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Gender on Facebook during the Local Electoral Campaign for Bucharest City Hall in 2020.
The Self-construction of the Candidates

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Abstract: Romanian politicians have been using Facebook profiles as a digital tool. This study aims to analyze the gender dimension in the local electoral campaign for Bucharest City Hall in 2020 and to establish how the candidates portray themselves on their Facebook pages by going against hegemonic views. One of the focuses of the study is on gender and social media personalization and the second one is on building a personal political brand during the electoral campaign through gender identification. The hypothesis is that new media, (interactive, social, multimodal, user-centered, and circularly networked) play key role in this new communicative paradigm and they may become an important discursive space for redefining gender stereotypes and reproducing (new) social identities. The analysis focuses on the media and digital tools and on to what extent gender influences the self-personalization in digital campaigning. According to the analysis, the woman candidate engages in a particularly gendered form of personalizing by presenting herself through social media in caregiving roles. At the same time, the two candidates (both female and male) for Bucharest City Hall, used a mixed strategy of gender adaptiveness. On the one hand, the candidates use and present gender stereotypes in their self-presentation, in order to benefit from existing voter expectations and norms. On the other hand, they use a bending or overturning stereotype strategy as an alternative one.

Keywords: election campaign; female politicians; male politicians; multimodality; social media; new communicative paradigm; gender stereotypes; digital identity, SC-CDS, personalization.

Introduction

Romanian politicians have been using Facebook profiles, considered to have a high level of self-representation, as a digital tool (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) [1], especially during elections. Self-presentation is a form of communicative agency (Wagner and Everitt, 2019) [2] and, in this regard, social media could provide means to strengthen women candidates in a context in which

feminist studies (Freedman, 1997 [3]; Ross, 2002 [4]) criticize the stereotypical representations of political women in the media.

As opposed to the *linear-source message-audience flow* of traditional media, the new media, (interactive, social, multimodal, user-centered, and circularly networked), in the *new communicative paradigm* (KhosraviNik, Esposito, 2018) [5] may become an important discursive space for redefining gender stereotypes and reproducing (new) social identities.

This study aims to analyze the gender dimension in the local electoral campaign for Bucharest City Hall in 2020 and how the candidates portray themselves on their Facebook pages by going against the hegemonic views and to analyze to what extent gender influences the self-personalization in digital campaigning.

The images serve to *anchor meaning* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) [6] but also offer a more complex interpretation of a given post. A multimodal view of discourse (Jewitt, 2012 [7]; Jewitt, 2014 [8]; Kress, 2011 [9]) has great value for a holistic feminist critique of discursive constructions of gender (Achin, C., & Bereni, 2000 [10]) since images can reinforce stereotypical forms of masculinity, Jewitt, Oyama, 2001). [11]

In a context where the equation of *popularity as legitimacy* is being fed by the *personalization* on social media, women politicians are still particularly vulnerable to gender stereotypes and therefore tread a careful line between showing sufficient emotion to be credible as women and sufficient professionalism to be seen as credible politicians (McGregor et al., 2016 [12]; Meeks, 2016, 2019 [13]).

According to our analysis, the woman candidate engages in a particularly gendered form of personalizing by presenting herself through social media in caregiving roles. (McGregor et al., 2016). [14] At the same time, the two candidates (both female and male), used a mixed strategy of gender adaptiveness (Banwart & McKinney, 2005), reinforcing, on one hand, gender stereotypes in the self-presentation, in order to benefit from existing voter expectations and norms, and a *bending* or *overturning stereotype* strategy (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011) [15] as an alternative one.

