

UNRAVELLING GENDER, PARTY AND POLITICS IN 280 CHARACTERS

**AN EXPLORATION OF BRITISH POLITICIANS' TWEETS
DURING AND BETWEEN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS**

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THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE QUALIFICATION OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

SCHOOL OF ARTS AND CULTURES
DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, CULTURE, AND HERITAGE
NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

DECEMBER 2020

Abstract

Twitter research at the intersection of gender, party, and politics is burgeoning, but limited by an overreliance on quantitative-only approaches, North American conditions, and election campaigns. This thesis aims to confront these deficiencies by exploring how gender and party shape British politicians' Twitter communication, both within and outside an election campaign, by means of a mixed-methods approach. I collected all tweets from Labour and Conservative MPs active on Twitter during three periods: the campaign period for the 2017 UK General Election (8 May – 8 June 2017), and two subsequent non-election periods (8 November – 8 December 2017; 8 May – 8 June 2018). This resulted in a total of 159,115 tweets, of which 82,467 were original (that is, not re-tweets), and I focused my analyses on *original* tweets only. I conducted a content analysis by hand-coding a 12,000-tweet sample and performed thematic analyses on three smaller sub-samples (each comprising approximately 400 tweets). The results showed that gender and party, individually and together, shaped politicians' tweets in terms of general tweet content, political issues, and personal topics, but that these differences varied across the chosen time periods. Conservatives in general emphasised their Party's superiority in handling a wider range of issues than Labour politicians, including those typically associated with the left. Subtle differences arose in the manner in which politicians personalised their tweets, but women and men politicians from both parties seemed to strategically blend personal and political elements within single tweets, arguably to present themselves as 'ordinary' people. My research demonstrated the importance of mixing quantitative and qualitative methods, analysing gender and party both apart and jointly, and looking at Twitter communication both during and between general election contexts.

Keywords: Twitter, gender, party, political communication, content analysis, thematic analysis, tweet content, issues, personalisation

Acknowledgements

Throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, I have received much academic and moral support. I would first like to thank my supervisors, Professor Karen Ross and Professor Deborah Chambers. Karen's expert guidance has been invaluable to the production of this thesis. Apart from her academic knowledge, from which I have benefited enormously, I am fortunate to have spent much time with her in less formal settings. Together we shared many lunches, dinners, and walks with our dogs. Karen was also immensely supportive during the most difficult of times for me personally. Deborah as my second supervisor has likewise been a source of judicious advice and generous encouragement.

I am further indebted to Professor Lidwien van de Wijngaert, from whose expertise I profited greatly during the tweet collection process. I was privileged to work with Lidwien and Karen on the article 'Gender, politics and the tweeted campaign: tweeting about issues during the UK's 2017 general election campaign', published in *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, which shares the same dataset as the first of this thesis, but with a different method of analysis. Neither will I forget the central role Professor Bruce Mutsvairo has played in my academic career. I have known Bruce for many years, and it is owing to his unfailing belief in my abilities that I have progressed this far in my studies.

I would like also to thank Northumbria University, at which I commenced my PhD and who provided my initial funding. I will always remember with great fondness my time there and the friendships formed, in which regard I must make special mention of Dr Cyril Tjahja. I am extremely grateful to Newcastle University and their Research Excellence Academy for funding the remainder of my PhD project following my transfer from Northumbria University. It was a true pleasure to study with the Department of Media, Culture and Heritage, whereat I made lifelong friends, among them Vesela Harizanova, Dr Tobias Bürger, Katharina Wilske, Dr Phillip Deans, Dr David Farrell-Banks, Dr Alix Ferrer-Yulfo, and Dr Erica Robenalt.

I must also acknowledge the invaluable support I received from my new colleagues at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and its research group Political Communication, where I commenced my job whilst concluding this PhD. I am particularly thankful to Dr Loes Aaldering, who has kindly helped me prepare for my viva examination, and Dr Mariken van der Velden, who has provided important insights that have helped me improve my thesis.

I thank Dr John Hemy and Dr Tobias Bürger for coding a sample of my tweets to fulfil the intercoder-reliability tests for the content analysis. Aside from assisting my coding procedure, Dr Hemy has been at my side throughout my PhD, during which he has offered selfless and unflagging support. Thank you, John.

I wish to express my gratitude to my friends and family in the Netherlands, who have always comforted me and supplied many happy distractions. With apologies to those whose names are here omitted, I thank especially Rian van Rens, Meander Hendrikse, Laura Ruyter, Femke Dekema, Rob Cuperus, Ari and Marlène Jansberg, Joop and Nellie Jansen, and Maron Spikmans.

My greatest appreciation is reserved for my wonderful parents, Gert Jansen and Gerda Bertisen, to whom this thesis is dedicated. Their faith in me throughout my academic studies and beyond has been unwavering, and their help inestimable. I relate with great sadness that my mother did not live to see the completion of this PhD. It is on such occasions that I miss her even more than usual.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Politicians are increasingly using a variety of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to communicate with citizens. Twitter is a particularly interesting tool for politicians, with its interactive architecture that easily accommodates many-to-many, one-to-one, and one-to-many communication and the platform has become an important feature of political communication, and is being widely used by voters seeking political information (Boukes, 2019), by journalists to search for newsworthy material (Brands, Graham and Broersma, 2018; McGregor and Molyneux, 2018), and by politicians worldwide to reach out to citizens (Kousser, 2019). Scholars have begun exploring politicians' Twitter usage, with the majority of existing studies focusing on factors that influence politicians' Twitter adoption (Jungherr, 2014), such as age, gender, ideological viewpoints, position in government, and legislative experience (Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017; Lappas, Triantafyllidou and Yannas, 2019). However, with the considerable uptake in Twitter use by politicians, it is increasingly important to consider *how* politicians present themselves once they are on Twitter. This thesis accordingly explores politicians' self-presentation on Twitter in the United Kingdom, with a particular interest in any potential association that this has with party and gender. The intention to study matters of gender and party implies an assumption that such associations may exist. Firstly, the political party to which they belong is known to be a determining factor influencing politicians' behaviour and communication styles (Bystrom *et al.*, 2004), and secondly, the political arena is generally considered a highly gendered domain (Connell, 2005; Dolan, 2014b). One may therefore reasonably expect differences in how politicians present themselves to arise dependent upon their party and gender. An investigation of politicians' self-presentation on Twitter is particularly interesting, since the platform enables politicians to craft and control their own messages without interference from traditional news media. This might be especially beneficial for women politicians, given that the news media often ignore them or portray them in restricted and stereotypical ways by, for example, disproportionately focusing on their appearances, personalities, and personal lives (Heldman *et al.*, 2005; Ross, 2010; Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Further, in news

coverage, women are frequently aligned with ‘feminine’ topics such as welfare, education, and gender-specific issues (Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008; Major and Coleman, 2008; Ross *et al.*, 2013), while the public often considers ‘masculine’ topics, such as the economy and defence, of greater importance (Meeks and Domke, 2016). Seeing that traditional media coverage has been shown to influence voter intent (Aaldering, Van der Meer and Van der Brug, 2018), such media practices can undermine the democratic assumption of equal opportunity for those seeking to become politicians, and might therefore put women running for political office at an electoral disadvantage. Given the masculine nature of the political arena and the gendered news media coverage of politicians, a gendered lens to analyse women and men politicians’ self-presentation on Twitter seems appropriate. The following section will briefly provide some contextual information about the UK, its political system, and some of the changes it has undergone in the past few years.

§ 1.1 The United Kingdom and its political system

The United Kingdom is a fitting region for the study of politicians’ Twitter habits, since the vast majority of research on politicians’ communication on Twitter is dominated by North American studies (Meeks, 2013, 2019; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016). Although there are examples of studies on politicians’ Twitter communication in countries other than the U.S. (Spina and Cancila, 2013; Kruikemeier, 2014; López-Meri, *et al.*, 2017), little is known about the extent to which the findings obtained by North American research are applicable to, for example, European countries. The UK is a suitable location to further explore gender and party differences in politicians’ communication practices, because North America and the UK share many institutional similarities among them that two parties dominate the political landscape, they have First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral systems in place, and feature single-member districts - which makes the UK a suitable country for evaluating how far the findings obtained in North American studies can be generalized to other, European, countries.

The United Kingdom has a plurality-majority electoral system, within a party-centred political landscape, generally dominated by two major parties: the centre-left Labour Party and the centre-right Conservative Party. The country is geographically and

administratively divided into 650 constituencies, each of which elects one Member of Parliament (MP) to a seat in the House of Commons under the first past the post system, which means that the candidate who receives the most votes, or the party with the most seats, wins. In the past few years, UK politics has undergone some major changes. The Conservative Party's manifesto for the General Election in 2015 included a promise to hold a referendum on whether the UK should leave the European Union. After the Conservatives' victory in that election, the referendum was duly held on 23 June 2016, with 52% of voters choosing to mark the 'Leave' box on the ballot paper. Conservative leader David Cameron resigned as Prime Minister and was succeeded by Theresa May, after she had won the Conservative Party leadership contest. Usually, general elections take place at least once every five years, but in April 2017, Prime Minister May announced a 'snap election'¹, arguably in the hope that her party would secure an enlarged majority, which would strengthen Britain's hand in the Brexit negotiations with the EU and give her a mandate to lead the country, having not been elected to Prime Ministership by the public. The election has for such reasons often been called the 'Brexit election' (Heath and Goodwin, 2017). The campaign period preceding this snap election forms the empirical foundation of this study, which is reinforced by two subsequent, non-election periods. These two periods were analysed to complement the first, but all three are considered equally important. The current research focuses on politicians from the two major parties – the Labour and Conservative Parties – and not on other parliamentary parties in the UK such as the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru, and Green Party. Narrowing the scope to only include Labour and Conservative politicians enabled me to conduct comparative statistical analyses according to gender and party. This avoided the problems which some researchers have experienced where women and men in smaller parties are often prolific on social media and can thus exaggerate both gender and party influences (Ross, Bürger and Jansen, 2018).

In their 2017 manifestos, the Labour and Conservative Parties both promised to

¹ The term 'snap election' signifies the suddenness and often unexpectedness of its announcement amid the standard 5-year cycle of UK general elections.

honour the referendum result to leave the EU (Hobolt and Rodon, 2020), but held differing views of what kind of Brexit should follow (Kavanagh, 2018). The Conservatives favoured a ‘Hard Brexit’, meaning that the UK would also exit the Single Market and the Customs Union (The Conservative Party, 2017), while the Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn at the time, emphasised a softer approach to the negotiations, though made no commitment to stay in the Single Market (The Labour Party, 2017). The Conservative campaign centred on the idea of May’s strong and stable leadership, with a promise that this would secure the best Brexit deal for Britain. Their other assurances included a free vote on repealing the ban on fox-hunting,² and supported the establishment of new grammar schools. The Labour Party campaigned on anti-austerity measures, such as increased spending on social services and the nationalisation of public services (Hobolt, 2018), and besides set out to abolish university tuition fees, ban zero-hour contracts, raise the minimum wage, and to invest further in the National Health Service (NHS) (The Labour Party, 2017). Brexit was expected to be a key campaign issue, but it was overshadowed by two Islamic terrorist attacks that occurred during the campaign, the Manchester Arena bombing of 22 May 2017 and the London Bridge attack of 3 June 2017. These events prompted parties to suspend campaigning, and brought issues of defence and security to the fore (Heath and Goodwin, 2017). The Conservatives had expected substantial gains (Tonge, Leston-Bandeira and Wilks-Heeg, 2018), but the election resulted in them securing 317 seats – thirteen fewer than in the 2015 General Election – while the Labour Party won 262 seats, thirty more than in 2015. The Conservative Party remained the largest single party in the House of Commons, but were short of a parliamentary majority, resulting in a hung parliament and a subsequent Conservative alliance with the right-wing Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland.

² The Hunting Act 2004, which bans the use of packs of hounds for hunting foxes and other animals, came into force 18 February 2005. In an interview during the election campaign, May stated her support for fox-hunting, and the Conservative Party manifesto included a party commitment for a free vote (where MPs are allowed to vote according to their own views, rather than voting in accordance with party policy) to overturn existing legislation that bans fox-hunting with dogs. After the election, in December 2017, May dropped the party commitment for a free vote to repeal legislation.

§ 1.2 Research questions

The main research question of this thesis is:

To what extent were gender and party associated with British politicians' Twitter communication during and after the 2017 General Election?

This question takes in three sub-questions:

1) To what extent were gender and party associated with British politicians' tweet content during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?

'Tweet content' was defined as the types of tweets politicians sent, such as 'user interaction', 'attack', or 'campaign' tweets, which is further discussed in *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*.

2) To what extent were gender and party associated with politicians' discussion of political issues on Twitter during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?

This question, to which I reply in *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*, focuses on 'political issue' tweets, in which politicians confronted particular issues, such as Brexit, the economy, or education, informed voters on how they voted in Parliament regarding a particular issue, or provided general information on an issue.

3) To what extent were gender and party associated with the ways in which British politicians personalised their tweets during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?

Personalisation in this thesis refers to any information that politicians disclose regarding their private lives and is the focus of *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*.

§ 1.3 Data collection

I collected all tweets from all MPs active on Twitter during three time periods: 8 May – 8 June 2017 (the election campaign period); 8 November – 8 December 2017; and 8 May – 8 June 2018 (two non-election periods). I chose these three periods because they comprise an election period and two non-election periods, and thus offer a more comprehensive view of how politicians used Twitter. I selected tweets sent by politicians from the Labour and Conservative Party alone, to make credible comparisons between gender and party and to avoid the potential bias and skews of smaller-party variables, a problem identified in previous research (Ross, Bürger and Jansen, 2018). Limiting the sample to tweets sent by Labour and Conservative women and men thus allows for party and gender differences to become more apparent where they are discernible. This strategy resulted in a total of 159,115 tweets, of which 82,467 were original tweets and 76,648 retweets. Since I was interested in politicians' self-presentation,³ I excluded the retweets. Even after the removal of retweets, the datasets were considered too large for the individual reading and coding of every tweet, and therefore, three random stratified samples were drawn, consisting of 4,000 tweets per time period (12,000 tweets in total), stratified along gender and party lines. That is, I randomly selected 1,000 tweets from each group per time period: Labour women, Conservative women, Labour men, and Conservative men. Firstly, a content analysis was by manually coding the sampling of 12,000 tweets using an elaborate coding scheme (see *Appendix A: 'Coding scheme'*). In the content analysis, I categorised tweets by 'tweet content', and categories included 'attack', 'political issue', and 'personal' tweets; the analysis of this sample formed the basis of *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*. The content analysis also involved coding the 12,000 tweets for the presence of political issues, such as the economy or health and care, and the results of this analysis are presented in the first part of *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*.

Secondly, I constructed three smaller samples, which I analysed through

³ I acknowledge that I cannot be certain that the captured tweets actually originated in the imagination of the account-holders rather than, for example, political aides, but for the present purpose, the 'self' being presented at least purports to be authentic, and I am taking that at face value.

thematic analyses, to move beyond the descriptive and to draw out the complexities and nuances in the data that the content analysis had not allowed for. The first sample comprised a selection of 'political issue' tweets ($n = 388$), which were identified in the content analysis, and the analysis of this sample informed the second part of *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*. The other two samples intended to explore aspects of personalisation in politicians' tweets. One of these samples consisted of all tweets which were coded as 'personal' ($n = 479$) in the content analysis, and the other sample constituted a random sub-sample of 400 tweets, stratified according to gender and party (100 from each group: Labour women, Conservative women, Labour men and Conservative men), and were derived from the complete dataset of original tweets ($n = 82,467$). The analysis of these latter two samples form the empirical heart of *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*. I strove for a balance between quantitative and qualitative research approaches, and accordingly used a combination of both, at times blending the two approaches. In the quantitative analysis particularly, I went into considerable detail when describing common patterns of politicians' Twitter use and some uncommon Twitter patterns, which some quantitative researchers might put aside as 'miscellaneous' or 'outliers', and therefore irrelevant, but which, to me, merited some discussion. At the same time, in the qualitative analysis, I quantified how frequently certain themes arose, a practice that some qualitative researchers deem unnecessary, or even undesirable but again, I considered this strategy to add a useful nuance. Further, the quantitative and qualitative enhanced one other, the latter being influenced by the former. The methodology chapter, Chapter 4: Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods, further expounds how the mixed-methods design was implemented.

§ 1.4 Furthering our understanding of politicians' Twitter communication

This thesis contributes to existing knowledge by advancing the understanding of politicians' Twitter communication in four respects. Firstly, the vast majority of Twitter research at the intersection of gender, party, and politics has dealt with North American conditions (Meeks, 2013, 2019; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016),⁴ and consequently,

⁴ For examples of research focusing on politicians' Twitter communication in a context other than the U.S., see Fountaine, Ross, and Comrie (2019), who analyse tweets sent by politicians in New Zealand

our understanding of politicians' Twitter communication is considerably influenced by the particularities of that political system. By analysing the discourse of British politicians, the current research is able to explore how gender and party differences either reflect or differ from findings obtained in North American studies (and indeed elsewhere) and provide some interpretations of differences and similarities. Secondly, research on politicians' Twitter communication has predominantly been performed during elections (see, for example, Fountaine et al., 2019; Kruikemeier, 2014; Meeks, 2019; Stier et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2017)⁵, which is understandable, since elections signal important moments in political communication, but this also means that our understanding of politicians' communication is incomplete. Accordingly, this thesis sampled tweets from one election period and two non-election periods, which provides a more complete picture of how politicians use Twitter. Thirdly, previous research has generally taken quantitative-only approaches to study politicians' communication patterns on Twitter (Evans, Brown and Wimberly, 2018). Such quantitative studies have enriched the scholarly community with important insights into politicians' Twitter behaviour but are necessarily limited by their measuring only the quantitative features of tweets (such as the number of times a politician mentions a topic). There have been some qualitative enquiries into politicians' communication patterns on Twitter, a notable example being Fountaine (2017) which was a thematic analysis of tweets sent by the politicians Nikki Kaye and Jacinda Ardern during New Zealand's 2014 general election campaign. However, Fountaine's study focused only on two politicians of the same gender, which of course does not allow for an analysis of gender differences. The present study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a more in-depth and refined understanding of the ways in which politicians use Twitter, by focusing on tweets sent by both women *and* men politicians. Finally, previous research has generally concentrated on the singular influence of gender or party (Niven and Zilber, 2001; Graham, Broersma and Hazelhoff, 2013; Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019). The current research thus analyses if and how gender and party work together to constitute

and the UK; Spina and Cancila (2013), who study tweets sent by Italian politicians; and Kruikemeier (2014) on the use of Twitter by Dutch political candidates.

