussion among women and Mariani et al. (2015) found young women reported lower levels of anticipated future political involvement than men.

The presence of women candidates can, in some cases, increase women's political engagement in a variety of ways. However, most studies indicate the candidates must be viable, meaning they have a chance of winning (Atkeson, 2003), and visible, meaning there is sufficient media coverage for women to be aware of their candidacy (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). The presence of viable, visible, women candidates can increase young women's anticipated political involvement including plans to vote, work on a campaign, donate money, and participate in political protests (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006, 2020;

Mariani et al., 2015). Wolbrecht and Campbell (2007) also found a similar effect on young women when there were more women serving in the legislature. Several studies have also found an increase in political engagement, interest, and knowledge among women when female candidates are present (Atkeson, 2003; Dolan, 2006; Sapiro & Conover, 1997; Verba et al., 1997), and other studies have found women are more efficacious when represented by women (Atkeson & Carrillo, 2007; Lawless, 2004).

Furthermore, the presence of female candidates may politicize gender in such a way that it signals to women that their participation in politics in appropriate and desirable (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999). From a young age, girls are socialized out of politics. Boys are exposed to more political talk in the home and are more likely to be encouraged to run for office when they are older, and the gender difference in exposure to politics continues into young adulthood where college women are exposed to less politics in classes and social groups (Fox & Lawless, 2014). Burns (2008) also argues the unequal division of labor in the home makes it more difficult for women to find time to engage in political behaviors because, even in the 21st century, women still spend more time than male partners on childcare and household tasks. Supporting this, Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010) found time was an important factor in the engagement gender gap, with variables like having children affecting women's engagement more than men. This is capped off by the fact women often feel less confident in their knowledge of politics, leading to decreased political discussion and overall engagement (Winfrey, 2018).

However, women's feeling of connectedness to their gender group may spur political engagement when that gender identity is politicized (Conover & Feldman, 1984; Miller et al., 1981). Informed by Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory, Winfrey (2018) found that women are more politically engaged if they feel connected to their gender group because policies and vote choices affect the group as a whole. The presence of a visible and viable female candidate politicizes gender in several ways, possibly explaining why women's engagement increases. Women candidates make the political system seem more legitimate because it is more representative, and it may demonstrate that political activity is appropriate for women (Mansbridge, 1999). Women candidates may spur greater interest, knowledge, and engagement if they talk more about issues of concern to women (Dolan, 2008). The uniqueness of a female candidate, particularly in an office historically held by men, may also make the race more interesting and consequential for women voters.

The 2016 election checks all the boxes for examining the effects of role models and gender group salience. Hillary Clinton was the first woman to ever run as a major party presidential candidate, making her candidacy novel. There was ample media coverage, and most polls predicted her victory- indicating she was both visible and viable. Furthermore, gender was also made salient by Donald Trump's sexist attacks, such as criticizing Clinton's appearance and stamina, and attempting to discredit Megyn Kelly by referencing her menstrual cycle. Trump was also accused of sexual assault by numerous women, bragged about sexually assaulting women in the infamous Access Hollywood tape, and supported numerous anti-feminist policy positions. All of these factors made gender a central theme in the 2016 campaign. Furthermore, there was no shortage of topics to talk about, and debate about, in 2016. Next, we turn our focus to a specific and important form of political engagement- political discussion.

Political Discussion

Political discussion, or informal political talk, is an important form of political engagement, and we choose to focus on political discussion because of its unique relationship to the other types of engagement. Taking part in political conversation increases one's depth and breadth of knowledge (Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Hively, 2009) and subsequent participation in activities like attending meetings, circulating petitions, and contacting officials (Mcleod et al., 1999; Tian, 2011). In short, political discussion contributes to nearly all other components of political engagement. Furthermore, political discussion is an easy form of engagement that requires few resources. Anyone can talk about politics, but not everyone has the money to donate to a campaign or the time to volunteer or attend rallies.