Multimodality is at the center of communications in the *new communicative paradigm* (KhosraviniK, Esposito, 2018) [16] which is a product of participation characterized by a decentralization of power (KhosraviniK, 2014) [17], the new media, opposed to the *linear-source message-audience flow* of traditional media, are interactive, social, user-centered, circularly networked, providing an increased range of affordances in communication (Kress, 2011). In a communication medium where *popularity is legitimacy* and which requires constructing a representation of oneself (Enli, 2017) [18] that is at once both private and public, multimodal items might be particularly useful tools for women candidates to counteract masculine communication norms in politics

(Meeks, 2013). [19] In fact, social media can provide women candidates with better control over their self-images that help them bypass media filters and journalistic frames (Sandberg, Öhberg, 2017). [20]

Three ideas are to be considered when we talk about political communication on Social Media: the rise of personality politics, the prevalence of affect over argumentation and the freedom to use a strategy of gender adaptiveness (Banwart & McKinney, 2005). [21]

This study aims to analyze the gender dimension in the local electoral campaign for Bucharest City Hall in 2020, in particular, how the candidates portray themselves on their Facebook pages (photos) by going against the hegemonic views. We consider that how politicians present themselves may include a *response to the gender-based stereotypes* held by the media. Stereotypic and counter-stereotypic gender strategies are demonstrably and inherently a discourse, as shown in the adjustments in the construction of the ethos of male and female candidates (Achin, Dorlin, 2008). [22] The second research objective is to analyze to what extent gender influences self-personalization in digital campaigning. We assume that women candidates tend to 'self-personalize' more and may engage in a particularly gendered form of personalizing by presenting themselves through social media in caring roles. (McGregor et al., 2016). [23]

The multimodality 'turn'

Since the new election battleground is increasingly found on social media, the political communication genre has become more multimodal, cross-referencing, and interactive (Lilleker et al., 2017) [24], politicians presenting themselves on social media using visuals, which accords with the *personalisation turn* of modern politics (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013 [25]; McGregor et al., 2016 [26]);. Social media not only allow for sharing things from one's private life, they also provide an immediacy that conveys authenticity (Hernández-Santaolalla, 2020). In fact, the use of images is also an important way in which to convey this complex notion of *authenticity*, with video being particularly successful in boosting shares and thus extending a politician's reach (Koc-Michalska et al., 2020). [27];

The images serve to *anchor meaning* (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996) [28] but also offer a more complex interpretation of a given post. The *picture superiority effect* (Rosenberg et al., 1986) [29]; suggests that a single photo can communicate an important amount of political information to voters and individual candidates can influence public perception through strategic use of social media.

A multimodal social semiotic approach provides a richer perspective on the multiple means involved in meaning making and communicating; in the (self-) making of identity and in the production/ dissemination/ interpretation of images and discourses (Roventă-Frumușani et al., 2022). [30] Multimodal discourse

analysis (Jewitt, 2012 [31]; Jewitt, 2014 [32]; Kress, 2011 [33]) is used to see how gender ideology and gendered relations of power get (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in discourse. Legitimation is one of the main social functions of ideologies (van Dijk, 2001 [34]), but in social media where the design values and processes are at work, legitimacy is given by the visibility/popularity, derived from accumulated symbolic power, i.e., power is legitimacy (KhosraviNik, Esposito, 2018). [35] In fact, the equation of *popularity as legitimacy* is being fed by the *personalization* on social media, the logic of regimes of popularity building being sustained through engagement of prosumers (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). [36] We are talking about the *ethos of visibility-as-legitimacy* or what Fountaine (2019) [37] identified as the ‘likeability’ frame which was ‘rooted in the visual and rhetorical mix of personal and political’.

Politicians use a variety of options, but Facebook maintains its lead (Bossetta, 2018 [38]; Magin et al., 2016 [39]; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran, 2018 [40]) since it has a greater reach but also because of its more diverse audience (Auxier and Anderson, 2021). [41] In a communication medium where *popularity is legitimacy* and which requires constructing a representation of oneself (Enli, 2017) that is at once both private and public, multimodal items might be particularly useful tools for women candidates in order to counteract masculine communication norms in politics (Meeks, 2013). [42]

Thus, how women politicians present themselves may include a response to the gender-based stereotypes held by citizens and the media about them (Dittmar, 2010 [43]; Winfrey and Schnoebelen, 2019 [44]), which is generally less favorable (Heith, 2003 [45]; Jalalzai, 2006 [46]; Kahn, 1996 [47]). A multimodal view of discourse has great value for a holistic feminist critique of discursive constructions of gender (Lazar, 2000 [48]) since images can reinforce stereotypical forms of masculinity, Jewitt, Oyama, 2001 [49]).