⁵ For some useful examples of research analysing politicians' communications outside an election campaign, see Larsson and Kalsnes (2014), and Oelsner and Heimrich (2015).

a distinguishing feature of Twitter discourse. I suggest that this approach provides us with a broader, more comprehensive understanding of how gender and party are associated with politicians' message strategies on Twitter.

§ 1.5 Thesis outline

This thesis comprises eight central chapters. Following this introduction, ***Chapter 2: Literature Review 'Gender and Partisanship in Politics'*** focuses on gendered stereotypes, including those relating to politics. The review commences by outlining a social constructionist perspective of gender relations, before considering academic literature in respect of social role theory and gender stereotypes. It then specifically discusses the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the political domain and how such stereotypes are manifested in traditional news media coverage.

Chapter 3: Literature Review 'Twittering Politicians', reviews further literature and then presents the theoretical framework of the thesis. The chapter opens by reviewing debates concerning the democratising potential of the Internet and social media, following which is a brief history of social media adoption by politicians. The chapter then reviews literature on politicians' Twitter usage and identifies the shortcomings in research that this thesis aims to redress, from which the research questions derive. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the theoretical framework supporting the empirical analysis, with a discussion of the theoretical concepts used to analyse the content of politicians' tweets, their remarking of political issues in tweets, and their personalisation of tweets. Since the body of research at the nexus of gender, party, and politicians' Twitter use is still relatively new, an established theoretical framework for analysing and interpreting the interplay between the three had not yet been fully developed. I have accordingly developed my own framework, for which I drew on several theories and concepts, such as gendered and incumbency/challenging communication styles, political issue ownership theories, and personalisation theory.

Chapter 4: Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods, is the methodology chapter and illustrates why and how the research employs methodological pluralism to

interpret my findings. I use core principles of the positivist tradition, including objectivity, observation, and rigour, to analyse the relationships between independent variables (gender and party) and sets of dependent variables (such as tweet types and political issues), which are augmented by an interpretive approach and the application of its central notions, such as situatedness. Subsequently, I provide a justification for the application of a feminist methodology which places gender at the core of the analysis. I then describe why I employed a mixed-methods approach, blending quantitative and qualitative modes, through a content and thematic analysis. I then consider the suitability of these methods for finding answers to my research questions. Chapter 4 also discusses matters related to the approach I have taken by addressing reliability, validity, dependability, and trustworthiness. I further provide a personal reflection on the research process, in which I identify and detail the practical problems and issues that arose. The chapter concludes with thoughts on the ethical issues when using Twitter data, concerned with obtaining ethics approval, assuring the anonymity of users, the practicability of gaining informed consent, carefully selecting the ways in which the data were stored, and transparency regarding the ways in which the tweets were captured.

Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content, is first of three empirical chapters. In this chapter, I respond to the first research question by assessing the association of gender and party with politicians' tweet content. For this purpose, a category-based approach was applied which analysed 12,000 hand-coded tweets. The findings show that gender *and* party, both separately and together, were associated with politicians' tweet content in several ways. The findings in this chapter also show that gender *and* party differences were contextual, with some differences arising only during certain periods.

Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues, is the second empirical chapter, which responds to the second research question by exploring if and how gender and party are associated with the ways in which politicians tweeted about political issues. Two analyses were performed for this chapter: a content analysis and a thematic analysis. The content analysis considers the frequencies with which politicians tweeted

about political issues, and the thematic analysis studies the tone, focus, and orientation of political issue tweets. For this purpose, I analysed all tweets which concerned a political issue ($n = 5,589$) during the earlier coding of 12,000 tweets. To perform the thematic analysis, I constructed a sub-sample of 388 tweets, after having selected five primary political issues: Brexit, the economy and taxes, education, the environment, and gender and sexism-related issues. The reasoning for this sampling strategy is that it presents a balanced mix between 'feminine' and 'masculine' issues, and issues which the Labour and Conservative Party are perceived more able to deal with; this rationale is further explained in *Chapter 4: Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods*, under § 4.3 *Methods*. The results in this chapter demonstrate that gender and party, separately and together, were associated with the ways in which politicians discuss political issues, both in terms of frequencies *and* in the tone, focus, and orientation with which they tweet concerning political issues. As with politicians' tweet content, gender and party differences in politicians' discussion of issues varied across the three time periods.

Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation, is the final empirical chapter which replies to the third research question by exploring the ways in which British politicians disclosed personal information in their tweets. In this chapter, two separate thematic analyses were conducted. The first analysis explored the content and tone of personal tweets and to this end, all tweets coded as personal tweets were analysed, that is, tweets unconcerned with politics ($n = 479$) from the content analysis of 12,000 tweets. The second thematic analysis explored the ways in which politicians included personal information in *any* of their tweets. To achieve this, a random subsample of 400 tweets was analysed, which was stratified along gender and party lines, drawn from the complete dataset of original tweets ($n = 82,467$). These two sampling strategies allowed me to first explore the content and tone of *personal* tweets and then the presence of personal commentary in a random selection of *all* tweets. This chapter sheds light on the ways in which politicians used personal information to perform what I suggest is an 'authentic' identity designed to appeal to the public. In their personal tweets, politicians made trivial remarks about sports events or televised entertainment to show their 'ordinariness', while in their political tweets, they used various personalisation tactics,

thereby blending the personal and the political. I argue that politicians might have used these personalisation tactics to make themselves more ‘relatable’ to voters.

Finally, ***Chapter 8: Conclusions***, sums up how the thesis has responded to the overarching research questions and summarises the most important findings. The chapter further evaluates the suitability and usefulness of the theoretical framework that was developed to explain and interpret the findings. The chapter also consider the limitations of the current research and sets forth suggestions for further research. The chapter concludes with a description of the most important and original contributions that the current study makes to the existing body of knowledge.

Throughout the thesis, I insert figures at the point at which they are first discussed, and where these figures did not fit on the same page as the accompanying text without spilling onto a new page, they were inserted at the next blank page. Further, to improve readability and ease navigation of the thesis, hyperlinked cross-references are used, which when selected can be activated when clicked to transfer the reader to the beginning of that chapter or section in the document.

Chapter 2: Literature Review ‘Gender and Partisanship in Politics’

This chapter provides the first review of literature relevant to this thesis, and begins by contemplating differing definitions of sex and gender and by defending the use of a social constructionist perspective of gender relations in this thesis. The chapter will then examine the nature of stereotypes and how they function through the lens of schema theory. Next, academic literature concerning social role theory and gender stereotypes specifically will be discussed, followed by an adumbration of scholarship on gender stereotyping in the political arena, and thoughts on the circumstances under which gender stereotypes are likely to be applied by citizens when evaluating political candidates. The discussion of gender stereotypes depends heavily on the question of how politicians present themselves, since gender stereotypes serve as important rhetorical constraints for political candidates: in order to be successful, candidates need to emphasize their stereotypical weaknesses and capitalize upon their stereotypical strengths. Indeed, research has suggested that women politicians are aware of the kind of gender stereotyping practiced by voters and behave accordingly, in ways that attempt to diminish negative implications. The chapter then considers how gender stereotypes manifest in traditional (news) media and particularly in coverage of political actors. The chapter subsequently discusses gender differences in women’s and men’s communication styles. Finally, the closing section of the chapter reviews literature concerned with how gender and partisanship together shape voters’ perceptions of political candidates.

§ 2.1 A social constructionist perspective on gender relations

In accordance with feminist research in general, I adopted a *social constructionist* perspective on gender relations. While such thinking might be familiar to some readers, especially those versed in feminist literature, I would like to explicitly define this approach, because academic research that focuses on gender differences, as the current study does, runs the risk of being essentialist (Steiner, 2012). Essentialism here refers to the idea that certain phenomena, for instance differences between the sexes, are essential to those sexes and therefore natural and biologically determined (Rahman

and Jackson, 2010). The assumption that sexual differences are ordained by nature has long been taken for granted, and has dominated cultural values, beliefs, and conventional wisdom. For centuries, essentialist ideas of sexual distinctions have served to justify patriarchal, hegemonic power systems with social domination over women. Specifically, biological distinctions have been used to rationalise the gendered nature of the public/private dichotomy; only men were perceived as psychologically suitable to guardianship of the public sphere, with women considered emotionally fragile and therefore destined for the private domain (Braden, 1996; Sanbonmatsu, 2004). Whilst a man could move freely from one sphere to another, a woman was restricted to the private world, and subjected there to male authority. These gendered realms thus excluded women from citizenship and participation in wider society, lending men more political, economic, and democratic power. Through the gendered public/private dichotomy, essentialist ideas about women's and men's roles in society lie at the heart of women's oppression.

Second-wave feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s challenged these deeply ingrained essentialist beliefs, by advocating a more social constructionist perspective of sexual differences and inequalities (Friedan, 1963; Greer, 1970; Millett, 1970; Oakley, 1972; Chodorow, 1999). A social constructionist view holds that hierarchical sets of social relations and contexts, including patriarchy, are socially generated, rather than caused by nature (DeLamater and Hyde, 1998). One of the first to endorse this view was the French philosopher and feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir. In her pioneering book 'Le Deuxieme Sexe' ('The Second Sex', 1949; English translation 1953), she stated that "one is not born, but becomes a woman" (1949, p. 301), which has come to be one of the most famous and oft-cited sentences in feminist scholarship. The line encapsulates the thought that structural relations, rather than biology, dictate inequality and women's subordination. To differentiate between biologically determined differences and socially constructed ones, feminists adopted the term 'gender' to complement the term 'sex'. Gender in this sense pertains to socially constructed differences between femininity and masculinity, constructed and constituted by everyday experiences and interactions (Butler, 1990, 1999; Jackson and Scott, 2002;

Dolan, 2018). Butler in her influential work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, second edition 1999) argues that gender identities are 'performatively constituted', meaning that they are not stable or coherent, but rather stylised repetitions of acts. Savigny and Scullion (2019) draw on Butler's theory of performativity to argue that gender is not a neutral, but rather a *political* feature, as they assert that "gender is something that is learned and performed, and its meaning generated, through its repetition, which, in turn, serves to both represent and (re)construct gendered power structures and relationships" (p. 366). The term sex, alternatively, refers to biological differences between females and males (Holmes, 2007). The sex/gender distinction thus fits within the broader nature/nurture debate (Squires, 1999), and the division between the terms originally appeared in psychoanalytic literature, where Stoller (1968) used the term 'gender' when writing on the subject of transsexuality. In his pioneering work *Sex and Gender: The Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968), Stoller argued that even though one's gender and sex are usually complementary, the concepts are not coextensive; not all women are feminine and not all men are masculine. By distinguishing between sex and gender, Stoller could explain the situation of those whose sex and gender features did not correspond to their ideas about themselves. He further contended that whereas one's sex is biologically established, at least at first sight for most people, gender is culturally defined. Although his work was not aimed at promoting a feminist agenda, second-wave feminists, such as Millett (1970), Greer (1970), Oakley (1972), and Chodorow (1978; second edition 1999), swiftly appropriated Stoller's disentanglement of gender and sex to argue that societal influence dictates male domination, not biology. The affirmation of a line of demarcation between gender and sex is often considered to be the keystone of second-wave feminism (Oakley, 1972), as it poses a fundamental argument for the rejection of essentialism that had so long prevailed.

As a consequence of the second-wave feminist struggle, many people nowadays acknowledge the distinction between sex and gender, though society continues to place a heavy focus on 'natural differences' between women and men, even though it could be argued that they are more alike than different (Friedman, 2011). Natural differences

are therefore still adduced to justify gendered divisions and the gender order. Connell (1983) argued that this rationalisation occurs through the ‘negation of biology’. She postulated that a configuration of social practices negates, or suppresses, bodily *similarities* between women and men, whilst they exaggerate bodily *differences*. To illustrate this social practice, Connell (1983) provided the example of girls being repeatedly defined as the ‘weaker sex’, despite the fact that they are often stronger and taller than boys during puberty, and importantly, boys and men are, to a much greater extent than girls and women, *encouraged* to be physically strong and confident. Further, Connell (1983) reasoned, average numbers are translated into absolute numbers: while men are *on average* stronger than women, this does not mean that *all* men are stronger than *all* women. These examples show how societal gender inequalities are variously perpetuated by dominant narratives built around the negation of biology. Even though essentialist beliefs about sexual differences have clearly not dissipated, and to a certain extent continue to serve as justification for women’s inferior position in society, the acknowledgement of a distinction between sex and gender has arguably still built important foundations for a path towards women’s liberation. It is under such conditions that this thesis will refrain from using sex and gender interchangeably as synonymous terms, and will henceforward refer to gender, instead of sex, to contemplate social differences and inequalities between women and men. Gender differences that might arise in the current research are considered to be rooted in processes of acculturation and socialisation that determine what constitutes gender. It is therefore important to keep in mind that, when I looked at politicians’ sex and particular differences arose, I assumed them to be present because of differing ideas politicians hold about their own sex, which they believe are correspondent with their gender. If I find distinct patterns between women and men politicians, these by no means characterise the patterns of all women or all men. Thus, this thesis adopts a social constructionist perspective of gender relations: it is nurture, not nature, that defines social differences and life chances between women and men.

§ 2.2 Schema theory and stereotypes

The theoretical understanding of the social construction of gender has not erased beliefs about biologically determined differences in many people's minds, and such differences continue to inform contemporary stereotypes. This section aims to briefly explain stereotypes through the lens of schema theory. To comprehend and process the deluge of information we are bombarded with on a daily basis, people create cognitive structures, or schemata, to simplify and categorise all of the knowledge that we receive (Anderson, 1978). The cognitive construction of these *schemata* to make sense of the social world is captured in schema theory (Anderson, 1978). Bartlett (1932) used the term '*schema*' when arguing that the human memory operates in a selective manner, rather than extensively storing all available information. More recently, Cerulo (2002) states that schemata accustom the brain to keep only those features of a new experience consonant with previously stored experiences, while excluding or adjusting any discrepant details. On the one hand, schemata can be useful for individuals to gather knowledge from the mass of potentially overwhelming information with which they are presented. On the other hand, schematic thinking is associated with stereotypic thinking, since stereotypes can be thought of as kinds of schemata. Stereotypes can be defined as a set of behaviours and traits attributed to members of specific social groups (Hamilton and Trolier, 1986; Macrae, Stangor and Hewstone, 1996). Just as other schemata, stereotypes do not have to be problematic, as they can aid individuals by providing information-processing shortcuts, especially when there is a lack of information, when people are minimally engaged, or when concepts are overly complex (Koch, 1999, 2002). However, stereotypic thinking can be questionable, as it is linked to prejudicial beliefs and unrealistic expectations about certain groups (Hughes and Baldwin, 2002), which can lead to negative, discriminatory behaviour (Dovidio *et al.*, 1996), to the detriment of those stereotyped (Pickering, 2001).

§ 2.3 Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are undoubtedly amongst the most pervasive, with a person's gender being so readily accessible a cue that we automatically and universally utilise it to categorise people when encountering them, which permeates all aspects of human

life (Dolan, 2014b; Sprague, 2018). Gender stereotypes can be defined as a set of behaviours and traits attributed separately to women and men (Bauer, 2019). Research has shown that gender stereotypes, as with other social stereotypes, can operate explicitly, entailing conscious awareness, as well as implicitly, or automatically, without intention or conscious awareness (Rudman and Kilianski, 2000). Interestingly, Rudman and Kilianski (2000) demonstrated that although women show less explicit prejudice towards female authority than do men, their implicit prejudices are equally negative. Even people who believe that they are not gender-biased and disavow traditional beliefs may utilise gender stereotypes to infer others' personality traits, competencies, and dispositions (Rudman and Goodwin, 2004). *Social role theory* proposes that gender stereotypes are rooted in the traditional role-constrained behaviours that women and men have historically exhibited, and that this role behaviour shapes stereotypes (Eagly, 1987).

Research shows that gender stereotypes are acquired very early in childhood, and so before people can question them (Devine, 1989), and persist into adulthood (Fiske, 1998). This occurs through the process of *gender role socialisation*; women and men take on different gender roles according to social expectations. Children are implicitly and explicitly taught how to behave, what to wear, and how to play in accordance with traditional expectations of their gender. From a very early age, girls are generally raised to be social, caring, and modest, and boys to be assertive, competitive, and independent (Baumann *et al.*, 2015). Miller, Lurye, Zosuls and Ruble (2009) demonstrate that when children are asked to describe girls, they focus first on appearance traits, such as being pretty, wearing dresses, makeup and jewellery, and having long hair, whilst when describing boys, they focus on activities, such as sports and rough play. These descriptions suggest that children's ideas of gender distinctions agree with wider social expectations. It is considered that women focus much more heavily than men on connectedness to others and think cooperation and emotional support of greater importance, whilst men place a heavier weight on autonomy and separateness from others (Cross and Madson, 1997). In other words, women are socialised into being more '*communal*' (an orientation towards other people and their

well-being) and men more ‘*agentic*’ (an orientation towards the self and the attainment of one’s own ambitions) (Sczesny, Nater and Eagly, 2019).

However, gender stereotypes are not fixed in time (Diekman and Eagly, 2000). Social role theory propounds that women’s and men’s role behaviours inform gender stereotypes (Eagly, 1987), which means that as gender roles in society evolve, so do gender stereotypes. Since the mid-20th century, women’s and men’s social roles have changed dramatically, not least because of women entering the labour market (Diekman and Eagly, 2000). Several studies by Eagly and her colleagues have demonstrated that gender stereotypes evolve as gender roles in society change (Diekman and Eagly, 2000; Eagly *et al.*, 2020). Firstly, by using an experimental design, Diekman and Eagly (2000) showed that female stereotypes are more dynamic than male stereotypes, because women’s roles have changed more than men’s. They further argued that perceived differences between women and men are diminishing in accordance with greater role similarity between women and men (Diekman and Eagly, 2000). Finally, Eagly and colleagues (2020) performed a meta-analysis of 16 public opinion polls carried out between 1946 and 2018 on gender stereotypes in the United States (N = 30,093 respondents). The authors (2020) demonstrated that women were increasingly considered to be more ‘*communal*’ than men, but found no change in the extent to which women were deemed ‘*agentic*’ relative to men. To summarize, these studies have documented the dynamic nature of stereotypes as gender relations and role behaviour changes, so do stereotypes.