A close examination of the literature indicates women discuss politics less frequently than men, which is likely related to women's overall lower level of political engagement (other than voting). Verba

et al.'s (1997) study found women were significantly less likely to report daily discussions of national or local politics and were less likely to report enjoying political discussion. Since 1984 the American National Election Study has asked how many times per week respondents discuss politics with friends and family, and Winfrey's (2018) analysis found gender differences were less pronounced in recent elections. Specifically, women discussed politics less frequently than men in election years until 2000 (including midterms), but the gender differences were not statistically significant in 2004, 2008, and 2012. This trend suggests the gender gap in political discussion frequency may be dissipating.

One explanation for the gender gap in political talk is the perceived political knowledge of women. Mendez and Osborn (2010) found male discussion partners were perceived to know more than they actually did by both men and women, and women were perceived to know less than they actually did by both sexes. Since women are also less confident in their own knowledge (Banwart, 2007), these perceptional difference in political knowledge might partially explain why women are less likely to participate in political discussions and may influence how women are responded to by others. However, the presence of female candidates can change this dynamic, increasing women's interest and knowledge (Sapiro & Conover, 1997; Verba et al., 1997). Furthermore, several studies have found women's political discussion increases when there is a viable female candidate running. For example, Atkeson (2003) found women in states that had viable female candidates for statewide office were more likely to discuss politics, do so frequently, and comment on political parties than women in states without such candidates. This effect may be strongest when there is party congruence between the female candidate and female citizen and when the candidate is not an incumbent. Wolbrecht and Campbell (2017) found that Democratic young women (18-29 years) discussed politics more frequency when there was a Democratic woman running for an office not already held by a woman. To extend this research our study tests the role model effect on online communication by young men and women in the 2016 election. We expect that the gender gap in political discussion will be insignificant given the gendered nature of the 2016 election and pose the following hypothesis:

H1: The frequency of women and men's political discussion on social media will be statistically similar.

A limited amount of research suggests political partisanship may be a factor in the effect of female role models. Since this research is limited and no study has examined role models at the presidential level, we also pose the following research question:

RQ1: Are there gender differences in social media communication-enabled behaviors based on whether the respondent was a Trump or Clinton supporter?

Another possible reason women are less likely to engage in political discussions is the potential for conflict. Coffé and Bolzendahl (2017) found women were more conflict avoidant, less likely to engage with people who disagree, and less likely to try to justify their own political beliefs to someone who disagrees with them. While much research on political conversation suggests individuals are most likely to talk politics with those who have similar political opinions (Klofstad et al., 2009; Morey et al., 2012; Wyatt et al., 2000), the potential for conflict exists, especially when political opinions are unknown, and the desire to avoid conflict and protect relationships is a common reason people chose not to share political opinions (Peacock, 2019). Engaging in such cross-cutting political conversations can increase awareness of opposing views, increase political tolerance (Mutz & Mondak, 2006), and lead to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between political issues (Eveland & Hively, 2009). Participating in political discussion can be risky, especially for women, but discussion is an important form of political engagement.

While little research exists on the influence women candidates may have on women citizens' willingness to engage in conflict or disagreement, there is some evidence that it may change behaviors. Hansen (1997) found that women were more likely to engage in political persuasion in races with female candidates for U.S. Senate, U.S. House, and governorships. Furthermore, the gender gap in political proselytizing nearly disappeared when there were two or more women on the ballot. Such an increase in political persuasion have been confirmed by several later studies (e.g., Atkeson, 2003; Dolan, 2006;

Reingold & Harrell, 2010; Stokes-Brown & Dolan, 2010; Stokes-Brown & Neal, 2008). Attempting to persuade someone to vote for a candidate comes with a risk for conflict. While these existing studies did not specifically measure conflict, a logical extension of this research is to examine whether and how this may translate into conflict engagement. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ2: Do men and women engage in arguments about the election in similar frequency?

Political Discussion Online

From 2008 through the 2016 general election, social media, and in particular, Facebook, have been touted as a useful tool for engaging potential voters in the political process (e.g., Fernandes et al., 2010; Pennington & Winfrey, 2020). Given the growing importance of social media in politics, we turn our focus to online political engagement, and political discussion in particular. Some, but not all, studies have found a relationship between online and offline political engagement. For example, Dimitrova et al. (2014) found different types of digital media have different effects, and social media use was a strong predictor of political participation but did not contribute to political knowledge. Studies also indicate that engaging in cross-cutting political talk online is related to offline political participation (Lane et al., 2017), and participation in online political groups are related to offline political engagement (Conroy et al., 2012). These studies demonstrate the importance of studying social media use in electoral contexts- talking politics on social media relates to real-world political activity.