Gender based stereotypes

Research in political science indicates that gender-based stereotypes are a central element in how the public views political candidates (Dolan, 2005) [50], and these stereotypes shape how a candidate must communicate to voters. As Huddy and Terkildsen (1993) [51] found, women are most often associated with traits related to warmth and expressiveness. These traits include: honesty, integrity, cooperation with others, sensitivity and understanding of others, a nurturing and gentle nature, emotional expressiveness, caring, helping, being involved, being responsible but also passivity, and dependence (Atkeson & Krebs, 2008 [52]; Bystrom, 2003 [53]; Bystrom, 2004 [54]; Dittmar, 2010 [55]; Dolan, 2005 [56]; Eagly & Karau, 2002 [57]; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993. [58]

With the notion of “hegemonic masculinity”, Raewyn Connell (1995) [59] proposed a more attentive approach to structural inequalities, in opposition with women, but also with other masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is typically

presented as an „enough” of virility in opposition to the „not enough” characterizing gay people and the „too much” morbid virility attributed to popular classes (Volery, Tersigny, 2015 [60], Achin, Dorlin, 2008. [61]).

Women politicians are particularly vulnerable to gender stereotypes and therefore tread a careful line between showing sufficient emotion to be credible as women and sufficient professionalism to be seen as credible politicians (McGregor et al., 2016 [62]; Meeks, 2016, 2019 [63]).

Female candidates might be able to overcome this subtle form of gender bias by emphasizing masculine qualities; (Fridkin & Kenney, 2015 [64]), but this strategy runs the risk of the double bind, for being too tough and not nice enough—especially from voters of the opposite political party (Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014 [65]).

The analyses of the traits female candidates highlight in their campaign materials, show a greater focus on masculine over feminine traits (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). [66] Political women in Romania navigate between women’s traditional gender roles that emphasize familial and maternal instincts, and those that stress feminine toughness (Schneider, 2014a,b) [67], albeit with only sporadic and contradictory attempts to recast women’s position as a tolerated presence in the political arena. There is a clear female choice for the masculine model, perceived as the only legitimate one in the extraordinary events. On the other hand, men do not hesitate to promote the personal side of their life, family and private (Roventa-Frumusani, 2015). [68] This is the solution adopted for the moment by many Romanian female politicians, with modulations induced by the ideology of the party and the persona of the candidate. (Roventa-Frumusani, Irimescu 2018). [69]

Women politicians center on displaying their professional life and they rely on the presence of ordinary people to create an image of caring personalities, but still with a focus on formal activities. (Savulescu, Vitelar, 2012). [70]

Gender and social media personalization

To participate in online social networking, individuals have no choice but to represent themselves’ and to do so virtually requires a highly individualized and personalized approach (Enli and Thumim, 2012). [71] In fact, personalization requires the individualization of the *res publica* (Hernández-Santaolalla, 2020) [72] and placing the focus on the individual politician rather than on the political party and an increased personalized campaigning (Enli and Skogerbø (2013). [73]

Personalization comes with the tendency *to emphasize the affective-subjective content* of communication (Khosravini, Esposito, 2018) [74] which relates to power and empowerment of the individual. Papacharissi (2015) argues that networked digital structures are characterized *by affects* and uses the term ‘networked publics’ as ‘publics that are restructured by networked technologies

and, therefore, simultaneously are (1) the space constructed through networks technologies and (2) *the imagined collective* that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice. [75]

In the context of digital media technologies, the argumentative content seems to be less central *compared to the affective content*: the political communication on Social Media denies that real politics is about policy, argumentation and overarching principles and happily reduces it to media appearance, likeability, psychological connection and relatability (Khosravini, 2018). [76]