§ 2.4 Gender stereotypes in politics

When gender stereotypes extend to politics they are referred to as political gender stereotypes (Dolan, 2014a, 2018). The political domain appears decidedly gendered in many ways (Connell, 2005; Dolan, 2014b; Piscopo, 2019), with men having dominated the highest echelons of political power in most places throughout human history. Recently, *some* women have gained access to high political positions, though they are still very much in a minority. When I collected the data, 207 out of 805 Members of the House of Lords in the UK were women (26%) and 8 out of 23 Cabinet posts were held

by women (35%) (Apostolova and Cracknell, 2017). At the time of completing this thesis, this number had increased to 220 women MPs (34%), an all-time high in the UK, though the number of women in Cabinet had fallen to six (Uberoi, Watson and Kirk-Wade, 2020). Globally, there are 21 women serving as Heads of State or of Government (Vogelstein and Bro, 2020). Scholarship provides various explanations for the dearth of female politicians worldwide, among which is incumbency advantage or bias, since the great majority of political offices are held by men, and incumbents are generally in a stronger position than their challengers when voting is held for that office (Darcy, Welch and Clark, 1994; Meserve, Pemstein and Bernhard, 2020); the recruitment strategies of political parties seeking candidates, where highly qualified women are less likely than similarly fitted men to be recruited to run for office (Fox and Lawless, 2010); candidate selection processes, where party gatekeepers disproportionately place women in less favourable positions on electoral lists compared with similarly qualified men (Lühiste, 2015)⁶; institutional, organisational, and structural barriers, with women being systematically excluded from the electoral process (Piscopo, 2019); stereotypical, sexist media coverage of women politicians which curbs political ambition in women (Haraldsson and Wängnerud, 2019); and finally, voters' gender stereotyping (Lefkofridi, Giger and Holli, 2019), which will now be discussed.

Politics could be a sphere where gender stereotypes particularly thrive, since people often rely on stereotypes for when trying to comprehend areas in which they are minimally engaged or that they find complicated (Koch, 1999, 2002; Johns and Shephard, 2007), politics undoubtedly being among such areas for most (Lupia, 2016). However, empirical studies of the actual prevalence and application of gender stereotypes when evaluating politicians have produced contradictory conclusions. Whilst some point towards the existence of gender stereotypes and suggest that these are harmful to women politicians (Banwart, 2010; Lefkofridi, Giger and Holli, 2019), other scholars argue that voters do not carry out the gender stereotyping of political

⁶ Lühiste (2015) shows that in comparison with male candidates, female candidates' likelihood of being placed by party gatekeepers in viable positions depends more on the institutional setting and overall context in which they run, such as the kind of voting system used, than it does for male candidates' chances of viability.

candidates when voting, or that such stereotyping does not negatively affect candidates' electability (see for example Seltzer, Newman and Leighton, 1997; Brooks, 2013; Fox, 2018). I propose five explanations for these conflicting conclusions. Firstly, differences in research findings may have resulted from the ways in which samples were constructed. For example, many studies rely on the responses of university students (Chang and Hitchon, 2004; Turska-Kawa and Olszanecka-Marmola, 2018), probably because student pools provide researchers with convenient and readily available research subjects (Henry, 2008). However, students might not be a sufficiently representative group for detecting the presence of gender stereotyping (Devroe and Wauters, 2018), since their higher levels of formal education and generally younger age are associated with more positive attitudes towards women in politics (Kahn, 1994a; Norris, 2001; Campbell, 2004). As younger voters, students might have become more accustomed to women occupying higher political positions, compared to older voters. Secondly, gender stereotypes are found to be conditional on the socio-political context (Boyle and Meyer, 2018). Indeed, Boyle and Meyer (2018) demonstrate with their work on the U.S. political landscape that a greater representation of women in politics makes citizens feel less negative about a woman president.

Thirdly, as mentioned before, gender stereotypes are not fixed in time and change in proportion to the changing social roles of women and men (Eagly *et al.*, 2020). This applies also to political gender stereotypes. Dolan (2014b) argues that while political gender stereotypes persist, they are perhaps not as strongly held as previously. Fourthly, a discrepancy in the literature regarding whether or not voters hold gender stereotypes beliefs when evaluating women politicians, can be explained by the idea of 'sex-based political selection', which means that female candidates need to be thought of as more qualified and more competent than male candidates to get elected (Lawless and Pearson, 2008; Anzia and Berry, 2011; Fulton, 2012). Much of the literature concludes that the electorate does not practice gender stereotyping, because of the increasing number of both women leaders and women elected political representatives over the past decade in several regions of the world. This strand of research suggests that when women candidates run, they win (Darcy, Welch and Clark, 1994; Fox, 2000).

However, other research has shown that the electoral success of women relative to men politicians at the polls does not necessarily mean that voters do not hold stereotypical views of gender. Researchers such as Anzia and Berry (2011), Fulton (2012), and Lawless and Pearson (2008), among others, have found that there is an underlying mechanism at work, which may disguise a negative voter bias against female politicians, namely 'sex-based political selection'. According to the process of sex-based political selection, female candidates need to be more qualified and more competent than men candidates to get elected. Anzia and Berry (2011) tested the theory of 'sex-based political selection' by comparing the success of female and male Congress members at securing federal spending for their districts and at sponsoring legislation. The authors (2011) found that women gained approximately 9% more money for spending than did men, and co-sponsored significantly more bills than did men. If women politicians hold superior qualifications and outperform men politicians, but enjoy equivalent support at the polls, then voters might be biased against women because otherwise women would, with their superior qualifications, outperform men at the polls (Fulton, 2012). Similarly, by analysing data from primary election results for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1958 to 2004, Lawless and Pearson (2008) suggest that "[o]nly the most qualified women may be willing to take on a primary battle, winnowing women from the field before the contest begins" (p. 78).

Lastly, is there is a prevalence of gender stereotypes only in certain circumstances. Bauer (2015), for example, posits that voters apply gender stereotypes only when presented with stereotypical information, and therefore, she argues, gender stereotypes could be activated by the media or by politicians' self-portrayal. This indicates how the discussion of gender stereotypes is related to the manner in which politicians present themselves (Johns and Shephard, 2007), and suggests that women politicians should be deliberate with their campaign messaging by avoiding traditional feminine stereotypes and adhering to conventional campaign strategies to improve their chances of electoral success (Bauer, 2015; Devroe, Spáč and Uhlík, 2020). Indeed, some research has proposed that women politicians, being familiar with gender stereotypes, employ counter-stereotypical strategies (Kahn, 1996; Dolan and Kropf,

2004). This illustrates the importance of analysing women and men politicians' own communications, to discern if politicians themselves prompt gender stereotyping. Existing literature differentiates between four kinds of political gender stereotype: (1) general competence stereotypes; (2) personality trait stereotypes; (3) gender-ideology stereotypes; and (4) issue competence stereotypes, which will now be discussed.

§ 2.4.1 General competence stereotypes

The reasoning for general competence stereotypes is that candidate gender influences perceptions of competence, in particular that women have less competence for politics than do men (Kahn, 1996; Devroe, Spáč and Uhlík, 2020). Social role theory explains that general competence stereotypes originate from the idea that women are socialised into being more '*communal*' and men more '*agentic*' (Abele and Wojciszke, 2007), and understandings of communality and agency are linked to the perception of competence (Okimoto and Brescoll, 2010). Notably, agentic qualities are deemed more important for functioning in politics (Bligh *et al.*, 2012). Scholars have noted that women politicians are generally thought less credible and qualified for political office than are men politicians (Kahn, 1996; Koch, 1999). Further, Ditonto, Hamilton and Redlawsk (2014) conclude that citizens look for more information related to the competence of women candidates than of men candidates, thereby under-measuring women politicians' qualifications and credentials. Bligh and colleagues (2012) note that the media have an important bearing on voters' judgments of the likeability and competence of female politicians and suggest that women in positions of authority are seen as competent, but not liked, because they violate femininity stereotypes, and therefore the authors suggest that women politicians need to be more vigilant than men politicians in proactively counterbalancing how the media portrays them. In other words, women politicians must strike a fine balance by neither appearing too warm nor too competent, a phenomenon that Jamieson (1995) describes as the 'femininity-competence double bind'.

§ 2.4.2 Gender issue competence stereotypes

The idea of issue competence stereotypes is that men and women are intrinsically different in their competence for handling certain issues (Devroe, Spáč and Uhlík,

2020). Derived from Petrocik's (1996) theory of party issue ownership, gender issue ownership accordingly holds that women and men politicians, differing in their competence for particular matters, 'own' these issues, in the sense that they are expected to be responsible for confronting them (Herrnson, Lay and Stokes, 2003). More specifically, and congruent with traditional gender roles, female candidates are frequently associated with the ability to better deal with putatively 'feminine' issues, whilst male candidates are often considered more able to tackle supposedly 'masculine' issues.

Though different taxonomies exist of 'feminine' and 'masculine' concerns, there seems to be consensus that typical 'feminine' issues include social welfare and problems that arouse compassion, among them education (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, 2009; Devroe, Spáč and Uhlík, 2020), health care (Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Dolan, 2018), poverty (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, 2007; Dolan, 2018; Devroe, Spáč and Uhlík, 2020), and women's issues (Bystrom *et al.*, 2004). Exemplary 'masculine' matters include strategy, state interests, and finance, such as those concerning the military (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Devroe, Spáč and Uhlík, 2020), national security (Meeks, 2013; Holman, Merolla and Zechmeister, 2017), economy (Meeks, 2013; Dolan, 2018), foreign policy (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, 2007; Holman, Merolla and Zechmeister, 2017), crime (Sanbonmatsu, 2002), and immigration (Bystrom *et al.*, 2004). This issue-oriented assumption could put women at an electoral advantage if the electoral environment makes 'feminine' matters more salient. Dolan (2018) observes that sometimes, general gender stereotyping can harmonise with what the public is specifically looking for from candidates, depending on which issues voters consider important at the time of a particular election. For example, research has shown that gender stereotyping might be helpful for female candidates when 'feminine' issues are salient, such as education (Anzia and Bernhard, 2019) or gender equality issues like abortion, so long as they hold liberal views of such issues (Blome, Lloren and Rosset, 2020). Democratic reality, however, often shows that the political agenda primarily revolves around 'masculine' matters and that these issues are privileged over 'feminine' concerns (Thomas and Adams, 2010; Meeks and Domke, 2016). For instance, Lawless

(2004) demonstrates that citizens considered men better equipped to handle the response to the September 11 attacks, by improving national security and curbing terrorism among other measures, with such ‘masculine’ cares dominating the political agenda in the post-September 11 era. Further, Falk and Kenski (2006) find evidence that people who think terrorism, homeland security, and war the most concerning issues for the U.S. were likelier to remark that a male president would more ably deal with these issues than would a female president. Research besides indicates that the higher the office in question, the more that ‘masculine’ policy and programme interests top the political agenda (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Smith, Paul and Paul, 2007). It could be argued that much current political rhetoric is built around notions of ‘masculine’ confrontations, such as those between the potential threat of terrorists and immigrants and the strong political leadership necessary to counter them. During the period that this thesis was written, the UK political debate frequently centred on ‘masculine’ issues, as with Brexit and associated concerns, including the protection of borders, immigration, national security, and terrorism. However, one ‘feminine’ issue which temporarily held centre stage during the data collection period is abortion, following the Irish Abortion Referendum on 25 May 2018. It is therefore particularly interesting to discover if women and men politicians’ discourse took a gendered form.

§ 2.4.2 Personality trait stereotypes

Using Petrocik’s (1996) theory of issue ownership, Hayes (2005) developed counterpart, *trait ownership*, according to which Republicans possess more leadership traits, while Democrats have more compassion and empathy traits. Likewise, based upon traditional gender roles, female and male politicians are perceived to have distinct personality traits, that is, women politicians are thought more communal, and thus deemed more understanding, honest, trustworthy, emotional, and gentle (Kite, Deaux and Haines, 2008). Men politicians, on the other hand, are generally perceived as more agentic, and therefore more controlling, assertive, self-confident, qualified, knowledgeable, competitive, and independent (Kite, Deaux and Haines, 2008). As with stereotyping in respect of issues, this perceived disparity between the personality traits of female and male politicians may hinder women politicians, since ‘masculine’ traits are

generally considered more important for political leadership than are ‘feminine’ traits, especially so at higher levels of office (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; McGinley, 2009). Significantly, the gender stereotyping of politicians is conjunctive as regards issue competency and personality traits: female politicians are ascribed ‘feminine’ personality traits that stand for their adeptness at handling ‘feminine’ issues, while male politicians are equally deemed to be better at dealing with ‘masculine’ issues, having been assigned ‘masculine’ personality traits (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993).

§ 2.4.3 Gender-ideology stereotypes

The conceit of gender-ideology stereotypes is that women are more left-leaning than men (Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; McDermott, 1997; Koch, 2000, 2002; Dolan, 2014a; Devroe and Wauters, 2018), and research documents a tendency for citizens to consider women politicians more liberal than men politicians (Alexander & Andersen, 1993; Devroe & Wauters, 2018; King & Matland, 2003; Koch (2000 2002; McDermott, 1998; Dolan, 2018). These stereotypes are rooted in women’s communal role in society, since a liberal ideology entails a ‘caring’ role of government in people’s lives (Koch, 2000; Bauer, 2019). Research is inconclusive over the question whether such stereotypes affect voting behaviour. Some scholars have argued that gender-ideology stereotypes hardly influence electoral support for candidates (Brooks, 2013; Dolan, 2014b; Thomsen, 2020). Thomsen (2020), for example, argues that female U.S. House candidates do not fare worse than ideologically similar male candidates. Other scholars, however, have suggested that gender-ideology stereotypes may hinder women politicians’ success at the polls under some circumstances (Bauer, 2015, 2019; Ditonto, 2017). These stereotypes might not affect Labour women who espouse a left-wing ideology (e.g. feminine values of nurturing), but it could be harmful for Conservative women who support a right-wing ideology (e.g. masculine values of self-support).

§ 2.5 Gender stereotypes in traditional media

An abundance of research has shown that the media reinforce structural and cultural biases against women in politics by perpetuating the aforementioned stereotypes

(Byerly and Ross, 2006; Campbell and Childs, 2010; Harmer, Savigny and Ward, 2017; Ward, 2017). Second-wave feminist scholarship began analysing the stereotypical portrayals of women by mainstream media in the late 1960s, among which were the content analyses conducted by the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the United States on women's representation in television programming. Today, important work is being undertaken by the GMMP, which stands for the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2015), the largest international study of media coverage from a gender perspective. Collectively, a burgeoning body of feminist research demonstrates that gender bias is pervasive in traditional media outlets, such as television, radio, and print. By and large, the media trivialise women, rendering them invisible, subjugated, objectified, symbolised in subordinated roles, and exclusively confined to the domestic domain (Carter and Steiner, 2004; Byerly and Ross, 2006). This nullifying was highlighted by Tuchman, Daniels, and Benét's (1978) edited collection of essays, wherein the term 'symbolical annihilation' was coined.

§ 2.5.1 Political Gender Stereotypes in Traditional Media

The news media promote patriarchal power structures by consistently framing women in highly restricted and negative ways (Ross, 2013).⁷ This also applies to news coverage of women politicians, as research shows that news media invariably situate women politicians in gendered positions, outside the public sphere. Tuchman and colleagues (1978) argued that one of the manifestations of women's symbolical annihilation is omission, and past research findings show that women politicians typically receive less news coverage than their male counterparts (Kahn, 1994b; Norris, 1997; Ross *et al.*, 2013; Lühiste and Banducci, 2016; O'Neill, Savigny and Cann, 2016). For instance, in the United States, Kahn (1994b) demonstrated that female politicians in the Senate elections received less coverage than male politicians and Norris (1997) found that women leaders worldwide are mentioned in fewer news media stories than the men leaders preceding or succeeding them. In the United Kingdom, Ross and colleagues (2013) analysed press coverage during the 2010 British General Election, and

⁷ Ross (2013) notes that the news media's framing of women in highly gendered ways is a global phenomenon, which has endured over time and across media formats.

concluded that women candidates were much less likely to feature in news stories than were men candidates, even in coverage of party leadership contests. Further, O'Neill and colleagues (2016) explored British news coverage of women and men politicians in seven newspapers in three chosen years spanning two decades – 1992, 2002 and 2012 – and concluded that while in 1992 and 2002 the quantity of women politicians' news coverage was roughly proportionate to their numerical representation in Parliament, by 2012 this coverage had decreased, despite women politicians having greater representation in Parliament. Finally, Lühiste and Banducci (2016) analysed the 2009 European Election Study's Media Content Data, encompassing data on media coverage in 25 European Union member states, and demonstrate that women candidates receive less media coverage than men candidates. Other studies find little gender bias in the amount of news coverage women and men politicians receive (Jalalzai, 2006; Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008; Van Der Pas and Aaldering, 2020). However, even if women candidates are gaining more parity with men as regards news coverage, it is not just the quantity of coverage that matters, but also the quality and orientation of this coverage.

Research has shown a variety of gender-based inconsistencies in media reporting. The media tend to echo the gender stereotypes which exist in a given society. The news media especially perpetuate gender stereotypes concerning politicians' ability to handle political issues, their personality traits, and the legitimacy of their position in politics. Concerning political issues, Kahn (1994b) shows that during the U.S. Senate elections between 1982 and 1988 the media's discussion of issues varied according to the gender of the Senate candidate, with so-called feminine issues being given more attention when women candidates were considered. Similar research findings appear in more recent studies. For example, an examination of newspaper coverage of British MPs in the months leading up to the 2010 General Election concludes that female MPs were much more likely to feature in articles specifically about gender issues than were male MPs (Ross *et al.*, 2013). Kittilson and Fridkin (2008) find like results in their transnational analysis of the United States, Australia, and Canada, with male candidates receiving far more press coverage when seemingly 'masculine' issues such as the economy and foreign policy were the focus, and female candidates

correspondingly gaining greater press coverage when seemingly ‘feminine’ issues including education and welfare were under scrutiny. Moreover, Major and Coleman (2008) show that even when a female candidate has expertise in traditionally ‘masculine’ issues, or when a male candidate has considerable experience with supposedly ‘feminine’ issues, the media persist in attaching women to ‘feminine’ issues and men to ‘masculine’ issues. Notably, journalists devote more space to ‘masculine’ issues in general (Meeks, 2013). Regarding personality traits, Kahn (1994b) found in her study of U.S. Senate elections that reporters emphasised reputedly ‘masculine’ traits more often for men candidates than for women candidates, whilst they generally discussed so-called ‘masculine’ traits more often than ‘feminine’ traits. Greene and Lühiste (2018) argue that gender can also act as a ‘symbol of priority’, because parties with more female MPs, or with a female leader, gain more news coverage related to traditional women’s or compassion issues.