The focus of this study is to examine how young people engage in political talk online and potential gender differences in 2016. Recent research has considered how individuals use social media for political engagement, considering topics such as whether users opt to post and share about political topics (Bode, 2017; Pennington & Winfrey, 2020; Wang & Mark, 2017), with current work also highlighting how individuals communicate about political issues with friends, family, and strangers through social media (Mascheroni & Murru, 2017; Vraga et al., 2015). These studies highlight how individuals seek to balance their political engagement with the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, painting a complex picture wherein political talk online can become active disagreement (Bode, 2016), stymie political engagement both online and offline (Hampton et al., 2017; Vraga et al., 2015), and damage interpersonal relationships (Fox & Moreland, 2015; Pennington, 2020).

While the body of research concerning social media use and politics is growing, there is still very little examining gender differences in how men and women use social media for political talk and what they encounter in online discussions. This study is a step in filling that void. To provide context, we can look to research about online activity generally, which has found men use social media more often than women for career networking, dating, making friends, and playing games, but women participate in more relationship maintenance activities like sending friend requests and private messages, in addition to posting photos (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). Given the difference in online activity generally, and women's political engagement offline, it is not surprising several studies have found sex differences. Men more often post political opinions than women on both Facebook and Twitter (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019), and men are more likely to comment on online political news stories (Van Duyn et al., 2019). This does not appear to be a phenomenon unique to the US. Heger and Hoffmann's (2019) study examined internet users in Germany and found women were less politically engaged online than men, and feminist women were more engaged than non-feminist women.

Despite some differences in activity, Bode (2017) found men and women have similar political motivations for using social media; the motivations she examined were using social media for political news, discussing issues, finding others who share views, and recruiting people to get involved. She also found men and women are similar in less visible behaviors such as liking a comment or posting a positive comment in response to someone's post. Conversely, men were more likely to engage in visible behaviors like posting original content. One possible explanation for these differences is women may be more likely to prioritize relationships and avoid posting content that might upset someone. However, when women see content they disagree with, they are more likely than men to unfriend or unfollow someone, though this not

a common response. There were no gender differences found in how likely men and women are to respond to disagreeable content by ignoring or replying, and there was no difference in how often men and women change their attitudes in response to content they encounter (Bode, 2017). Kenski et al. (2017) also found gender differences in responses to incivility in online news comments. This study examined five types of incivility- name-calling, vulgarity, accusations of lying, pejorative speech, and aspersion- and found name-calling and vulgarity were rated as the most uncivil. They also found women show a greater sensitivity to uncivil comments, rating each test comment (except aspersion) as more uncivil than men did. This sets up the following research question:

RQ3: Do men and women witness comments on social media they deem rude or cruel in similar frequency?

Another explanation for these gender differences is social media can be a hostile environment for women voicing their opinions. Koc-Michalska et al. (2019) found women were more likely to report having political issues explained to them in a condescending way, or to have something "mansplained", particularly on Twitter. In a study of the US and the UK, about half of women reported being mansplained to, and they were more likely to be young, educated, white, and liberal. Interestingly, only a third of men in the US and one fifth in UK reported being accused of mansplaining, and conservative men were accused more often. Vochocová's (2018) interviews with influential Czech women revealed social media are a gendered environment where women often face attacks and are rejected as arrogant feminists for sharing opinions. Knowing this, the following research questions were posed:

RQ4a: Are men and women equally likely to receive rude or cruel comments in response to a political post on social media?