While the personalizing trend in politics overall may not be gendered, there are some reasons to suspect that politicians will engage differently in personalizing communications depending upon their gender considerations. We think that women candidates tend to ‘self-personalize’ more and may engage in a particularly gendered form of personalizing by presenting themselves through social media in caregiving roles. (McGregor et al., 2016). [77]

But, the effect of the ‘privatization’ of politics (Holtz-Bacha, 2004) and the ‘politicization of private persona’ (Langer, 2007) [78] in women politicians, who personalize their campaigns and reveal personal details about being a woman, a wife and a mother, is *the double bind* that calls into question their competence and ability to do their job. In fact, gender stereotypes put female candidates in a double bind between being seen as capable political leaders and fulfilling gender expectations (Costa, 2020). [79] If female politicians exhibit gender stereotypical traits, they are not rewarded for merely meeting expectations, and they are evaluated unfavorably on counter-stereotypical traits, such as assertiveness and leadership. Yet if they exhibit such counter-stereotypical traits, they are penalized for lacking feminine, stereotype-confirming traits (Krupnikov and Bauer 2014). [80]

Research questions and analytical framework

This study aims:

a) to analyze the gender dimension in the local electoral campaign for Bucharest City Hall in 2020, in particular, how the candidates portray themselves on their Facebook pages (photos) by going against hegemonic views. We consider that how politicians present themselves may include *a response to the gender-based stereotypes* held by the media. Stereotypic and counter-stereotypic gender strategies are demonstrably and inherently a discourse, as shown in the adjustments in the construction of the ethos of male and female candidates (Achin, Dorlin, 2007). [81]

Hypothesis

The two candidates (both Nicușor Dan and Gabriela Firea) will use a mixed strategy, reinforcing, on the one hand, gender stereotypes in self-presentation, in order to benefit from the existing expectations and norms of the voters, but also

a strategy of overturning stereotypes as an alternative: candidates seek to deviate from the typical status quo.

- Q.1: How is gender built on Facebook?
- Q.2: What gender stereotypes are used?
- Q.3.: What type of strategy do the candidates use (reinforce gender stereotypes in their self-presentation, to benefit from meeting the existing expectations of voters, or try to deviate from their status quo).

We will use Andrew J. A. Mattan and Tamara A. Small framework (2021) [82] to analyze gender in visual, political, online content based on Schneider's analytical framework (2014a, 2014b) [83] as a methodology.

Table 1 Variables

Variables	Reinforcing WOMEN	Overturning WOMEN	Reinforcing MEN	Overturning MEN
<i>Presence of others</i>				
Family (parental status) (Cmeciu, 2014, Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015).	present	absent	absent	present
Non-familial children (Cmeciu, 2014; Muñoz and Towner, 2017)	present	absent	absent	present
Senior citizens (Cmeciu, 2014)	present	absent	absent	present
<i>Appearance</i>				
Informal attire (Flicker, 2013)	present	absent	absent	present
Smiling (Bystrom et al., 2004)	present	absent	absent	present
Issues (Dittmar, 2010; Schneider, 2014b; Lee and Lim, 2016)	Communal Issues	Agentic issues	Agentic issues	Communal Issues

b) The second research objective is to analyze to what extent gender influences self-personalization in digital campaigning.

Hypothesis

We assume that women candidates tend to 'self-personalize' more and may engage in a particularly gendered form of personalizing by presenting themselves through social media in caring roles. (McGregor et al., 2016) [84]

We operationalized ‘self-personalizing’ by taking the references to politicians’ personal lives from Langer’s study (2007) [85], including their family (we compared the ways in which female and male candidates brought their families and family lives into their social media streams).

Findings

Nicușor Dan was the main opponent of the incumbent mayor in the 2020 elections, Gabriela Firea. He announced his candidacy as an independent having the support of the alliance that brought together the most important right-wing parties in Romania. He was elected as general mayor with 42.8% of the votes, ahead of the mayor in office, Gabriela Firea. Gabriela Firea represented the opposition, left-wing party and had won the elections for the general mayor’s office in 2016.