Accumulated research has further pointed towards an inclination for the media to disproportionately focus on political women’s personal attributes, experiences, and physical appearances rather than on their policy preferences or ambitions (Ross, 2010). Heldman, Carroll, and Olson (2005) ascertained that the media gave significantly more attention to the private lives (e.g. marital status, children) and personalities of women politicians than those of men. O’Neill and colleagues (2016) relatedly concluded that women politicians appeared more often in non-political stories than did men politicians. Not only is such scrutiny intrusive and irrelevant to their competence for the job, but the persistent framing of women politicians as *women* implicitly undermines the legitimacy of their place in politics, since women are routinely being associated with the domestic, private domain. Ross (2017) observes that in news media coverage of the 2017 UK General Election, journalists were for the most part not overtly sexist, but that more subtle strategies of undermining and trivialising women as politicians were still present. By the same token, men are stereotyped in gendered ways: by not highlighting the private lives of men, the media reinforce the assumption that this is irrelevant to male politicians’ fulfilment of their political obligations. Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) performed a meta-analysis of 86 studies covering over 20,000 politicians, and

concluded that women politicians receive more attention on their appearance and personal life than do men politicians. These studies illustrate the media's reconstruction of politics utilising traditional frames that are built around the dominance of men, whereby women's political stances and capabilities are backgrounded, and thus are they reduced to political outsiders (Ross, 2010). Scholars refer to this procedure as 'gendered mediation' (Gidengil and Everitt, 1999; Ross and Sreberny, 2000). The gendered mediation of politics can influence public perceptions about who should and should not participate in the public sphere, thereby discouraging women to participate in the political process (Ross, 2002; Falk, 2008). Indeed, research has shown that stereotypical media coverage affects members of the negatively stereotyped group (Appel and Weber, 2017), and that stereotypical media portrayals stifle political ambition among women politicians (Haraldsson and Wängnerud, 2019). Hence, by means of widespread disparagement and marginalisation of women candidates, the media uphold and perpetuate hegemonic, patriarchal power structures in society, despite their having the social responsibility to promote normative ideals of equal access to political power and the public sphere. While the previously discussed research on stereotypical news media coverage considers women and men politicians as *objects* of representation (e.g. Van Der Pas and Aaldering, 2020), the current study looks at women and men politicians as *producers* of communication.

§ 2.6 Gendered communication styles

Particularly relevant to the inquiry of women and men politicians as producers of communication is the notion of 'gendered communication styles'. Various studies have investigated whether women and men employ differing communication styles in interpersonal as well as mass-media contexts (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990; Steiner, 2012; Kendall and Tannen, 2015; Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Baden, 2018). In her much-discussed work on language, gender, and power, Lakoff (1975) argued that women's and men's communication styles were influenced by their position in the patriarchal system and that women were socialised into speaking in manners that are perceived as weak, by way of, for example, the use of 'super politeness' and 'qualifiers', which, in turn, reaffirms their inferior position in society. Tannen (1990) agreed with Lakoff that

gender differences exist in women's and men's communication styles, and she outlined them in her best-selling book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. For most women, Tannen (1990) argued, the goal of communication is to maintain interaction and to seek understanding, whereas for most men, the primary aim is to preserve independence and to maintain their status in a hierarchical social order. While for the majority of men conversations serve as negotiations for dominance and power, for most women they are a means to connect and preserve intimacy (Tannen, 1990). Other researchers have similarly argued that women's communication is mainly intended to establish and maintain relationships, whilst men's communication is more directed at establishing control and status (Tannen, 1990; Wood, 1994; Bate and Bowker, 1997). Furthermore, Campbell (1973) suggested that women's verbal communication carries a personal tone, relies on personal experiences, examples, and anecdotes, and focuses on identification with respondents and on participatory interaction. Dow and Tonn (1993) drew upon Campbell to study the locution of Texas Governor Ann Richards, who, they concluded, relied heavily on concrete examples, anecdotes, and brief narratives, and who used a familiar tone and shared personal experiences, therethrough attempting to forge a personal connection with her audience.

Alternatively, men's communication style tends to be more impersonal, is more assertive, and relies more on facts and analytics (Wood, 1994; Jones, 2017). In general, most contemporary scholarship, building upon Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990), contends that gender differences, though they do exist, are relatively small (Leaper and Robnett, 2011; Hanitzsch and Hanusch, 2012). Of course, though researchers differentiate between women's and men's communicate styles (Campbell, 1973; Tannen, 1990; Dow and Tonn, 1993; Wood, 1994), the use of these styles is not limited to one gender (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Baden, 2018). The current research investigates if these 'gendered styles', which have been historically identified as parts of analogue forms of communication, can be discerned in the digital form of tweets.

§ 2.7 Gender and Party identification

The central argument of this thesis is that the possible bearing of gender on a politician's communications by means of Twitter should not be considered in isolation, and I am primarily concerned with the question of how a politician's gender interacts with their political party affiliation. The political party to which they belong is largely thought to be the most important influence on evaluations of politicians and voter choice (Rahn, 1993), and is said to influence how politicians behave and communicate (Bystrom *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, it is important to consider gender *and* political party together. Voters use candidate gender heuristically to infer their traits and issue positions, and this interacts with the party's issue profile. Research suggests that voters rely on beliefs about parties to infer political candidates' traits and issue positions (Hayes, 2005; Goren, 2007). Using data from The American National Election Studies for the period from 1980 to 2004, Hayes (2005) showed that Democrat presidential candidates are persistently considered more compassionate and empathetic than Republican candidates, who are deemed stronger leaders and more moral than Democrat candidates than Democrat candidates. According to party issue ownership theory, some political parties are deemed better able to 'handle' certain difficulties (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996), 'handling' here signifying a party's and its candidate's capability and commitment "to resolve a problem of concern to voters" (Petrocik, 1996). A party's historical dedication to certain matters of policy can create an expectation amongst voters that some parties are more interested in specific issues than are others (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen, 2003). In the British political arena, the Labour Party's electoral base have historically been working-class (Lawton, 2005) and more recently, the left-leaning middle class, and the Party has developed a reputation for acting in the interest of 'workers' (James, Markey and Markey, 2006). As a result, the Labour Party is often assumed to give priority to social welfare concerns, such as education (Seeberg, 2017) and unemployment (Green and Hobolt, 2008). Among the other issues for which the Labour Party is thought to have an aptitude are health and care, in particular the NHS and housing provision (Thorpe, 2008, 2015), and gender and sexism (Johns, 2006; Celis and Erzeel, 2015).

The electoral base of the Conservative Party, contrastingly, has historically been the middle- and monied classes (Blake, 1997), including business owners and those working in high income sectors, in whose interests the Conservatives have developed a reputation for working, and have therefore been termed ‘the party of business’ (Ball, 2014). The Conservative Party is deemed more interested in addressing issues related to the economy (Ball, 2014), crime (Thorpe, 2008, 2015; Bochel and Powell, 2018), foreign policy and immigration (Green and Hobolt, 2008), Europe (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005), and recently, Brexit (Dommett, 2015). Similar reputational distinctions have formed in North American politics, where Democrats are associated with a special care for education and poverty, and Republicans for foreign policy, crime and defence (Petrocik, 1996; Egan, 2013). It is important to note that party issue ownership and gender issue ownership are bound together (Meeks and Domke, 2016), with political parties increasingly viewed in gendered ways (Hayes, 2005; Winter, 2010). In North America, Republicans are connected with ‘masculinity’ and considered superior in handling ‘masculine’ issues, such as crime and defence, whereas Democrats, are often connected with ‘femininity’ (Winter, 2010) and thus thought better able to deal with ‘feminine’ issues. Correspondingly in the UK, The Labour Party are related with stereotypically ‘feminine’ issues, and the Conservative Party with traditionally ‘masculine’ issues. Research has further noted that women political leaders are judged more severely than their male colleagues during national security crises (Falk and Kenski, 2006), but Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister (2017) found that during such periods partisanship can form a strong counteraction of the tendency to unevenly appraise female leaders. Holman and colleagues (2017) remark for example that the standing of Republican leaders, both male and female, is mostly unaffected when there is a terrorist threat, though at such times Democratic leaders are discredited. Latterly, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in widespread praise for the effective leadership of women politicians, among them Denmark’s Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, Ethiopia’s President Sahle-Work Zewde, Finland’s Prime Minister Sanna Marin, Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, Iceland’s Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Slovakia’s President Zuzana Čaputová, and Thailand’s President Tsai Ing-Wen, with qualities such as the rapidity and orderliness

with which they introduced measures to reduce infection rates and the clear and humane manner in which they addressed the public being highlighted (Freizer, Azcona and Berevoescu, 2020; Garikipati and Kambhampati, 2020; Taub, 2020).

Resultantly, for some politicians, there is alignment between their gender and party identity, such as Labour women and Conservative men in the UK. For example, a Labour woman candidate might be viewed as being even more likely than her male colleague to support increases in welfare, as the gendered stereotype of women being more caring/nurturing would amplify the presumption of their being more sensitive to the socially deprived. Similarly, a male Conservative candidate might be perceived as more likely to support a reduction in the tax threshold for high earners than would their female colleagues, because for the most part men are more highly paid than women in equivalent roles. However, for other politicians, their gender- and party-based identities can be in conflict, such as Conservative women and Labour men, given that the expectations of how they should conduct themselves in accordance with their political party may differ from how they should act according to their gender (Holman, Merolla and Zechmeister, 2016). Meeks (2019) argues that for the latter group of politicians, conflicting gender and party ownerships create a “party- and gender-fuelled double bind” (p. 191). This means that such politicians need to carefully negotiate contrasting ownerships to build effective self-presentations (Meeks, 2013; Meeks and Domke, 2016). For example, if Conservative women highlight ‘masculine’ issues, which align with their party, they may be perceived to be neglecting their feminine identity, whereas a focus on so-called feminine issues, might make them look like straying too far from their party priorities. Similarly, for Labour men their perceived ownerships conflict and they also must strike a balance between their ownerships. The present study accordantly considers gender and party affiliation together.

§ 2.8 Conclusion

This chapter began by reviewing feminist arguments against assertions that differences and inequalities between the sexes are innate, and by explaining how the use of the term ‘gender’ as signifying social or cultural (rather than biological) distinctions supported these arguments. Even though feminist scholarship has robustly countered

conventional views of the natural division of women and men, gender stereotyped beliefs are still much in evidence and deeply entrenched in contemporary society, albeit to a significantly lesser extent than at the time preceding the feminist writings of the 1960s and 1970s. Gender stereotypes arise from schematic thinking and are widely applied because society still lays a heavy weight on gender as a defining quality. Gender stereotypes are amplified by 'gendered mediation', which here denotes the manner in which traditional news media commonly intercede between the political world and the public to elevate men politicians while inferiorising women politicians. Research shows that the prevalence of gender stereotypes in news media poses a formidable challenge to female politicians seeking advancement in their careers. While studies of the stereotypical depictions of politicians consider women and men politicians as *objects* of representation, this study considers women and men politicians as *producers* of communication. Accordingly, my research queries whether the same stereotypes about gender, party, and policy are replicated when politicians are themselves the producers of content. Critically, I consider gender and party together, as political party is one of the most important determinants of vote choice and gender- and party-based stereotypes overlap. The following chapter comprises the second literature review, which surveys the democratising potential of social media applications such as Twitter and reviews research on the influence of gender and party on politicians' social media usage.

Chapter 3: Literature Review ‘Twittering Politicians’

This chapter comprises the second literature review and the theoretical framework. The literature review considers the broad scholarly debate on the Internet and social media and democracy, to understand the wider context of the current research, discusses the earliest adopters of social media for political campaigns, reviews extant literature concerning politicians on Twitter, and identifies three matters that hold a dominant position in the field: tweet content, political issues, and personalisation. Gaps and shortcomings in previous research will be identified, from which result the research questions of this thesis. The chapter concludes by presenting the theoretical framework that was used to answer the research questions.

§ 3.1 The democratising potential of the Internet and social media

The emergence of the Internet for public use in the 1990s on a massive scale brought about high expectations – some of which proceeded from the field of political communication – that our democratic practices would be revitalised (Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Van Dijk, 2012). The Internet, it was argued, could remedy some side effects of democracy, such as political apathy, low levels of voter turnout, general distrust amongst the populace in politicians and the political process, and citizens being mostly unaware of what is happening on the political stage (Lupia, 2016). In the main, scholars have highlighted three democratising possibilities of the Internet and social media: improving access to political information; supporting public debate and deliberation; and increasing political participation by citizens (Tsagarousianou, 1999). Notably, advocates of the mobilisation hypothesis valued the potential of the Internet to revolutionise public engagement in politics, by mobilising those who are otherwise marginalised in the political system (Norris, 2001). Most empirical studies, however, did not corroborate this optimism, and scholars accordingly proposed the reinforcement hypothesis, which propounds that the Internet merely resembled or even reinforced existing political practices, power balances, and social inequalities (Best and Krueger, 2005; Lilleker et al., 2011).

Scholars' and commentators' hopefulness was revived when, three years after the 'dot com bubble' burst, the Internet advanced from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 (Van Dijk, 2012). O'Reilly (2005) coined the term Web 2.0 to describe a progression from Web 1.0, the first stage of the World Wide Web's development, which was characterised by static web sites with little interactive content, to websites designed for social participation and interaction, as exemplified by social media applications as diverse as YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Twitter (Fuchs, 2014). Social media platforms lie at the heart of Web 2.0, and have been academically defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as "Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61).⁸

Their emergence brought about a fresh wave of optimism that stressed their democratising potential for political dialogue (Dagoula, 2019), which is often dependent on interpretations of Habermas' concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). According to Habermas, the public sphere represents a democratic space in which private citizens can freely debate issues of public concern, without the state's interference or supervision. For Habermas, the coffeehouses of the late 17th century onward embodied the public sphere as discursive spaces where the bourgeoisie met for rational-critical debates and where public opinion was formed (Dagoula, 2019). Habermas's idea of the public sphere has been strongly contested by feminist writers, for its distinguishing between the labour of domestic childrearing and paid work (Fraser, 1985), and for the many groups seemingly excluded from the public sphere, on the basis of their gender, class, and ethnicity (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013). Nevertheless, the concept has been used extensively to explore social media's potential as a modern public sphere (Fuchs, 2014; Kruse, Norris and Flinchum, 2018), which has resulted in opposing perspectives, with at one extreme *cyberoptimism*, and at the other,

⁸ The hypothetical Web 3.0 foresees progression to a 'Semantic Web' composed of pages constructed in such a way that allows them to be read directly by other computers, not just humans, thereby creating a kind of intelligence capable of making its own associations between online content and deciding which of that content is most appropriate for a given online search, which could, for example, quickly provide far more relevant and organised knowledge to internet users making certain political enquiries.

cyberpessimism.⁹ Optimists consider social media a representation of Habermas' ideal of the public sphere and therefore things which can be regarded democratising devices, while pessimists have pointed out potential problems with digital public spheres (Schäfer, 2015).

Optimists contend the democratising potential of social media because widespread access to social media for political campaigning can facilitate a more inclusive and decentralised democratic discourse. Utz (2009), for example, argues that social media offer ample opportunity for political engagement, especially among young people, who can be presented with political information and political viewpoints without seeking it out. Utz's (2009) argument is rooted in political science research, which suggests that membership of heterogeneous networks increases exposure to political viewpoints, a procedure which, she says ultimately benefits democracy. Another way in which social media might be beneficial is by amplifying the voices of people who are often disregarded. For example, while the #MeToo movement – which as a resistance against sexual harassment and assault was begun on social media – has been heavily criticised by feminist writers for reinforcing assumptions that 'real' sexual assault victims are confined to particular type of person (DeKeseredy, 2019),¹⁰ it did receive an overwhelmingly positive response from and in support of at least some victims, revealed the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault, and impelled the development of offline activist movements (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). Another potential advantage of social media is its capability to make politics more even, an idea that is captured by the equalisation hypothesis, which reasons that smaller and fringe parties could effectively use social media for campaigning (Carlson and Strandberg, 2008), thereby eroding the traditional advantage of established parties, who have long had better access to the media (Rheingold, 1993). Southern and Lee (2019), for example,

⁹ Rather than classifying viewpoints on the use of digital media in the pursuit of democracy as 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic', Van Dijk (2012) distinguishes between 'dystopian' and 'utopian' views.

¹⁰ Many scholars have criticised the MeToo movement for reinforcing assumptions about those groups who are thought of as 'real' sexual assault victims. Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2019), for example, argue that "#MeToo has largely been taken up by, and therefore reflects, the experiences of young, cisgender, heterosexual women" (p. 8). Consequently, the experiences of, among others, women of colour (Ryan, 2019), LGBTIQA+ communities (Ison, 2019), and women with disabilities (Hsu, 2019), remain unheard or deemed illegitimate.

analysed website and social media use by candidates during the 2015 UK general election campaign, and concluded that Green Party candidates were most likely to use Facebook and more likely than Conservative Party candidates to use Twitter. Another group for whom communication by way of traditional media is often problematic are women politicians, and optimists have noted that social media might be particularly beneficial to women politicians for obviating sexist media coverage (Van Der Pas and Aaldering, 2020).