RQ4b: Of those receiving rude or cruel comments on social media, did men and women respond in similar ways?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited by a multi-university research team, and some were offered class credit for participation. This analysis focuses on young voters, so any participant aged 30 or above was removed. A total of 999 respondents aged 18-29 ($M = 19.84$, $SD = 1.85$) completed the survey items reported here. The sample was 68.9% female ($n = 688$) and 31.1% male ($n = 311$). The majority of the sample identified as White/Caucasian (72%, $n = 719$) followed by Latinx (9.6%, $n = 96$), Black/African American (5.6%, $n = 56$), Asian American (6.8%, $n = 68$), Bi/multiracial (2.4%, $n = 24$). A small percentage opted to not answer (2.9%, $n = 29$), and less than 1% identified as Native American and Pacific Islander. The sample was 42.5% Democrat ($n = 425$), 28% Republican ($n = 280$), and 29% Independent/Other ($n = 290$).

Procedures

Data were collected through an online Qualtrics survey between September 12 and November 8, 2016. The survey was part of a national election study with 11 participating universities across the country; students were recruited through classes and most were offered course credit. The survey included measures of political discussion frequency, content, and conflict; choice of candidate and demographic information were also collected. This project was part of a larger survey on political behavior and opinions; only the measures relevant to this project are discussed.

Measures

Frequency of Political Talk on Social Media

To examine how voters engaged in political discussions on social media, respondents answered a series of questions regarding the frequency in which they used Facebook and Twitter for several behaviors during the 2016 election cycle. Participants gave responses ranging from never (1) to very frequently (6) for the following items: *made posts related to the presidential candidates on Facebook/Twitter, posted something positive about the candidate you support, posted something negative about the candidate you didn't support, posted something about the election that was neither positive or negative.* These items were developed by the authors and informed by previous research (e.g. Bode, 2017; Vraga et al., 2015). We chose to analyze these items individually because they capture different types of online behaviors that may also yield different kinds of responses from one's network. For example, only making positive or neutral posts about the election may demonstrate a desire to avoid conflict while making negative posts may be an invitation to engage in debate. Previous research suggests there may be gender differences in the type of content individuals post (e.g., Bode 2017), and this study sought to examine those differences.

Conflict on Social Media

In an effort to understand how often voters encountered conflict and how they responded to conflict related to the election on social media, respondents were asked on a scale of 1 (never) to 6 (very frequently) how often they: *witnessed mean or cruel behavior in discussions of the presidential election, gotten into a minor argument about the election,* and *gotten into a major argument about the election.* Respondents were also asked: *has someone ever responded to one of your political social media posts with a comment you felt was rude or cruel*? Those answering *yes* to this item (16.1%, *n* = 164) were then asked to think of times when they had witnessed rude or cruel behavior on Facebook and Twitter and responded to the following item on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (often): *telling the person to stop; defending yourself or your post; just ignoring it; making rude or attacking comments back;* and *unfriending, stop following, or blocking the person.* These items were also developed by the authors and partially informed by previous research (e.g., Bode, 2016; Pennington, 2020), and analyzed individually because they represent distinct behaviors related to conflict and relationships.

Candidate Choice

Respondents were asked which candidate they "most wanted to be president" *Hillary Clinton* (53.9%, *n* = 550)*, Donald Trump* (24.8%, *n* = 253)*, Gary Johnson* (14.7%, *n* = 150)*, Jill Stein* (4.4%, *n* = 45).

Results

H1 predicted a statistically similar frequency of political discussion on social media by women and men. Independent sample t-tests revealed no significant difference in the frequency of Facebook, $t(991)$ = .64, p = .52; Twitter, $t(991)$ = .22, p = .82; positive, $t(990)$ = .21, p = .83; negative, $t(987)$ = -.29, p = .78; and neutral posts, $t(986)$ = .75, p = .46. Therefore, H1 is confirmed. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of social media activity by respondent gender

	Men M (SD)	Women M (SD)
Facebook Posts	2.18 (1.53)	2.11 (1.45)
Twitter Posts	2.12 (1.48)	2.10 (1.49)

Positive Posts	2.24 (1.57)	2.22 (1.55)
Negative Posts	2.29 (1.61)	2.32 (1.62)
Neutral Posts	2.24 (1.53)	2.16 (1.53)
Minor Argument	2.61 (1.60)	2.65 (1.63)
Major Argument	2.12 (1.47)	2.06 (1.46)