A total of 299 Facebook posts and 1188 photos were manually coded across the election campaign period (August 28-September 25, 2020). Nicușor Dan made nearly twice as many posts (192) as Gabriela Firea (107) and this confirms the fact that opposition parties are more prolific users of social media (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). [86] Both candidates posted more during the final week, with Nicușor Dan making a significant final push with 11 posts on the day before the vote, the majority of which were negative in tone.

Under the slogan *People first*, Gabriela Firea privileged the photos of her in different places (opening nurseries, centers for violence against women, on construction sites, at COVID testing centers, etc.) showing what she had achieved during her mandate.

Nicușor Dan had led a negative campaign which was built around attacks on the opponent, since the first days of the campaign, which is confirmed by the scholars, since negative messages are the most powerful (Fridkin, Kenney, 2011). [87] Ab contrario, Gabriela Firea has chosen to be conciliatory (“hatred does not build” in her own words).

Nicușor Dan very rarely posted about his family, unlike Firea (3 pictures for Dan versus 32 for Firea). „Family card” is a privacy strategy which women are more likely to employ than their male counterparts (Meeks, 2016, 2019) [88] and is a reinforcing strategy for Gabriela Firea. Nicușor Dan reticence to play the family card is reinforcing the gender masculine stereotypes. We compared the ways in which Gabriela Firea and Nicușor Dan brought their families and family lives into their social media streams. Consistent with communal traits that are often associated with caregiving, Firea pictured with her family, which is a gender-reinforcing strategy (Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015). [89]

The hypothesis that woman candidate Gabriela Firea tends to ‘self-personalize’ more and may engage in a particularly gendered form of personalizing by presenting herself through social media in caring roles, is confirmed. (McGregor et al., 2016). [90]



The presence of others is one indicator of gender-based stereotypes found in the literature. We looked for the presence of seniors or other non-familial children, too. We found that the Nicușor Dan rarely posted pictures with these actors (only 3% included at least one of these actors). This suggests gender-reinforcing strategies for him even if he could have capitalized on the use of these actors, since male politicians do not face the double bind and they can present themselves as agentic but also nurturing and empathetic (McGregor et al., 2016). [91]

Table 2 Findings

Variables	Gabriela Firea N=857 photos	Nicușor Dan N=331 photos
<i>Presence of others</i>		
Family (parental status) Cmeciui, 2014, Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015).	32 (4%)	3 (1%)
Non-familial children (Cmeciui, 2014; Muñoz and Towner, 2017)	22 (2,5%)	0
Senior citizens (Cmeciui, 2014)	53 (6%)	8 (2%)
Total	107 (12,5% of all the photos and 30% of the	11 (3% of all the photos and 5% of

	photos in which the candidate appears)	the photos with him)
<i>Appearance</i>		
Formal attire	85 (10%)	100%
Smiling	156 from 363 (42%)	72 (33%)
<i>Issues</i>		
Communal issues (posts) <i>education, health care, seniors, addiction, food insecurity, environmental protection, and women's health and reproductive rights</i>	Education: 13 Health care: 13 Seniors: 2 Environmental protection: 2 Women's health: 4 Violence against women: 3 Reproductive rights: 3	Education: 2 Environmental protection: 9 Violence against women: 1
Total	40 (37% of all the posts)	12 (6% of the posts)
Agentic issues <i>economy, military, security, law enforcement, defense, business, and international affairs.</i>	Economy: 14 Business: 3 International affairs: 2	Economy: 27 International affairs: 2
Total	19 (18% from all the posts)	29 (15% from all the posts)

Nicușor Dan's slogan was: *The New Bucharest* with 3 campaign themes: economy, investments and environment “New Bucharest, the city where people move better, breathe better, earn better”. However, Firea had more posts about economy and investments (18% of the total) than Dan who had 15%, which is an overturning strategy for the male candidate.

Some posts made by the candidates attracted significantly more attention than most, in terms of likes. For Gabriela Firea, the post which attracted the highest volume of likes (94.000) was posted on 29th August and was a dance with her husband, Bogdan Pandele (<https://fb.watch/mVbeaEN-EC/>).