Conversely, pessimists point to possible threats social media pose to democratic practice, such as governmental surveillance, suppression of free speech, and the use of social networks to infiltrate protest groups and prosecute their members (Morozov, 2012). In respect of political communication, others have observed the potential of social media to threaten democracy by, for example, putting to use 'computational propaganda' such as algorithms and social bots in election campaigns (Woolley and Howard, 2018; Bürger, Jansen and Ross, 2020), promulgating misinformation and 'fake news' (Van Dijk and Hacker, 2018; Klinger and Svensson, 2020), and potentially polarise debates by creating so-called 'echo chambers' (Baumann *et al.*, 2020). Further, advocates of the normalisation hypothesis question the equalisation hypothesis and argue that online campaigning merely replicates existing power imbalances, since already powerful political actors also dominate online political debate (Lilleker *et al.*, 2011; Klinger, 2013; Seethaler and Melischek, 2019). For example, Klinger (2013) found after a study of Swiss political parties that larger parties with greater offline resources were able to more effectively communicate with and mobilise voters than were marginal parties with fewer offline resources. More recently, Seethaler and Melischek (2019) found that incumbent parties' Twitter campaigns were more successful than those of smaller parties at influencing the substantive issue agendas of five leading legacy media outlets during the 2017 Austrian national election campaign, which accords with the 'normalisation thesis' that established power balances will persist in the digital realm and become ever more normal. Overall, it seems that a majority of studies support the normalisation, rather than the equalisation hypothesis (Jungherr, 2014; Gruber, 2019), but empirical studies have concluded that the truth lies

somewhere in between, with social media equalising in some settings and normalising in others (Koc-Michalska, Gibson and Vedel, 2014; Larsson and Moe, 2014). For women politicians as for any politician, traversing the social media environment is of course not always advantageous, and in certain respects can be harmful (Bürger, Jansen and Ross, 2020). Research has shown that women politicians are frequently victims of online abuse (Dhrodia, 2017; Macfarlane, 2018), and that such gender-directed attacks are increasing (Krook and Sanin, 2019), and that such online abuse is often multipronged, with many non-white women receiving abuse both sexist and racist in nature (Southern and Harmer, 2019).

Van Dijk and Hacker have pointed out that thinking of the democratising potential of social media solely in optimistic or pessimistic ways is too simplistic, since such media simultaneously create opportunities *and* risks (Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000; Van Dijk, 2012; Van Dijk and Hacker, 2018) for their users, politicians included. While giving politicians a platform to promote themselves and their ideas, without interference from their party or the traditional media, digital social media expose them to online abuse. Others have therefore suggested that it is “time to move beyond assessing the potentials of social media” (Klinger and Svensson, 2020, p. 378), and that whether or not social media are hindering or fostering democracy is a redundant enquiry, since they have now become an essential feature in political communication (Gibson, Williamson and Ward, 2010; Ross, Fountaine and Comrie, 2015). Indeed, political actors throughout the world are increasingly capitalising upon these new methods of transmission (Kousser, 2019; Graham and Schwanholz, 2020), which are put to use in the midst of election campaigns (Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Meganck *et al.*, 2019). With this in mind, the current thesis does not attempt to measure the extent to which social media influence our democratic practices, neither does it examine whether they are beneficial or harmful to democracy. Rather, I consider social media important vehicles for politicians to reach out to citizens and investigate *how* politicians use these platforms. The following section provides a brief history of early adopters of social media in political campaigns, to situate this thesis in a wider historical context.

§ 3.2 A brief history of social media and political campaigns

One of the first politicians to profitably use social media in their campaigning seems to have been the U.S. Democratic candidate Howard Dean, with his blogging activities during the 2004 Presidential Elections (Kreiss, 2011). Though scholars criticised Dean's 'Blog for America' for not responding to its public readers (Stromer-Galley and Baker, 2006), others have pointed out that his online campaign enabled him to more widely announce his candidacy (Iosfidis and Wheeler, 2018) and to mobilise groups who were previously politically inactive (Williams *et al.*, 2005). A few years later, the French Socialist candidate Sérgolène Royal's online political campaign attracted interest worldwide (Koc-Michalska, Gibson and Vedel, 2014) for effectively employing social media in her campaign in the run-up to the Presidential Elections in 2007. According to some, Royal's efficacious campaign increased party membership for the French Socialist Party from 120,000 to 200,000 (Montero, 2009). The online campaigns of Dean and Royal have been credited with informing and inspiring Barack Obama's campaign for the 2008 and 2012 U.S. Presidential Elections (Lilleker and Vedel, 2013), with which it has been said he set the standard for the application of online technology in election campaigns (Johnson, 2016). Obama's campaign team adopted a hybrid media approach in which the offline campaign was systematically complemented with social media, including Facebook and Twitter (Iosfidis and Wheeler, 2018), and the thoughtful utilisation of social media in Obama's campaign has been considered one of the reasons for his presidential victory (Williams and Gulati, 2008). Inspired by the enthusiasm at Obama's successful application of social media technologies, politicians worldwide followed suit and began to incorporate social media in their communication strategies (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011; Kousser, 2019; Graham and Schwanholz, 2020), and Twitter in particular became an increasingly important communication channel for electioneering purposes (Meganc *et al.*, 2019). More recently, Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump used social media, especially Twitter, to interact with voters when campaigning for the 2016 Presidential election against Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton (Iosfidis and Wheeler, 2018), though his tweets became notorious for their outlandish and misogynistic content (Vickery and Everbach, 2018).

In the UK, the Labour MP and former cabinet politician Alan Johnson believed that he was the first in the UK to send a political tweet while campaigning for the Labour Deputy Leadership bid in 2007 (Baxter and Marcella, 2012). While his bid was ultimately unsuccessful, Johnson attracted media coverage for himself and the then novel campaigning tool Twitter, since when the popularity of Twitter amongst UK parliamentarians has risen significantly (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). At the time of writing, 564 out of the 650 MPs in the UK (87%) had Twitter accounts (MPs On Twitter, 2020). For the present research (which only includes Labour and Conservative MPs), this percentage varied from 85% to 90% across the three periods of study, meaning that Twitter has been adopted by nearly all of the politicians here considered.

§ 3.3 Politicians on Twitter

The uptake in politicians' Twitter use has not gone unnoticed by political communication scholars, and the relatively new field has already produced a substantial amount of research. Broadly speaking, studies concerning politicians and Twitter can be divided into three categories: (1) those about *who* uses Twitter (Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Dolezal, 2015; Lappas, Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2019); (2) those about the *effects* of politicians' Twitter use (Lyons and Veenstra, 2016; Seethaler and Melischek, 2019; Bright *et al.*, 2020); and (3) those about *how* politicians use Twitter (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Evans, Brown and Wimberly, 2018; Stier *et al.*, 2018). The majority of studies (particularly earlier ones) are of the first kind, and focus on factors that influence politicians' Twitter adoption and use (Jungherr, 2014). These studies generally show that the politicians most likely to adopt Twitter are women (Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016) and are members of opposition parties (Gainous and Wagner, 2014). The second type of research is concerned with the effects of politicians' Twitter use and often relies on either experimental designs or combines content analysis with aggregated sets of data on vote choice. One example of a study using the former approach is that of McGregor (2018), who carried out an online experiment to explore the influence of candidate self-personalisation on social presence (a perception that the candidate is in effect physically present and their emotions are therefore discernible), parasocial interaction (when audience members imagine that they have a familiar relationship with the candidate, which is therefore unreciprocated), and vote intention. The author found

that some participants when reading personalised tweets felt a sense of being physically present with the candidate and experiencing an interpersonal relationship, but such effects were contingent upon the candidate's gender and a shared partisan identity. In particular, personalisation seems to have greater effect for men politicians, with whom participants perceived a sense of closeness regardless of any shared partisanship, whereas only women with whom participants shared a partisan identity were able to elicit similar feelings (McGregor, 2018). When considering the effect of politician's Twitter use, Kruikemeier (2014) in a study of the Dutch national elections of 2010 showed that politicians who employed Twitter during the course of the campaign received more votes than those who did not. Bright et al. (2020) draw a similar conclusion in their examination of politicians' Twitter activity during the 2015 and 2017 general election campaigns in the United Kingdom, namely that Twitter-supported campaigning seems to help gain votes.

The present study is primarily concerned with *how* politicians use Twitter and thus belongs to the third category. This thesis focuses particularly on the ways in which British politicians' tweets are shaped by political party and gender. Such a focus on political party and gender implies some association between them and politicians' Twitter communication patterns, and indeed, previous research has shown that politicians' Twitter expression is often mediated by political party and gender. However, research carried out at the intersection of gender, party, and politicians' Twitter usage tends to be skewed in at least two ways. Firstly, research on politicians' Twitter use has mostly been performed during (national) elections (Kruikemeier, 2014; Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017; Stier *et al.*, 2018; Fountaine, Ross and Comrie, 2019; Meeks, 2019). These studies offer the scholarly community important insights, since election campaigns are important moments of political messaging, with intense interaction between parties, candidates, and voters (Oelsner and Heimrich, 2015). At the same time, I suggest that our understanding of politicians' Twitter communication could be improved if we augment the study of political campaigns with a consideration of politicians' communication patterns *outside* election campaigns. Other scholars have noted a need for more investigations of politicians' general online practices (Larsson

and Kalsnes, 2014; Larsson and Svensson, 2014), and I seek to redress this shortcoming by analysing politicians' tweets within and without an election campaign period.

Another limitation of previous work at the crossroads of gender, party, and politics is that it has predominantly concerned North American conditions (Meeks, 2013, 2019; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016; Golbeck *et al.*, 2018; Gervais, Evans and Russell, 2020), which provides an uneven impression of politicians' Twitter communication patterns. Such a tendency might be a trickle-down effect from the U.S.-centrism that has been observed in the larger field of political communication scholarship, a disparity evinced by U.S.-based researchers dominating this area of study and by the greater number of projects being carried out in the U.S. (Boulianne, 2019; Rojas and Valenzuela, 2019). Rojas & Valenzuela (2019) argue that a result of this leaning is that the U.S. is treated as the 'context-less' norm, which sets expectations for other areas of the world. Consequently, Boulianne (2019) signals the importance of testing whether relationships observed in the U.S. are the exception rather than the norm, which leads to the main research question of this thesis:

RQ: To what extent were gender and party associated with British politicians' Twitter communication during and after the 2017 General Election?

Three subjects have thus far received the bulk of attention in the relatively new field of Twitter research: tweet content, political issues, and personalisation. The following sections will review research done in these three areas and introduce the sub-research questions accordingly.

§ 3.3.1 Party, Gender, and Tweet Content

A central focus in the field of political Twitter communication is politicians' tweet content, and research has often used content analysis to categorise tweets, from which several types of tweet content have been classified, a number of them used in this study (Haber, 2011; Graham *et al.*, 2013; Adi, Erickson and Lilleker, 2014; Evans, Cordova

and Sipole, 2014). I borrow tweet content categories such as ‘attack’, ‘issue’, and ‘personal’, among others (Haber, 2011; Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014). Studies have shown that during election campaigns, most politicians concentrate on informing citizens of campaigning activities (López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017; Stier *et al.*, 2018), while other research finds that party and gender are in some way associated with politicians’ tweet content. For example, investigations have indicated that Democratic and Republican politicians use Twitter for differing types of communication (Golbeck *et al.*, 2018; Russell, 2018), while other scholars have noted that the status of a political party as incumbent or challenger has a bearing on communication methods, which are accordingly distinguished by Denton and colleagues (2019) as *inc incumbency* and *challenging* styles. An incumbency style is characterised by a positive tone and a heavy focus on past achievements, while a challenging style is often more cynical and involves attacking the recorded accomplishments of the incumbents (Benoit, 2004; Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014; Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Walter, Van Der Brug and Van Praag, 2014; Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017).

Research has furthermore indicated the presence of some gender distinctions in politicians’ tweet content. Gervais and colleagues’ (2020) Linguistic Inquiry Word Count analysis of all candidate tweets during the last two months of the House of Representatives midterm election campaign of 2018 finds that women candidates are more likely than are men candidates to use negative emotional language, by way of a vocabulary featuring anxious, angry, and unhappy terminology. Secondly, research indicates that women U.S. House Candidates will more probably send campaign and mobilisation tweets than will men politicians (Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014; Evans and Clark, 2016). Besides, studies have repeatedly shown that women politicians are more interactive on Twitter than are men politicians (Lawless, 2012; Meeks, 2013; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016), while North American researches have concluded that women politicians more often than men politicians send attack messages. For example, in their study of tweets sent by the Presidential candidates Clinton and Trump, Evans and her colleagues (2018) found that Clinton sent more attack tweets than did Trump,

and although their study is limited to two presidential candidates, other scholarship points towards a gender difference in the use of attack tweets. Evans and colleagues (2016), for example, found that women candidates sent a greater number of attack tweets during their 2012 House Elections campaigning, but following the elections, women members of Congress sent no more attack tweets than did men members. The present thesis builds on these studies by using the same content-labelling approach and, where applicable, employing the same tweet categories, but moreover broadening the focus in a non-U.S. setting. This leads to the first supporting research question:

RQ1: To what extent were gender and party associated with British politicians' tweet content during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?

§ 3.3.2 Party, Gender, and Political Issues

Another principal interest of scholars attending to politicians' Twitter communication is the kind of political issues or policy areas that politicians mention in their tweets. Hemphill and colleagues (2019) argue that Twitter offers a more direct measure of which issues politicians deem important than that of traditional news media, which permit only periodic, indirect measures of political priorities. Consequently, Twitter provides researchers with a good opportunity to answer questions on which issues politicians consider substantious (Russell, 2018). Existing studies into politicians' discussion of issues typically employ quantitative content analyses, with manual or computer-assisted topic-labelling exercises and, increasingly, machine-learning approaches (Hemphill, Russell and Schopke, 2019; Beltran *et al.*, 2020). Some of these studies have contemplated the extent to which gender and party are associated with politicians' topic discussions on Twitter and have reached differing conclusions. For example, Hemphill and colleagues (2019) found that Democratic Members of Congress more often sent policy-related tweets than did Republicans, which, the authors speculate, might be a consequence of Republicans' greater distrust of traditional media outlets.

Research has further found that women send more issue-related tweets than do

men politicians (Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014; Evans and Clark, 2016; Evans, Brown and Wimberly, 2018; Russell, 2018; Hemphill, Russell and Schopke, 2019), which according to some studies might be because it is harder for women politicians to gain issue-based coverage in mainstream news media than it is for men politicians (Dunaway *et al.*, 2013; Fridkin and Kenney, 2014). In addition to questions of how party and gender contribute to differing *amounts* of issue discussion, an important query is whether party and gender are associated with differences in *which* issues are covered. Whilst I endeavoured to concentrate my review of literature on gendered issue discussion on Twitter, I noticed that such research is scant, and therefore decided to look beyond Twitter for evidence of gender differences in issue emphasis to places such as candidate websites and online newsletters, as a means of contextualising my research. While Twitter and candidate websites are distinct communication tools, they share one important feature, in that they are both candidate-controlled, rather than media-controlled. As a result, consideration of candidates' websites might provide useful insights into how politicians present their issue ideas online.

Studies that have considered the influence of gender on issue emphasis yield varying and contradictory results, with some finding gender differences in the sorts of issues given prominence (Niven and Zilber, 2001; Dolan and Kropf, 2004; Gershon, 2008; Evans and Clark, 2015; Lee and Lim, 2016; Beltran *et al.*, 2020; Bürger, Jansen and Ross, 2020), while others report scarcely any gender differences (Ross, Fountaine and Comrie, 2015; Hemphill, Russell and Schopke, 2019), or none at all (Dolan, 2005; Bystrom, 2006; Just and Crigler, 2014). Several studies report that women and men politicians devote contrasting attention to policy issues in accordance with established gender role expectations. For example, Beltran and colleagues (2020) focused on tweets sent by Spanish national and regional politicians and concluded that, in conformity to gender stereotypes, women politicians tweeted more about gender and social affairs, whereas men politicians more often discussed politics, sports, ideology, and infrastructure. Further, Bürger and his colleagues (2020) analysed politicians' tweets during the 2015 UK general election and discerned that women politicians were

likelier to tweet about the ‘bedroom’ tax¹¹ and other matters related to housing and benefits, as well as issues concerning children and women. Comparably, when examining the congressional websites of U.S. House of Representatives members, Niven and Zilber (2001) judge that women members displayed significantly more interest in ‘women’s issues’, that is, issues exclusively or primarily affecting women, and further show that women members gave higher priority on their websites to issues of compassion – especially poverty and human rights – than did men members (Niven and Zilber, 2001). However, Niven and Zilber (2001) argue that these distinctions are highly overemphasised by the media, because women members, as with men members, present themselves as having a diversity of issue interests, and ‘women’s issues’ and compassion issues are but two of the many concerns to which women members devote their attention. In their investigation of tweets sent by congressional candidates leading up to the 2012 U.S. House elections, Evans and Clark (2015) report the same gender distinction, with women candidates mentioning more policy issues and placing a heavier focus on ‘women’s issues’. Clark and Evans (2020) show further that women Members of Congress tweeted more about the #MeToo movement from its establishment on Twitter in October 2017 than did their male counterparts.

Similarly, Dolan and Kroph (2004) performed a content analysis of newsletters distributed by members of U.S. Congress, and found that men chiefly take credit for improving traditionally masculine matters of policy, such as economics, whilst women sought acknowledgement for a variety of policy achievements. These findings suggest that women Congress members are desirous to give an impression of their adeptness at dealing with wide-ranging policy concerns, which could be a result of women defying gender stereotypes by highlighting a diversity of policy interests, thereby portraying themselves as competent in a multiplicity of areas (Atkinson and Windett, 2019). Gershon (2008) comparably analysed the congressional websites of U.S. House members and found that women representatives were considerably more likely to

¹¹ The Bedroom tax, otherwise known as the ‘under-occupancy penalty’, is a UK policy introduced as part of the British Welfare Reform Act 2012, which directs that the amount of housing benefit paid to social housing tenants be reduced if the property in which they are residing has more bedrooms than are considered necessary (Gibbons, Sanchez-Vidal and Silva, 2020).

connect general topics of discussion with gender, and were keener to discuss gender-related issues and at a greater frequency than were men representatives, although gender issues often only made up a small portion of women representatives' agendas. This finding suggests that the news media overplay the association of women with so-called feminine issues and of men with putatively masculine issues. Another study discerned the inclination of women and men politicians to take ownership of issues according to their gender is that of Lee & Lim (2016). The authors performed a gender analysis of the websites and tweets of the two front runners for the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. They found that Clinton gave more weight to supposedly feminine issues, such as human rights and LGBT concerns, whilst Trump emphasised reputedly masculine matters, such as border control and tax reforms. Evans and her colleagues also investigated tweets sent by Clinton and Trump, and concluded likewise that Clinton tweeted more about women's issues than did Trump.