RQ1 asked whether there would be differences in communication behaviors based on gender and candidate support. Due to sample size, only Clinton supporters (women $n = 383$, men $n = 154$) and Trump supporters (women $n = 165$, men $n = 85$) were included in the analysis. Means and standard deviations for all communication behaviors by each gender/candidate group are reported in Table 2. Through ANOVAs, a significant candidate/sex effect was discovered for use of Twitter, $F(3,778) = 3.01$, $p = .03$, making a negative post, $F(3,775) = 3.51$, $p = .02$, and witnessing mean behavior, $F(3,773) = 2.68$, $p = .05$. Means and standard deviations are reported in Table 3. Post-hoc analyses using Fisher's LSD revealed women and men Clinton supporters made significantly more Twitter posts and negative posts than women Trump supporters, and women Clinton supporters witnessed rude or cruel behavior significantly more often than men Clinton and men Trump supporters.

Table 3. Frequency of social media activity by gender and candidate support

	Women Clinton Supporters $M(SD)$	Men Clinton Supporters $M(SD)$	Women Trump Supporters $M(SD)$	Men Trump Supporters $M(SD)$
Made Facebook Posts	2.14 (1.48)	2.26 (1.61)	2.04 (1.38)	2.14 (1.39)
Made Twitter Posts	2.24_a (1.59)	2.18_a (1.55)	1.82_b (1.26)	2.16_{ab} (1.37)
Positive Post	2.34 (1.62)	2.25 (1.56)	2.13 (1.50)	2.45 (1.66)
Negative Post	2.48_a (1.68)	2.40_a (1.70)	2.01_b (1.50)	2.20_{ab} (1.46)
Neutral Post	2.18 (1.49)	2.37 (1.62)	2.13 (1.44)	2.06 (1.38)
Witnessed Mean Behavior	4.44_a (1.59)	4.08_b (1.73)	4.39_{ab} (1.62)	4.05_b (1.49)

Minor Argument	2.78 (1.67)	2.56 (1.59)	2.50 (1.57)	2.88 (1.62)
Major Argument	2.12 (1.51)	2.12 (1.47)	1.93 (1.37)	2.27 (1.44)

Note. *Means in the same row with different subscripts are significant at p < .05.*

RQ2 asked whether men and women differed in how often they engaged in arguments on social media about the election; independent samples t-tests revealed no significant difference in how often men and women engaged in minor, $t(985) = -.43$, $p = .67$; or major arguments, $t(985) = .59$, $p = .55$. Means and standard deviations for RQ2 are reported in Table 1.

Answering RQ3, independent sample t-tests revealed women ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.60$) were more likely than men ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.64$) to report witnessing rude or cruel behavior, $t(985) = -3.19$, $p = .001$. Answering RQ4, crosstabulation revealed there was no significant difference in the number of men (17.4%) and women (15.3%) reporting someone had responded to their post rudely. Those reporting they had been the target of rude posts were examined in response to RQ4a. See Table 2 for means and standard deviations. Independent samples t-tests revealed women, compared to men, were significantly more likely to report ignoring, $t(153) = -2.41$, $p = .02$, and unfriending or unfollowing, $t(151) = -2.73$, $p = .01$.

Table 2. Gender difference in response to rude comments

	Men M (*SD*)	Women M (*SD*)
Tell person to stop	2.49 (1.73)	2.58 (1.56)
Defend yourself or post	4.31 (1.32)	3.90 (1.70)
Just ignoring it	3.88[*] (1.69)	4.52 (1.49)
Make rude comment back	2.39 (1.50)	2.40 (1.61)
Unfried/unfollow	2.64[**] (1.66)	3.48 (1.83)

Note. [*]$p < .05$, [**]$p < .01$.