The post prompting the second highest volume of emojis (9.000) was the one featuring him with his newborn boy. The third place (8.800) was occupied by a post from September 20 with Nicușor Dan denouncing Dana Budeanu, fashion designer, public figure and political supporter of Gabriela Firea, who had made an outrageous call to men to beat women, in a video (https://fb.watch/mZ8me_Oeg-/). In fact, Facebook audiences generally respond emotionally to posts centered around personal as opposed to political content (Farkas and Bene, 2021). [92]



Smiling and touching are considered more feminine qualities, smiling being associated with women's desire to seek approval (Bystrom et al., 2004) [93], while Cmeciu (2014 [94]) suggests that the presence of physical contact (hugging and embracing) can be associated with women being perceived as compassionate. The two candidates are often smiling in the photographs posted (42% of all her photos for Firea) and 33% for Dan. Consistent with gender stereotypes, there are more posts with Firea smiling than Nicușor Dan. However, the presence of a smile on Dan's photos can be considered a strategy to overturn gender stereotypes.

In terms of clothing choices, there are some gendered differences in our data. Firea typically posted photographs of her campaigning in informal clothing, including, blouses, sleeveless dresses and shirts: 90 per cent of all photos. Nicușor Dan, on the other hand, dressed himself only in formal attire. Both of these findings are consistent with reinforced gendered norms, with formal attire being more likely associated with political men than women.

Women politicians present themselves in a gender reinforcing manner, they will emphasize communal issues, while men will highlight agentic issues. Communal issues include education, healthcare, environmental protection, and women's health and reproductive rights; agentic issues include economy, security, law enforcement, defence, or business and international affairs. Only 6% per cent of all issues presented in Nicușor Dan's feed were coded as communal. More than 40% of the issues presented on the Firea account were communal.

Conclusions

This study pointed out the gender dimension in the local electoral campaign for Bucharest City Hall in 2020. The two candidates (both woman and man) used a mixed strategy, reinforcing on the one hand, gender stereotypes in the self-presentation, in order to benefit from existing voter expectations and norms. They both used in very few cases a bending or overturning stereotype strategy as an alternative.

Gender had an important influence in self-personalization for Gabriela Firea since she presented herself through social media in caring roles (as a mother). She expressed traits that confirm gender stereotypes in her posts such as cooperation with others, sensitivity and understanding of others, a nurturing and gentle nature, emotional expressiveness, caring, helping and being involved. Firea used the family card as a privacy strategy, while Nicușor Dan had reticence to play it. He could have used the family card since male politicians do not face the double bind and they can present themselves as agentic but also nurturing and empathetic.

Consistent with communal traits that are often associated with caregiving, Firea pictured with her husband, children and seniors which is a gender-reinforcing strategy (Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015). [95]

Nicușor Dan had led a negative campaign which was built around attacks on the opponent which confirms the masculine expectations that political leaders should be tough, assertive, and decisive (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). [96]

Even if social media could provide means to strengthen women candidates in a context in which feminist studies criticize the stereotypical representations of political women in the media, Gabriela Firea used the strategy of reinforcing gender stereotypes, the only exception was the prevalence of using themes from the economic sphere (investments, modernizations, business), which can be explained by the fact that she was an economic journalist before becoming a politician: 18% of the total compared to what Dan had (15%), which is considered an overturning strategy.

In a context where the equation of popularity as legitimacy is being fed by the personalization on social media, Gabriela Firea used the interactive digital environment as a platform that is especially adaptable for developing the commu-

nication strategies of woman candidates, proving to be more suited to the characteristics normally associated with that gender (personalization, use of affect).

We found that the emotion contained in the posts, the personalization of the narrative and the use of private elements are the most important factors that influence the attractiveness of a post. Social Media empowers and validate the emotional understanding of multimodal discourses, and encourage a communication dynamic that rewards such behavior with a form of perceived validation as engagement.

Limitations

We cannot know for sure whether the posts were written by Nicușor Dan and Firea, or by members of their campaign team. To better understand election campaigns online, we should therefore also study what the candidates are doing between elections.

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