However, other research studies find very few gender differences between women and men politicians in issue attachment. For example, Bystrom (2006) argues that issue emphasis is much more guided by the context of the campaign than it is by gender. Having scrutinised the debating style of candidates taking part in mixed-gender races for U.S. Senate and gubernatorial elections in 2000 and 2002, Bystrom (2006) found that both women and men tended to discuss the issues most politically prominent during the campaign. For instance, when 'feminine' issues were highest on the political agenda, women and men members of Congress alike discussed these issues more frequently. However, when 'masculine' issues were of greater political concern, both genders discussed masculine issues. Additionally, Hemphill and colleagues (2019) discovered little gender difference in issue emphasis, but did find that women Members of Congress were likelier to tweet respecting social welfare issues, whereas their male counterparts would more probably tweet concerning environmental matters. Dolan (2005) studied the websites of U.S. Congress candidates in 2000 and 2002, and found that women politicians campaigned on a range of topics comparable to those discussed by their men counterparts. Just and Crigler (2014) similarly observed of candidates'

usage of Twitter and Facebook during the 2012 U.S. Senate races that women did not point to supposedly women's issues more than did men, neither did they focus upon different topics, but all candidates were preoccupied with the practicalities of campaigning – such as get out the vote (GOTV) efforts, debates, and fundraising – rather than with campaign issues.

One question that arises when reviewing these studies is, why do they present contradictory findings on the influence of gender on issue emphasis? This might be a result of differences in: (1) the stage in the electoral cycle; in other words, was the study conducted in an election or non-election period?; (2) which type of politicians were included in the sample; for example, in the U.S., are the politicians under study Members of the House or Senate?; (3) the political agenda at the time of study; for example, were 'feminine' or 'masculine' issues foremost in the political agenda and public debate?; and (4) the ways in which topics were classified. Firstly, most studies on gender differences in issue emphasis concern North American politics, and those which have discerned gender differences appear to have focused chiefly on sitting members of the House of Representatives (Niven and Zilber, 2001; Dolan and Kropf, 2004; Gershon, 2008), whereas studies finding very few gender differences have largely considered politicians running for Senate (Bystrom, 2006; Just and Crigler, 2014). This suggests that the stage in the electoral cycle (election or non-election period) as well as bicameral distinction (House of Representatives or Senate) play a role in the extent to which gender differences arise. A possible cause for these findings is that during election times, both women and men politicians are drawn to a similar range of issues, namely those that they believe are of high importance to voters in the run-up to the election, whereas after the campaign, politicians feel at greater liberty to give more attention to those issues in which they have a particular interest.

The political agenda might be another determinant of whether gender differences result. While the continuing political agenda mostly concerns 'masculine' issues, such as the economy and immigration, sometimes 'feminine' issues, including education, are prominent. It is probable that women politicians only emphasise 'feminine' issues more

often than do men politicians when such issues are part of a wider public debate. Another scenario might hold true: gender differences disappear when a mix of 'feminine' and 'masculine' issues comprise the political agenda, in which case both women and men politicians focus on those issues which they believe are of priority to the public. While it is not the intention of this study to explore the extent that the political agenda influences whether there are gender differences in the issues on which politicians speak, it nonetheless considers which political issues were prevalent in political debates at the time of the data collections and accounts for them in the interpretation of the results. Finally, contradictory results might follow from differences in how political topics were coded – for example, if issues were devised by means of hand-coding or if automatic classification methods were used – as well as the basis on which those issues were considered to be 'feminine' or 'masculine', given that this is a somewhat subjective process. For such reasons, I refrain in my study from attempting a strict division of 'feminine' and 'masculine' topics in my analysis, but in interpreting my findings, I do consider the extent to which issues are gendered and how other researchers have constituted issues as 'feminine' and 'masculine'. To summarise, studies of how far party and gender are associated with politicians' discussion of issues on Twitter have primarily been carried out in North America, are limited by a heavy reliance on quantitative approaches, and have produced contradictory results, which leads to my second research question:

RQ2: To what extent were gender and party associated with politicians' discussion of political issues on Twitter during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?

§ 3.3.3 Party, Gender, and Personalisation

The third key variable in the study of social media use is personalisation, which holds a prominent place in political communication literature (McAllister, 2007; Graham, Jackson and Broersma, 2018). In general, scholars have noted that politics has become more personalised, with politicians increasingly seen as 'intimate strangers' whose private lives are now considered an acceptable subject of self-disclosure and journalistic

investigation (Stanyer, 2012). Various scholars have observed that social media allow for a more personalised campaigning style (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2013; Dolezal, 2015). Enli and Skogerbø (2013) point out that “[s]ocial media such as Facebook and Twitter place the focus on the individual politician rather than on the political party, thereby expanding the political arena for increased personalised campaigning” (p. 758). Therefore, they provide a way for politicians to present themselves as authentic, ordinary people who can thus build a closer acquaintance with voters (Gruber, 2019). Studies have given diverse conclusions on the extent to which politicians personalise their Twitter messages, with great variance in the number of personal tweets measured. In the United States, for example, Evans et al. (2014) found that personal messages formed the largest category of tweets (29%) in their study of Twitter use amongst House candidates in the 2012 campaign, who offered personal reflections upon the 9/11 attacks, shared photographs of their friends and family, and opined on football games. However, when studying the Facebook posts of politicians during New Zealand’s 2011 general election campaigning, Ross and her colleagues (2015) found the proportion of personal posts to be very small. Likewise, in an analysis of Labour and Conservative politicians’ tweets during the 2010 UK Election campaign, Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff (2013) discovered that only 6% of tweets were wholly personal. Such differences could be attributed to context, with North American politicking being decidedly more ‘personalised’ than is the British (Stanyer, 2008), or to coding decisions on what precisely constitutes ‘personal’ tweets. I further expound why studies might find differing levels of personalisation on Twitter in *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*, at § 7.1 Context.

Some studies have investigated the degree to which party, and, to a greater extent gender, act upon Twitter personalisation. For example, in his analysis of tweets by politicians in Australia, Kousser (2019) concludes that when a politician’s party controls government, they are more likely to send tweets conveying personal events or characteristics. Comparably, in their study of US House candidates, Evans and colleagues (2016) found that incumbents sent more personal tweets than did challengers. More attention has been devoted to analysing gender differences than to

party differences in personal tweets, because there is evidence that the personalisation of politics, as well as the inclusion of a personal communication style, are in some ways gendered. Firstly, as discussed in the previous chapter (see § 2.5.1 *Political Gender Stereotypes in Traditional Media*), the news media disproportionately focus on women politicians' personalities and personal lives (Heldman, Carroll and Olson, 2005; Ross, 2010; Van Der Pas and Aaldering, 2020), and secondly, women are generally considered inclined to use personal communication styles, whereas men are thought to express themselves in a matter-of-fact, impersonal manner (Banwart and McKinney, 2005). Studies concerned with the influence of gender on personalisation generally indicate that gendered communication styles extend to politicians' Twitter strategies. Meeks (2013), for instance, found in her study on Twitter use by U.S. Senate candidates that women politicians wrote more personalised tweets than men politicians. In their study of U.S. politicians running for seats in the House of Representatives, Evans and colleagues (2014) noticed contrastingly men candidates sending more personal tweets than did women candidates, but in a follow-up study of the post-election period (Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016), the authors discovered a reversal of this pattern, with women representatives personalising more on Twitter than did men representatives. While these studies are of North American politics, they signify the importance of electoral setting in relation to gender and personalisation, and accordantly, the present thesis investigates gender differences in personal tweets both during *and* after an election campaign in a British setting.

It is further interesting to note that the majority of Twitter studies encompassing party, gender, and personalisation deal with large datasets: Meeks (2013) analysed a total of 14,662 tweets; Evans and colleagues (2014) 67,199 tweets and then another 41,191 tweets in their follow-up study (Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016); and Kousser (2019), 291,091 tweets. Another commonality of these studies is that their large datasets are mostly examined by means of content analysis (Meeks, 2013; Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016), sometimes in union with a machine-learning method (Kousser, 2019). Studies employing machine-learning techniques usually involve humans categorising a sample of tweets, after which these

categorisations are used to develop computer algorithms to code the main body of tweets. Kousser (2019) adopts such an approach by having 2,500 tweets coded by researchers which were then used by algorithms to code the entire set of 291,091 tweets. The widespread use of quantitative methods to study how politicians personalise their tweets is understandable. Twitter furnishes researchers with ample opportunities to gather large quantities of data relatively easily. Quantitative studies, which focus on counting occurrences of personal content in tweets, have given the research community important insights into the significance of the personalisation strategies of politicians, as well as knowledge useful for finding answers to the question of whether party or gender are related to the *extent to which* politicians personalise on Twitter.

My study builds upon previous research by focusing on occurrences of personal elements in tweets by means of a quantitative content analysis, while accounting for the role of gender and party in such occurrences. However, I suggest that our understanding of how politicians personalise on Twitter could be improved with a qualitative reading, which moves beyond counting instances of personal content and instead contemplates personalisation strategies. Such a qualitative focus is rare in Twitter research on personalisation, but one useful exception is provided by McGregor, Lawrence, and Cardona (2017), who demonstrate the merit of such an approach. In their study of Twitter and Facebook posts by U.S. gubernatorial candidates, the authors complement their large-scale computerised content analysis with a qualitative textual analysis of those posts that were categorised as 'personal'. In their quantitative analysis, they found that men politicians more often personalised messages than did their women counterparts, but their qualitative analysis suggested subtle gender differences in how candidates personalised their tweets. While both women and men politicians tried to portray themselves as family-oriented, almost none of the tweets made by men politicians explicitly referred to their caregiving roles or other domestic duties.

In sum, Twitter research that comprehends politicians' gender, party, and

personalisation has been predominantly undertaken in North America and to a lesser extent, Australia; has mostly studied election periods; and has mostly used quantitative approaches. It is important to move the study of personalisation on Twitter beyond these tendencies and extend our view to other settings, in this case Britain, since North American politics seems notably more personalised, with a greater emphasis placed upon the individual politician (Stanyer, 2008). Further, because previous research has evidenced the importance of electoral context, the current study pays heed to politicians' personalisation on Twitter both during *and* between election campaign periods. Finally, qualitatively supporting a quantitative method will allow for a more considered analysis of politicians' personalisation strategies. It is in these circumstances that the third and final of my main research questions is:

RQ3: To what extent were gender and party associated with the ways in which British politicians personalised their tweets during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?

§ 3.4 Theoretical framework

Thus far, this chapter has identified several blanks in existing literature on politicians' Twitter use, which have prompted three research questions concerning the association of party and gender with *tweet content*, *political issues*, and *personalisation*. The framework that follows will provide the theoretical support for the empirical part of the thesis, and since the body of research on the relationship between gender, party, and politicians' Twitter use is relatively new, an established theoretical framework for analysing and interpreting how the three interact has not yet been fully developed. I therefore draw from various theories and concepts of traditional political communication and analogue gendered communication to assist the analysis of the data that I have gathered, which concerns politicians' tweet content, political issues, and finally, personalisation.

§ 3.4.1 Theoretical Underpinnings to Study Tweet content

I borrow from feminist theory and political advertising literature to investigate and

interpret gender and partisan differences in tweet content. Firstly, I use concepts from feminist literature to study the influence of gender on politicians' tweet content. *Social role theory* contends that the role-constrained behaviours traditionally expected of women and men have led to gender stereotypes (Eagly, 1987). Research has shown that gender stereotypes are acquired early in childhood and persist into adulthood (Devine, 1989; Fiske, 1998): girls are typically raised to be social, caring and modest, while boys are expected to be assertive, competitive, and independent (Baumann *et al.*, 2015). Accordingly, women are stereotyped as friendly and compassionate, whereas men are often thought tougher and more assertive (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993). Though feminist activism and scholarship have strongly countered gender stereotypes, they are still entrenched in contemporary society and inform gender identities through everyday interaction and experience (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1988). Butler's *theory of gender performativity* (1990, 1999, 2007) holds that the sense of gender someone possesses is performative, in that it results from the sustained performance of certain acts which accord with that person's understandings of what kind of behaviour is 'appropriate' for women and men. This performance is manifested through bodily movements, gestures and, of particular relevance, speech acts (Butler, 1986, 1988).

Scholars have identified distinctions between women's and men's manners of expression, though it is important to note of course that these communication styles are not necessarily exclusive to the 'appropriate' gender. In other words, women can and do have (elements of) a so-called male communication style and contrariwise. In general, though, women's communication style is characterised by a focus on connectedness and the establishment and maintenance of relationships, whereas men's communication language is considered more directed towards establishing autonomy and a degree of separateness from others (Bate and Bowker, 1997; Cross and Madson, 1997). Further, women's communication style has been thought to promote personal connections with audience members (Campbell, 1973; Dow and Tonn, 1993), be more interactive, and encouraging of participation and two-way conversations (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Gendered communication styles further signify a tendency of women's speech to be personal and emotional, and men's speech impersonal and practical

(Campbell, 1973; Wood, 1994). It is therefore interesting to search for evidence that the gendered 'styles' which have been identified as part of analogue forms of communication persist in digital forms such as tweets. For example, since women's communication styles are thought more interactive (Cross and Madson, 1997) and personal (Campbell, 1973), do the tweets composed by women politicians exhibit similar propensities?

Additionally, I adapt political advertising concepts to seek out party differences in tweet content. In Denton and colleagues' (2019) conception of *incumbency* and *challenging styles*, political parties behave differently depending on the position they hold in government. The incumbent parties' strategy is thought to make much of their record of accomplishments, while the task of challengers is to persuade voters that these accomplishments are inadequate and so change is needed, and they might therefore be more likely to attack the incumbents' apparent missteps. Such findings are present in the abundant literature on negative campaigning (Walter, 2014b, 2014a; Walter, Van Der Brug and Van Praag, 2014; Walter and Van der Eijk, 2019). Negative campaigning is a commonly used practice, which involves attacking opponents' qualities and policies, rather than engaging in self-appraisal strategies (Walter, 2014a). Existing research on negative campaigning has repeatedly found that government status influences the likelihood that parties will make use of negative campaigning, with incumbents being more likely to adopt a positive campaigning style, whereas challengers are more inclined to use negative campaigning (Benoit, 2004; Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014; Walter, Van Der Brug and Van Praag, 2014; Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017). Walter and colleagues (2014), for example, studied negative campaigning in party election broadcasts between 1980 and 2006, in three European countries - Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK - and concluded that opposition parties were more likely to engage in negative campaigning. In this light it would be particularly interesting to investigate whether Labour and Conservative politicians utilise differing communication styles, and, for example, whether Labour politicians, as members of a challenging party, are likelier than Conservative politicians to use Twitter to send attack tweets.

§ 3.4.2 Theoretical Underpinnings to Study Political Issues

I derive from theories of political communication to analyse the influence of party and gender on politicians' discussion of policy issues, two such theories relevant to which are *party issue ownership* and *gender issue ownership*. Party issue ownership is the idea that certain political parties are deemed better able than others to manage and implement particular policies (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996). A political party's historical consideration of and dedication to specific policy issues can promote an assumption among voters that the party in question is responsible for resolving such issues (Petrocik, 1996). In the UK, the Labour Party has developed a repute for giving priority to and being more able to handle social welfare concerns, such as education, unemployment, and poverty (Green and Hobolt, 2008; Seeberg, 2017), alongside gender- and sexism-related issues (Celis and Erzeel, 2015). The Conservative Party, alternatively, has built a reputation for interest in and aptitude for tackling problems created by immigration and crime (Green and Hobolt, 2008) and matters related to the European Union and Brexit (Dommett, 2015; Green and Jennings, 2017). At the time of writing this thesis, these party-specific issue priorities remained more or less the same as they had been in the 1990s and 2000s (Benoit, 2018).

The associated idea of *gender issue ownership* is that gender stereotypes influence the issues which are deemed to be of (greater) interest to women and men (Herrnson, Lay and Stokes, 2003). More specifically, and congruent with the traditional division of gender roles and gender stereotypes, women politicians are frequently connected with an ability to better handle putatively feminine and women's issues such as education, health, welfare, and gender and sexism-related concerns (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, 2009; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2017), while their men counterparts are often considered more apt to handle supposedly 'masculine' issues, that is, *all* issues excepting those thought of particular interest to women. Such 'masculine' cares include the economy, foreign policy, immigration, and crime (Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Bystrom *et al.*, 2004; Meeks, 2013). Gender issue ownerships are often reinforced by news media coverage, which often binds women with 'feminine' issues and men with 'masculine' issues (Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008; Ross *et al.*, 2013), even when a woman or man has

extensive experience with concerns traditionally thought unfitting of their gender (Major and Coleman, 2008). However, the introduction and growing importance of social media including Twitter has given politicians a new vehicle to promote their issue agenda (Peeters, Van Aelst and Praet, 2019), and in these circumstances there is value in exploring whether issue ownership theories can help explain why some politicians are associated with certain political issues on Twitter.

§ 3.4.3 Theoretical Underpinnings to Study Personalisation

I combined aspects of *personalisation theory* with *gendered communication styles* to investigate politicians' personalisation strategies on Twitter. Scholars have pointed out that the personalisation of politics is a multisided phenomenon, and that it is consequently necessary to distinguish between them (Holtz-Bacha, Langer and Merkle, 2014). The first kind of personalisation refers to a shift of focus from political parties, organisations, and institutions to individual political leaders and candidates (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007; Adam and Maier, 2010). Rahat and Sheaffer (2007) define this type of personalisation as "a dynamic process that is expressed in an increase in the weight of the individual political actor and a decline in the weight of the group (i.e., political party) in politics over time" (p. 3). This process is also termed 'individualisation' (Van Aelst, Sheaffer and Stanyer, 2012) or, if the focus is specifically on leaders, 'presidentialization' (Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden and Boumans, 2011). In this thesis, I concentrate on the second type of personalisation, which signifies a shift from the political to the personal sphere by way of increased attention to the personal lives and personal qualities of politicians (Langer, 2010). Others describe this trend as 'intimization' (Van Zoonen, 1991), 'politicization of the private persona' (Langer, 2010), or 'privatization' (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Van Aelst, Sheaffer and Stanyer, 2012). Enli and Skogerbø (2013) think that this type of personalisation leads to a "blurring of the border between the political and the private, the public and the personal" (p. 758).

A majority of studies attend to the 'media personalization of politics', or the growth of media interest in politicians as individual and their private lives (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). The progression of television as a primary means of political

communication (surpassing print news media), both during elections and through an increase in political and current affairs programming, has resulted in correspondingly greater attention to individual politicians. Some studies have proposed that televised political personalisation can raise candidates' standing and improve the political knowledge of citizens (Druckman, 2003), and might encourage the practice of voting (Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, 2001). Social media platforms are essentially built for the sharing of personal information, and therefore offer a relatively quick and straightforward way for politicians to personalise and widely share material (McGregor *et al.*, 2016; Spierings & Jacobs, 2013). With the development of social media as a very important platform for political communication over at least the past decade, studies began to consider the extent to which politicians personalise their social media content. Whenever politicians send an original communication on Twitter, their messages are individualised regardless of content, because the politician, rather than their political party or another entity, is generally the owner and overseer of their Twitter account (Kruikemeier, 2014), even if they are not always the author of their own tweets. Analyses of politicians' Twitter communication therefore usually attend to the extent and nature of the personalisation. The present thesis adopts Kruikemeier's (2014) conceptualisation of personalisation on Twitter as the "focus on candidates' private life, emotions and activities" (p. 133).