Discussion

Our findings provide support for the role model theory (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006), and suggest the unique gendered nature of the 2016 presidential election positively influenced women's political discussion online. The presence of the first woman at the top of a major political party's presidential ticket was a meaningful event, and role model theory suggests such a highly visible and viable candidate would have a positive influence on women's political engagement (e.g., Atkeson, 2003; Mariani et al., 2015; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017. In addition to Clinton's candidacy, gender was prominent in the 2016 campaign because Trump often played the hyper-masculine, anti-feminist who made sexist remarks repeatedly and was accused of sexual assault by multiple women. This environment likely politicized women's gender identity, increasing women's engagement (Rinehart, 1992; Winfrey 2018), and motivating potential voters to discuss politics more (Wells et al., 2017).

Unlike most studies of women's political engagement, we found few gender differences in how men and women engaged in politics on social media during the 2016 election cycle. This lack of significant differences is itself significant and supports the role model theory because most previous research has found women's political engagement, and discussion specifically, to lag behind men's in offline and online environments (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Hoffmann, 2019; Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Van Duyn et al., 2019; Verba et al., 1997), though the difference in offline discussion was less apparent in recent presidential elections (Winfrey, 2018). Importantly, previous research on role model theory indicates the presence of a viable and visible female candidate can serve as a role model for women's political participation and increase interest, engagement, likelihood to talk politics, and confidence in their political knowledge (Atkeson, 2003; Atkeson & Carrillo, 2007; Dolan, 2006; Hansen, 1997; Lawless, 2004; Sapiro & Conover, 1997; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2007). Our study suggests the first female major party presidential candidate served as a role model for young women, with young women just as likely as young men to participate in online political discussion by making posts that were both positive and negative and engaging in arguments.

The similarities between men and women in the frequency of online political communication is also important because other studies have found a significant relationship between online and offline engagement (e.g. Dimitrova et al., 2014; Jennings et al., 2020). The public nature of engagement on social media is also noteworthy. As Bode (2017) found, women have traditionally been less likely to engage in highly visible political talk online, possibly to protect relationships and avoid conflict. This sort of political talk may have positive effects on women's political engagement and confidence. As Cho et al. (2016) found, political expression on social media can strengthen opinions, which can in-turn increase confidence and lead to more political involvement. We also found there were no gender differences in the tone of the posts made; men and women were similar in how frequently they made positive, negative, and neutral posts. Furthermore, we found no gender differences in how often women and men engaged in political arguments on social media. This is also noteworthy because if women were more conflict avoidant, as Coffé and Bolzendahl (2017) found, or were prioritizing relationships more than men, we would expect to see women making fewer negative posts and avoiding arguments. Instead, we find evidence that the context of 2016 empowered women to engage online as much as men, including by participating in behaviors that may produce disagreement.

Also supporting the idea that a gendered election affected support, we found Clinton supporters were more active on Twitter. It is logical that Clinton would serve as a role model more for women that support her than those that do not and is in line with research finding party congruence to be a factor in the role model effect (Reingold & Harrell, 2010; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017) Also noteworthy is the finding that Clinton supporters reported making more negative posts about Trump than Trump supporters reported making about Clinton. Given the outrage about Trump's alleged and evidenced treatment of women, it would not be surprising if Clinton supporters were making negative posts on these topics, among others, and perhaps motivated by fear and the politicized identity of women, using Twitter as a primary outlet to voice their concerns. While we do not know the content of the negative posts made by any respondents, given what we know about the candidates, it is reasonable to assume that Clinton supporters were more likely to support feminist ideas, and previous research has found greater engagement among feminists (Heger & Hoffman, 2019).

The age of our sample may be another factor in the relative similarity of men's and women's political posting. The overall mean scores for engagement across the sample were low (see Table 1), suggesting lower overall political engagement, so while young women and men posted about politics in similar frequency, neither was doing so often. This could be related to the less firm political beliefs of young people (Beck & Jennings, 1991; Stroker & Jennings, 2008). More likely, this speaks to the nature of posting on social media. Bode (2017) reported that participants rarely posted about politics. This was a representative sample of Americans with an average age of 46 years old, suggesting age many not be the issue, but that posting about politics is low. Indeed, Hall (2018) found in assessing time spent on Facebook that over 50% of time was spent passively consuming content and scrolling through one's news feed and the more time someone spent online, the more time was devoted to browsing. Passive consumption of

content online, particularly as it relates to time spent online, likely accounts for a generally low frequency of political posting and the similarities found between women and men.