This understanding of personalisation is related to notions of 'authenticity' and 'ordinariness', since an increased focus on a politician's personal life invites citizens to judge these qualities (Langer, 2011). Authenticity can be defined in various ways, but some consensus exists across disciplines that in current use the usual sense involves someone's character being unfeigned and therefore perceived as genuine, real, or true (Kowalczyk and Pounders, 2016). Authenticity is, by definition, often related to the extent to which one's outward behaviour corresponds with one's 'true' or 'core' self (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Social media might be suitable venues for politicians to offer impressions of their true selves, because research has indicated that voters consider politicians more authentic when they communicate by way of social media than through traditional media (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018), and online self-representations are

generally formed to match offline selves (Chambers, 2013). However, authenticity is frequently deemed a social construction rather than something inherent to an object (Enli, 2015b), which agrees with Goffman's (1959) idea that human interaction is always performative, and that individuals adjust their behaviour according to social norms and expectations. Relating Goffman's work to the concept of authenticity, Enli (2015b, 2015a) suggests that displays of authenticity are performative, and speaks of 'authenticity illusions', by which is meant that the self-portrayals of the 'authentic' politician are often pre-planned and staged, yet done so in ways that appear natural. Building on these notions, I define 'authenticity' as the extent to which politicians attempt to impress upon their audience (citizens), a semblance of their genuine, or true self (Enli, 2015a; 2015b; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

Apart from an effort to seem authentic, the construction of an appealing political image relates to the desire to appear 'ordinary' and thus relatable (McKernan, 2011). Sacks (1984) defined human ordinariness as "something that is the way somebody constitutes oneself and, in effect, a job that persons and the people around them may be coordinatively engaged in, to achieve that each of them, together, are ordinary persons" (p. 415). Sacks (1984) further argued that the *job* of 'doing ordinariness' includes "attending the world, yourself, others, objects, so as to see how it is that it is a usual scene" (p. 417). Sacks' definition suggests that ordinariness, like authenticity, should not necessarily be thought of as a characteristic essential to some people, but rather as something certain people *do*. This kind of performativity is apparent in Gruber's (2019) discussion of Austrian presential candidates' self-representation as ordinary people on social media. Gruber (2019) adduces Goffman (1959) and refers to the practice of 'doing ordinariness' on social media as "staged ordinariness performances" (p. 3). The aim of staging ordinariness, according to Gruber (2019), is to draw attention to the politician's attempt to appear connected with the general public. McKernan (2011) suggests that such connectedness can be built by, for example, being seen at sporting events or eating out in local restaurants. I make use of Sacks' (1984) concept of ordinariness and related ideas of its being affected, and think here of the term ordinariness as the extent to which politicians fashion their self-representations of

averageness by highlighting their affinity with ‘everyday’ people (McKernan, 2011; Gruber, 2019).

I further draw from gendered communication styles to discern gender differences in the manners in which politicians reveal personal information. On the one hand, women are thought to generally communicate with a more personal tone than do men (Campbell, 1973; Banwart and McKinney, 2005). Such a personal tone often relies on relating personal experiences and anecdotes, conveying a sense of fellow-feeling , and encouraging interaction with others (Campbell, 1973). On the other hand, men’s communication style tends to be more impersonal and assertive, and of greater reliance on facts, or what are expressed as facts (Wood, 1994). To date, personalisation literature has given little consideration to partisan differences in politicians’ personalisation behaviours, but the political party of which they are a member is of importance when studying politicians’ behaviour (Bystrom *et al.*, 2004), and therefore, party is included in the theoretical framework used to analyse personalisation. By extracting from theories of personalisation and gendered communication styles, I explore how party and gender influence politicians when personalising on Twitter.

§ 3.4.4 Theoretical Underpinnings: Gender, Party and Twitter

While much research has been concerned with the singular influence of gender *or* party (Niven and Zilber, 2001; Graham, Broersma and Hazelhoff, 2013; Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019), some scholars have shown that party and gender have a joint influence on politicians’ message strategies, in the way of tweet content (Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017), political issues (Hemphill, Russell and Schopke, 2019; Meeks, 2019), and personalisation (Cook, 2016). Regarding tweet content, Wagner and colleagues (2017) investigated politicians’ Twitter usage during the 2010 Congressional elections, and found that women from the challenging party (Republicans at that time) were likelier to send attack tweets than were women and men Democrats and men Republicans. Further, in respect of political issues, Meeks (2013, 2019) argues that party and gender issue ownerships are interconnected, with so-called women’s and Democrat issues showing some likeness, and so-called men’s and Republican issues

being comparable. The same pattern can be observed in Britain, where so-termed women's and Labour Party concerns overlap and supposedly men's and Conservative Party cares having similarities. Hemphill and colleagues (2019) relatedly show that the effects of gender and party depend on one another. For example, they find that women Members of Congress discuss policy more often than do men Members, but this applies only to Democrats. Finally, on personalisation, Cook (2016) observes an interaction effect in the degree to which politicians mention their family on Twitter, with Republican men being the most likely to do so and Republican women the least likely. The few studies that have analysed the interaction between gender and party have all been conducted in a North American setting, but they have signalled that gender and party might influence politicians' communication in union. Accordingly, a central intention of my thesis is to analyse whether, and if so how, gender and party work *together* to constitute a distinguishing feature of British MP's Twitter discourse.

§ 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has given an overview of scholarly works on the democratising potential of the Internet and social media, particularly in the field of political communication. It has reviewed 'optimistic' thinking on social media, as when social media enable smaller parties and women politicians to gain some political leverage, and more 'pessimistic' ideas, which stress the risks associated with social media use, among which is politicians' exposure to online abuse. A number of studies have attested that social media use brings with it opportunities *and* risks, and that we should not therefore consider social media in a wholly optimistic or pessimistic way, but rather as a variegated feature of the contemporary political communication landscape. This is what I set out to do in my thesis. While I acknowledge the wider debate on the democratising potential of social media including Twitter, my study does not directly participate in this discussion. Rather, I think of social media as an increasingly important element of political communication, and study politicians' Twitter usage in this light. I have also provided something of the historical background against which the current research subjects, British MPs from the Labour and Conservative Parties, are using Twitter. This chapter has further surveyed existing literature concerning politicians' Twitter usage,

among which has been situated the present thesis, which focuses on *how* politicians are using Twitter. Within this subfield, I identified three dominant areas of research into politicians' use of Twitter, and pointed out limitations in existing literature, including a preponderance of U.S.-situated studies, which have led in turn to my research questions, these being designed to explore the extent to which gender and party are associated with politicians' tweet content, political issues, and personalisation on Twitter. This chapter was brought to a conclusion with the presentation of my theoretical framework. The principal theoretical supports in this framework derive from feminist literature and political communication, among which are concepts of gendered communication styles, political advertising, and personalisation. The theories and concepts I have summarised aided my analysis and interpretation of the association of gender and party with politicians' Twitter communication. The next chapter further details how these aspects are detected and analysed in relation to politicians' tweet content, political issues, and personalisation, and presents the epistemology, methodology, and methods used to measure these elements.

Chapter 4: Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods

The research questions of this thesis are formed to explore the extent to which gender and party were associated with politicians' use of Twitter in respect of content, political issues, and personalisation, and this chapter expounds the epistemology, methodology, and methods I adopted to answer these questions. In the first part of this chapter, I lay out the epistemological stances informing the current research, and explain why and how I adopted a feminist epistemology. I will then turn to the methodological reasoning, and in agreement with its feminist epistemology, the thesis applied a feminist methodology, by placing gender (together with party) at the core of the analyses. Subsequently, I will briefly describe the range of methods that others have adopted to investigate party, gender, politics, and Twitter, which have been in the main quantitative-only, and defend my choosing a mixed-methods approach, which combined quantitative and qualitative methods, namely content and thematic analyses. For each method, I will explain its suitability to my research, and reflect on its advantages and disadvantages. I will then describe the sources I used, and set forth the data collection process, data analysis, and data description, after which I consider matters relating to the quality of my research, by discussing the concepts of reliability, validity, dependability, and trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter will provide a personal reflection on the research process, in which I confront the practical problems and issues that arose and how I dealt with them. I will conclude with a contemplation of the ethical concerns I encountered during the gathering and analysis of Twitter data.

§ 4.1 Epistemology

Epistemology can be defined as a branch of philosophy concerned with the study of knowledge and whence it originates (Harding, 1987; Griffin, 2017). It concerns the relationship between the knower and what can be known (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Hansen, 2015). Two contrasting epistemological positions are 'positivism' and 'interpretivism' (Grix, 2002), the former asserting that an *objective* reality exists, which can be observed and verified empirically, the latter insisting that researchers must interpret or understand the *subjective* meaning behind social action (Grix, 2002;

Sprague, 2018). Feminist scholars have argued that a strong androcentric bias is present in the production of knowledge, and in the ways in which traditional science is conducted (Keller, 1982; Harding, 1987, 1991; Keller and Longino, 1996; Code, 2015). Code (2015), for example, argues that many epistemologies informing science are the productions of a small, privileged group consisting primarily of wealthy, white men. As women have long been excluded as practitioners of science (Harding, 1986; Etzkowitz *et al.*, 2000), men's perspectives are considered the norm, and women's viewpoints are accordingly marginalised (Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019). A prime example of androcentric bias within the natural sciences is the frequent use of male-only experimental groups, with resultant findings being extrapolated to the whole population (Beery and Zucker, 2011). Feminist researchers have also questioned the traditional analysis of women and men in the social sciences (Harding, 1987, 2016). According to some feminist theorists, more attention within the social sciences has been given to the experiences of men, meaning that any consequent theorising is not of equal relevance to women and men (McHugh, Koeske and Frieze, 1986; Campbell and Wasco, 2000). For example, in the 1960s, feminists began to argue that the field of psychology not only neglected and misrepresented women in its research and theory, but also contributed to the perception of women's inferior position in society (Eagly *et al.*, 2012). In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan criticised the essentialist ways in which Freud described women and men, which asserted women's supposed weaknesses and child-like nature. In short, feminists argue that much of our academic and popular knowledge is based on men's lives and male ways of thinking, and is concerned with *their* problems and issues (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006).

To redress such masculinist distortions, feminist scholars have developed alternative, feminist epistemologies to guide research (Harding, 1987; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Hesse-Biber, 2014). A feminist epistemology considers the various influences of gender on the production of knowledge (Anderson, 2002; Grasswick, 2011; Castree, Kitchin and Rogers, 2013). Harding (1986, 1987) distinguishes three feminist epistemologies: *feminist empiricism*, *feminist standpoint theory*, and *feminist postmodernism*. Feminist empiricism aims to reduce gender bias and sexism in

research through the utilisation of traditional research methods (Harding, 1986). According to this epistemology, gender differences should neither be ignored nor overemphasised (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). As its name makes clear, feminist empiricism is based on the values of empiricism (Krijnen, 2017), resulting in a belief that female experiences constitute part of a “single and universal social world where truth exists independently of the knower” (Letherby, 2003, p. 44). Although other versions of empiricism do not rely on contentious ideas such as ‘truth’ and maintain that knowledge is based on experience, the framework has been criticised for not challenging the idea that there is a single truth or reality, for women as much as for men, and moreover that it does not call for structural changes in science.

In contrast, feminist standpoint theory clearly disputes the idea of a single truth or reality, and assumes that all knowledge is ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway, 1988; Mayhew, 2015; Doucet, 2018), which means that all knowledge is constructed from a particular position (Sprague, 2018). Developed in the 1990s by feminist theorists including Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding, and Susan Hekman, feminist standpoint theory posits that individuals from less powerful groups have a more complete and less distorted view of reality, as they have a distinct position from which to observe the culture of the dominant group (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). It draws on Marxian class analysis, which argues that the proletariat, as the socially disadvantaged class, had an ‘epistemic advantage’ over the dominant class, the bourgeoisie (Grasswick, 2011), because marginalised groups possess a stronger motivation to understand and critique the structures that maintain the status quo than those in power (Harding, 2004; Krijnen, 2017). Feminist scholars developed this analysis into feminist standpoint theory (Hesse-Biber, 2014), to reason that women, as a politically disadvantaged group, occupy a position of ‘epistemic privilege’ (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006; Doucet, 2018). Apart from gender, standpoint theory also argues that other positions or standpoints, such as race, dis/ability, class, and ideological beliefs make up a person’s understanding of the social world (Griffin, 2017). Importantly, feminist theorists have advanced the idea of *intersectionality* to address the nuances of knowledge-production. Intersectionality as a sociological term was devised by Crenshaw (1991, 1995) to convey the idea that

subjects are situated in frameworks of multiple, interacting forms of privilege or disadvantage, which result in differing ways of knowing and experiencing the social world. In an influential essay, Crenshaw (1991) problematised the intersection of identity markers by considering the experience of women of colour as one of marginalisation on the basis of both their gender *and* race. Typically, feminist standpoint researchers reflect on how their own social status influences their research (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). Like feminist empiricists, standpoint theorists have excited controversy (Harding, 2009), especially when omitting intersectionality, since according to their critics, standpoint theorists imply that women are a homogeneous group (Intemann, 2010) and suggest that women's perspectives are in some way superior to those of men (Wylie and Sismondo, 2015).

The third feminist epistemology is feminist postmodernism, an idea related not only to postmodernism but also post-structuralism and critical theory, notions which show remarkable overlap (Gannon and Davies, 2012; Krijnen, 2017), though, for the sake of clarity, I will use the term feminist postmodernism. This epistemology denies "the notion that there is a single truth or reality, in any form" (Campbell and Wasco, 2000, p. 782), and proposes that "identities are fluid, fragmented and perpetually in process" (Krijnen, 2017, p. 4). Further, feminist postmodernism questions feminist standpoint theory by pointing out that no standpoint should be privileged while a variety of competing standpoints exist (Millen, 1997). Work guided by feminist postmodernism recognises the influence of context and time in constructing a multiplicity of realities (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Importantly, feminist epistemologists of the feminist standpoint theory and feminist postmodernist traditions have particularly criticised the notion of objectivity within traditional science (Castree, Kitchin and Rogers, 2013). Objectivity assumes that meaning and existence are independent from an individual's beliefs or biases (Shepherd, 2014), and is the defining characteristic of a positivist epistemology (Sprague and Kobrynowicz, 2006; Code, 2015; Sprague, 2016). Within traditional scientific discourses, positivism is the dominant, hegemonic epistemology (Guba and

Lincoln, 1994; Sprague and Kobrynowicz, 2006; Harding, 2015). Positivists believe in an objective reality, which can be studied independently of subjective experiences (Sprague and Zimmerman, 1993; Sprague, 2018), and to achieve objectivity or impartiality, a researcher's own values and experiences must be put aside (Jaggar, 1983; Oakley, 1998; Park, Konge and Artino, Jr, 2020). An underlying assumption here is the 'subject/object' dichotomy: the researcher (knower) is the expert who studies the object (the known) in a "value-free" and "neutral" way (Oakley, 1998, p. 710). Some feminist critics have denounced the supposition of an objective reality and the subject/object dichotomy (Garko, 1999; Neumann and Neumann, 2018; Tripp and Hughes, 2018). Instead, they argue that research can *never* be value-free (Harding, 2004, 2015; Jaggar, 2015). Harding (2004, 2015) contends that standard philosophies persistently conceal their normative features behind a veil of asserted neutrality. All research endeavours, feminist scholars of the feminist standpoint theory and postmodernist traditions reason, are influenced by the researcher's positionality and situatedness (Wilkinson, 1988; Vanner, 2015; England, 2017).

Other feminist academics, mostly feminist empiricists, do not however think that observation, objectivity, and rigour, which are notions central to the positivist tradition, should be jettisoned. Sprague and Kobrynowicz (2006), for example, suggest that telling women's experiences can be *personally* empowering, whilst reporting numbers can be *socially* empowering, because it can demonstrate the pervasiveness of inequality. Sprague and Kobrynowicz (2006) further propose that personally empowering and socially empowering accounts are both required to make persuasive arguments in public discourses. According to Randall (1991), in order for feminist research to change things, it must be convincing, and it is difficult to convince the media, policy-makers, and academics if rigour is rejected. Randall (1991) further reasons that feminist critics often exaggerate the way social scientists 'pretend' to be objective, since good social science should always recognize that being fully 'objective' is impossible. Randall (1991) further notes that feminist critiques of the scientific method often portray an exaggerated, almost caricatured, version of the degree to which it dominates approaches to research, because even empirical studies (for example, in political

sciences) employ ‘methodological pluralism’, in which a variety of methodological perspectives co-exist.

The research design of this thesis is likewise characterized by ‘methodological pluralism’. First and foremost, because I was interested in how women and men represented and promoted themselves as individuals, my work focused on the similarities and differences between the social media practices of women and men, and here a feminist empiricist framework was considered a useful support. In particular, as I will discuss in further detail at § 4.3 *Methods*, to answer the research questions I applied both quantitative *and* qualitative methods, the former of which have roots in the positivist tradition. I used a positivist approach and relied on its core principles, including observation, objectivity, and rigour, to analyse the relationships between independent variables and dependent variables by means of a statistical analytical approach, as in *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*, where, I analyse the effects of gender and party on politicians’ tweet content, and in the first part of *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*, where I research the extent to which gender and party influenced politicians’ discussion of political issues on Twitter, in both cases drawing on a statistical analysis of the quantitative data. Therefore, in Chapter 5 and 6, I adhere to ideas from the positivist tradition, and strive for a high degree of objectivity and rigour. After using a positivist approach to discern the extent to which gender and party influenced politicians’ communication habits in terms of tweet types and political issues, I relied on more interpretative approaches, such as situatedness, to provide a more in-depth analysis and explanation of my findings. In the second analysis in Chapter 6 particularly, I used an interpretative approach to analyse politicians’ issue discussion by means of a qualitative research method, thematic analysis, and in Chapter 7, I used thematic analysis to study politicians’ personalisation practices on Twitter.