Unfortunately, but not surprising, we found women encountered more negative or hostile behavior than men did on social media. Women were significantly more likely than men, particularly women Clinton supporters, to say they had witnessed rude or cruel behavior in political posts or discussions, but there were not significant differences in whether they had personally been attacked online for political posts. The hostile nature of social media for women engaging in political discussion is well documented (Koc-Michalska et al., 2019; Vochocová, 2018). Our findings suggest that while women encountered negativity, they were no more likely than men to be the target of negativity. Given research has shown women are more likely to go online then men (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), this could account for the *seeing* but not the *posting* of political content. As previously noted, more often than not users passively consume content on social media rather than post (Hall, 2018). Similarly, Bode's (2017) study supported the idea participants may be more likely to view their friends as posting more about politics than the participant themselves did. Future work that accounted for these and other social media behaviors may provide additional insight into these results. Another possible explanation for this difference is women in our sample may have a different bar for what they consider rude or uncivil, as Kenski et al. (2017) found. Future research should further examine the content men and women are encountering, specifically whether men and women have similar criteria for what constitutes negativity online.

Men and women were statistically similar in how often the posted negative information or engaged in arguments, but a notable gender difference was in how women and men responded to negative or rude comments made in response to something they posted. While most of our sample reported they did not encounter this behavior, among those that did, women were more likely than men to report conflict avoidant behaviors (i.e., ignoring the comment or unfriending/unfollowing the commenter). This supports Coffé and Bolzendahl's (2017) study that found women to be more conflict avoidant and less likely to engage with disagreeable content. Bode (2017) also found women were more likely to unfriend someone over politics, but her findings differ from ours in whether there is a gender difference in choosing to ignore or reply. Our findings support the idea women may be more likely to avoid conflict when directly confronted, even when they are participating in discussions in an equal frequency to men, as was seen in this study.

Limitations and Future Research

Overall, our sample did not frequently engage in political posting on social media; the means for frequency of posting on Facebook and Twitter ranged between rarely and very rarely. The same was true of how often positive, negative, and neutral posts were made. However, we know most online activity is passive- reading and scrolling through news feeds, rather than posting original content or sharing (Hall, 2018). The low number of political posts might also indicate the young people in our study simply are not very engaged in politics, as is generally true of the youngest generation of voters (Lyons & Alexander, 2000). It is also possible their ratings of frequency of political posts may be in contrast to the frequency they make non-political posts. Young people are the most active on social media and use these sites several times a day (Smith & Anderson, 2018; "Social media fact sheet," 2019), so posting "rarely" about politics may still amount to several political posts a week. Our findings are also limited by the one-item measures used, however past research on similar topics has successfully used single items for analysis. Future studies may benefit from measuring frequency differently to account for individual perceptions of what constitute frequent posting.

The age of our sample may also limit our ability to generalize our findings. As has been mentioned, young people are more active online than older generations, so it is unclear if our findings would hold for the online political activity of voters more generally. On the other hand, studies have found online activity reflects offline activity (Hargittai & Shaw, 2013), suggesting the possibility for greater online political engagement among older groups. Future research should further explore gender differences among non-college aged populations. We are also limited by the racial and ethnic diversity of our sample, which was predominantly white. In examining the role of identity and group membership it is important to note that

identities are intersectional, and our study does not allow us to draw conclusions that address the intersections of race and gender. Race was certainly an important factor in 2016 with Trump winning 62% of white men voters and 47% of white women, but only 14% of Black men, less than 1% of Black women, and 28% of Hispanic men and women ("An examination," 2018).

Last, but certainly not least, the 2016 election was unlike any previous election. Social media played an important role in spreading information in what was one of the most negative and divisive elections in American history. It also marked the first time a woman ran as a major party candidate for the presidency, and, suffice to say, Trump was a candidate unlike any before. The relatively similar frequency in which young men and women made political posts may be a product of this election or may indicate a shift in women's participation to be more equal to men. Future research should explore how men and women of various age groups use social media to engage in political discussion in future elections, particularly with women candidates.

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