§ 4.2 Methodology

A methodology can be defined as a “theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Social science research is dominated by two

methodologies, positivism¹² and constructivism (Moses and Knutsen, 2019), though it is perhaps better to consider them in a continuous rather than dichotomous way, which means that methodologies in the social sciences can vary from more positivist to more constructivist ones. Positivist methodologies typically aim to discover ‘positive’, or scientifically verifiable knowledge, by way of observation and measurement, and therewith seek a single objective reality, whereas constructivist methodologies acknowledge that reality is independent of human perception and is thus necessarily constructed by humans and in turn unobjective (Moses and Knutsen, 2019). A methodology should befit the researcher’s epistemological commitments (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Wigginton and Lafrance, 2019), and since my research is informed by various feminist epistemological viewpoints, a feminist methodology is employed, which in this case intersects in important ways with a constructivist methodology. A feminist methodology is generally characterised by a focus on gender or sex and an aim towards the empowerment of women.

Respecting the first of these characteristics, a feminist methodology should focus on the prominence of gender in all social life (Cook and Fonow, 1990; Griffin, 2017), and some, among them Van Zoonen (1994), argue that gender should be an analytical category (Van Zoonen, 1994). According to Van Zoonen (1994), a feminist methodology stands out from others in the social sciences and humanities by way of an “unconditional focus on analysing gender as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them” (p. 3). Van Zoonen stresses that such a focus does not necessarily mean having to conclude that gender is a defining factor, and accordingly, in this thesis, I place gender together with political party at the core of my analyses. This thesis distinguished tweet behaviour between women and men politicians and investigated if and how they ‘performed’ gender in their tweets. Being interested in both gender and sex, I explored differences between women and men and the manner in which their Twitter behaviour conformed to or challenged socially ‘acceptable’ forms of so-called feminine and masculine communication styles. As

¹² In different academic contexts, positivist methodologies are known by different names, such as ‘naturalism’, ‘empiricism’ and ‘behaviouralism’ (Moses and Knutsen, 2019).

explained in *Chapter 2: Literature Review ‘Gender and Partisanship in Politics’*, I recognise gender as a social construct permeating all aspects of human life (Dolan, 2014), and particularly concentrate on the importance of gender in online political communication. Although the study of gender and politics has burgeoned (Sanbonmatsu and Dolan, 2007), much research on political communication concerns politicians in the upper echelons of power, such as presidents, presidential candidates, prime ministers, or party leaders (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Larsson, 2015; Ross and Rivers, 2018), most of whom are men (see § 2.4 *Gender stereotypes in politics*). Therefore, much of what we know about politics and politicians’ behaviour is still based on men’s experiences, which results in a gender bias in research on politics. This thesis contributes to the growing body of work which seeks to redress this imbalance by directing attention toward gender and politics.

Feminist methodologies place an emphasis on the “empowerment of women and transformation of patriarchal social institutions through research” (Cook & Fonow, 1990, p. 5). I aim to extricate gender differences from politicians’ Twitter behaviour, with the hope that a better understanding of women and men’s Twitter communication might ultimately promote research into how women politicians can use Twitter and perhaps other social media platforms to their advantage and prosper in a political arena where masculine values seem to be the standard.

§ 4.3 Methods

Research methods are techniques for gathering evidence (Harding, 1987) and are commonly dichotomised into quantitative and qualitative types (Morgan, 2007). The vast majority of studies conducted at the crossroads of party, gender, politics, and Twitter have taken quantitative-only approaches¹³, among them sentiment or other textual analysis (Gervais, Evans and Russell, 2020); content analysis, either manual (Meeks, 2019) or computer-assisted (Stier *et al.*, 2018); machine-learning methods (Hemphill,

¹³ For useful exceptions, see McGregor *et al.* (2017), who complemented their large-scale computerised content analysis with a qualitative textual analysis of Twitter and Facebook posts by gubernatorial candidates in 2014 in the U.S., and Fountaine (2017), who conducted a thematic analysis of tweets by politicians Nikki Kaye and Jacinda Ardern during New Zealand’s 2014 general election campaign.

Russell and Schopke, 2019; Beltran *et al.*, 2020); panel data (Bright *et al.*, 2020); network analysis (Wüest, Mueller and Willi, 2019); online experiments (McGregor, 2018); or a combination thereof (Kruikemeier, 2014). In contrast with a quantitative-only approach, this thesis employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell and Tashakkori, 2007). Though in the past, some researchers have argued that quantitative and qualitative approaches are mutually exclusive (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1989), there has been increasing criticism of placing them in opposition (Else-Quest and Hyde, 2016), and uniting them has become more commonplace in research (Atieno, 2009; Bryman, 2016). A major potential strength of a mixed-methods approach is that it can enhance the credibility of results by way of triangulation, using multiple methods to study a single phenomenon (Hussein, 2009). It enables the researcher to derive benefits from both quantitative and qualitative methods by compensating for the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another, and Harding and Seefeldt (2013) argue that “bringing multiple methodologies to bear on a research question produces a more complete and convincing answer” (p. 92).

In their important work, King, Keohane and Verba (1994) argue that qualitative and quantitative traditions differ only in style and technique, and apply a unified logic of *inference* to both traditions. King and colleagues (1994) assert that the overarching goal of *all* scientific research is to make inferences on the basis of empirical data. Both qualitative and quantitative researchers collect data, but their shared goal is the attempt to “infer beyond the immediate data to something broader that is not directly observed” (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994, p. 8). More specifically, the authors distinguish between descriptive and causal inference. Descriptive inference signifies using observed facts to draw conclusions about *unobserved* facts, while causal inference means using known facts to draw conclusions about causal relationships between variables. King and colleagues (1994) state that social scientists should always be explicit in whether the goal of their research is to make descriptive or causal inferences. The goal of the current research project was to make both descriptive and causal inferences on the basis of empirical data, analysed through a mixed-methods approach.

The research makes descriptive inferences because it aims to describe the personalized nature of communication patterns in politicians' Twitter communication by using observations as evidence to infer broader conclusions about this habit (Chapter 7), and causal inferences because it seeks to document the cause-and-effect relationship between independent variables (gender and party) and a set of dependent variables (tweet types and political issues) in Chapters 5 and 6.

It is important to acknowledge that methods themselves are often considered gendered (Tripp and Hughes, 2018). Traditionally in the social sciences, the utilisation of quantitative methods is associated with conventional, male-dominated science, whereas qualitative methods are often connected with feminist research that challenges established masculinist ways of thinking (Westmarland, 2001). Several studies have shown that women publish more articles using qualitative methods, whereas men publish more articles which make use of statistics (Evans and Moulder, 2011; Teele and Thelen, 2017). Others have argued that feminist research in fact prescribes qualitative methods (Landrine, Klonoff and Brown-Collins, 1992). It may thus appear surprising that the majority of research on party, gender, politics, and Twitter has relied on quantitative-only approaches, which seems to attest to the wider popularity of quantitative methods and positivist approaches. Indeed, while positivism is the dominant tradition generally, it particularly thrives in North America (Nicholson, 1996; Wacquant, 2003), where most work on the relations between gender, politics, and Twitter has been undertaken.

Importantly, however, Oakley (1998) asserted that the gendering of methods and a perspective from which quantitative and qualitative ways of finding knowledge are opposed, impede critical thinking and are ultimately unhelpful for social science research. Instead, Oakley argued, the appropriateness of the methods which could best answer research questions should be the critical consideration when selecting those methods.¹⁴ Tripp and Hughes (2018) have observed that the methods supporting feminist research have diversified in the past 40 years, with feminist researchers

¹⁴ In her earlier work, however, Oakley (1981) suggested that feminists should not interview women using pre-determined schedules, because this is morally indefensible.

showing a greater appreciation and use of quantitative approaches, though qualitative methods remain more prominent. Tripp and Hughes (2018) take a similar position to Oakley and propose that neither qualitative nor quantitative approaches are necessarily well-fitted for the feminist researcher, or any more appropriate for investigating issues concerning gender and politics, but rather that the suitability of each method is dependent not upon the gender or political affiliation of the subjects studied, but on the specific question to be answered. Campbell and Wasco (2000) relatedly remark that feminist methodologies do not prescribe specific research methods, and can incorporate qualitative as well as quantitative methods. I concur in this thesis with these scholars (Oakley, 1998; Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Tripp and Hughes, 2018), as I did not value one approach over the other, and selected the methods based on their usefulness for answering the research questions. I do not think that a research method can be termed 'feminist'; feminism is rather represented by the theoretical and analytical approach and epistemological standpoint taken. I selected both qualitative *and* quantitative methods, namely content and thematic analyses, to study samples extracted from the same dataset. The following section gives the reasoning behind the selection of these research methods.

§ 4.3.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis can be defined as the systematic, quantitative analysis of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2017), in which large volumes of text are broken down into specific categories based on a set of explicit coding rules (Stemler, 2001). My reasoning for the selection of content analysis as a method of research is four-fold. Firstly, content analysis seems apposite for analysing political communication on Twitter simply because it forms the basis of much scholarly inquiry into political usage of the Internet (Lilleker and Vedel, 2013; Zimmer and Proferes, 2014; Larsson, 2015). Zimmer and Proferes (2014) analysed 382 academic publications from 2006 to 2012 that used Twitter as their primary platform for data collection and analysis, and found that nearly two-thirds of the studies in the sampling relied on content analysis. Adopting a widely used research method in the study of online political communication holds the obvious advantage of making easier the comparison of my results with those of like studies, and

thus to more readily situate my findings in the larger field of related enquiry. Secondly, when used effectively, content analysis is considered a highly transparent research method (Lilleker and Vedel, 2013). I strived for a high degree of transparency by having two pilot tests for which I calculated intercoder-reliability statistics. During the first test, the initial coding scheme was used by myself and a peer to code a sample of 30 tweets, which yielded satisfactorily similar results. The initial coding scheme was then used to code 1,000 tweets, during the process of which the scheme was refined and adjusted as categories emerged from the data. The adjusted version was also subjected to an intercoder-reliability test, during which a sample of 100 tweets were coded by me and another researcher, which also yielded acceptable levels of intercoder reliability. I describe this process in more detail and provide the intercoder-reliability statistics in section *§ 4.5 Reliability, validity, dependability, and trustworthiness*. Openness is further enhanced by providing the reader with the coding ‘rules’ I developed, a process also further described later in this chapter; see *§ 4.5 Reliability, validity, dependability, and trustworthiness*. Thirdly, content analysis is a data-summarising technique, making it highly suitable for coping with large volumes of data (Stemler, 2001; Lilleker and Vedel, 2013). This is particularly important for analysing Twitter data, because of the abundance of information sent on this platform: as of July 2020, the number of UK Twitter users was approximately 15.25 million (Aslam, 2020), and Twitter has become a very popular platform for politicians to communicate with the electorate (Kousser, 2019). Finally, content analysis is an unobtrusive research method, which means that participants are unaware that they are being studied (Allen and Lambertz-Berndt, 2017; Holman, 2017). This is especially useful when researching politicians who tend to have very demanding agendas, as during election campaigns, which would restrict methods such as interviews. More importantly, unobtrusive methods may enhance the validity of the study, an advantage that will be considered further at *§ 4.5 Reliability, validity, dependability, and trustworthiness*.

Besides these advantages, content analysis has limitations, one of which is that researchers analysing the same variable may operationalise it differently, which can impede generalisations across content analyses (Maier, 2017), a potential pitfall that I

aimed to obviate as far as possible by drawing on the approaches used by other researchers. For example, many of the tweet types in my coding scheme, which are analysed in *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*, borrow from the categories devised by Evans *et al.* (2014). Although the coding of tweets still relied on my interpretation of their content, I closely looked at how other researchers had coded tweets, to enhance comparison. Another oft-mentioned limitation of content analysis is the time-consuming, labour-intensive nature of coding (Maier, 2017). Indeed, the manual coding of my data was a slow, laborious process, but my complete submersion in the data provided me with a very thorough understanding of my sample. Finally, one of the more prominent shortcomings of content analysis is that it is a descriptive method which presents a necessarily superficial account of what sort of content is present, but fails to offer any interpretations for *why* that content has been produced. In this respect, the summarising nature of content analysis means that important nuances in messages may be overlooked (Maier, 2017a). To counteract this limitation, I augmented the content analysis with a complementary analytical framework in the form of a thematic analysis which used a more interpretative method. A mixed-methods approach was therefore used to balance the weakness of one method with the strength of the other. During the coding of the 12,000 tweets, I encountered tweets of which the content analysis could not capture the complexities or shades of meaning. The thematic analysis thus enabled a fuller interpretation of the tweets than could be achieved with content analysis alone. Thus, the two methods clearly co-operated with each other, with the thematic analysis being supported by and building upon the content analysis. The following section describes the thematic analysis procedure, and where applicable, I indicate how the content analysis informed the thematic analysis.

§ 4.3.2 Thematic Analysis

The quantitative content analysis was complemented with a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun *et al.*, 2019). Thematic Analysis (TA) is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Scholars performing thematic analyses search for “recognizable reoccurring topics, ideas, or patterns (themes) occurring within the data that provide

insight into communication" (Hawkins, 2017, p. 1756). Thematic analysis is not tied to a specific epistemological or theoretical perspective (Boyatzis, 1998), which makes it a flexible method (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). There were several reasons for employing a reflexive thematic analysis. First, most Twitter research uses a quantitative approach (Jungherr, 2014), but as Marwick (Marwick, 2014, p. 119) points out, this may overlook "how people do things with Twitter". A qualitative approach seeks to apprehend the meaning behind what is communicated, in this case by contextualising the use of Twitter where possible within its social, temporal, and geographical setting (Marwick, 2014). Another significant advantage of this method is that, as before mentioned, it allows for tweets to be considered in greater detail than do content analyses. The thematic analysis enabled me to draw out subtleties of meaning from the data incapable of capture by means of the coding process, which ultimately produced more nuanced, in-depth insights into politicians' Twitter communication. A third advantage is that a TA approach intuitively permitted me to move beyond the descriptive restrictions of quantitative analysis (Braun et al., 2019). Further, a qualitative approach is inductive in nature (Atieno, 2009), and so I looked for general themes and patterns during my immersion in the data (Thomas, 2006), while being conscious of the danger of overgeneralising. Thus, a thematic analysis seemed a fitting method for answering the research questions, though it has its disadvantages.

Firstly, qualitative research is often considered subjective (Bryman, 2016). However, I conducted the thematic analysis in a rigorous and systematic manner, and included a detailed description of how I conducted the data analysis, so that the reader can determine the extent to which the research is credible (Nowell et al., 2017) (Nowell et al., 2017). Secondly, it is observed as a limitation or disadvantage of qualitative research that it does not support the extrapolation of findings to wider populations with the same degree of confidence as can be afforded by quantitative approaches (Atieno, 2009). However, others, among them Castleberry and Nolen (2018), have suggested that being unable to make firm generalisations should neither be seen as a limitation nor a hindrance, but instead simply be acknowledged as characteristic of the method. In accordance with Castleberry and Nolen (2018), I deemed being unable to generalise of

no concern, particularly because I studied the Twitter communication of politicians from two UK parties – a relatively small group – and in so doing was aided by a content analysis which, when applied transparently, could be considered a method that admits some generalisation.

In total, I performed three thematic analyses. The first of these focused on political issues, and its results are reported in *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*. For this analysis, I examined a selection of issue tweets that were identified in the manual content analysis. I analysed five political issues: Brexit, economy, education, environment, and gender/sexism ($n = 388$), which were selected because together they constitute a balanced mix of ‘feminine issues’ (education and gender/sexism) and ‘masculine issues’ (Brexit and the economy), and a more neutral issue (the environment). The other two thematic analyses concerned aspects of personalisation, and their outcomes form the basis of *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*. In this chapter, one analysis explored all tweets that were coded as personal, that is, tweets unconcerned with politics ($n = 479$) from the manual content analyses (see Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content). The purpose of this analysis was to seek an understanding of the content and tone of non-political tweets, a part of which was to discern any gender and party differences, and if detected, contemplate in what ways these might be significant. The second analysis in *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation* was of a random sub-sample of 400 tweets, stratified along gender and party lines, drawn from the complete dataset of original tweets (82,467 tweets in total). The aim of this analysis was to explore if and how gender and party were associated with the manners in which politicians include personal information in any of their tweets, as distinct from those which were coded as ‘non-political’ in their content. I had already drawn a sample of 12,000 tweets from the primary datasets of original tweets for the manual content analyses, and these 12,000 tweets, which were marked in the datasets to distinguish them from the rest, were excluded when I drew the sample of 400 tweets for the third thematic analysis to avoid duplication.

The use of qualitative research methods has been widely criticised for a lack of

transparency (Bryman, 2016), since researchers often neglect to provide a detailed description of the data analysis process itself (Fielden, Sillence and Little, 2011). Some scholars stress the need to clearly describe the method and mode of analysis and therethrough allow other researchers to determine the trustworthiness of the research process (Nowell et al., 2017; Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Nowell et al. (2017) say that qualitative researchers must show that the data analysis has been carried out in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner, while Castleberry and Nolen (2018) recommend that to enhance transparency, researchers provide the reader with a detailed description of the coding procedure and criteria, and explicate how codes and patterns led to certain themes. I strived for a high degree of transparency by providing a precise account of my coding procedure, which followed Braun and Clarke (2006), who propose a series of six phases with which researchers can perform a (reflexive) thematic analysis. I considered the analysis a recursive and reflexive process, rather than linear (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2019), and I accordingly moved back and forth between different phases as I drafted the analysis chapters.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

I acquainted myself with a large sample of data when reading and manually coding the three datasets for the quantitative analysis. I had hand-coded three datasets with 4,000 tweets each (12,000 tweets in total), which comprised random stratified samples with an equal number of tweets across the four groups of politicians (LabW, ConsW, LabM, ConsM). The coding exercise was an important step in the process of familiarisation, since becoming fully immersed in the data requires repeated readings of the data, and attentively seeking meaning and patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). By way of coding 12,000 tweets, I had already created some initial analytic topics for the thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise reading through the entire dataset at least once before commencing any coding. After constructing the sub-samples for the qualitative (thematic) analysis, I read and re-read all sampled tweets, endeavouring to give them equal attention. During this repeated reading, I made notes with ideas for coding and accessed every original tweet in order to view any images, videos, or links embedded within them. Where videos were embedded in the original tweet, I watched

them in full, which helped me to contextualise each tweet.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

I had already devised a list with potential ideas for coding, based on the quantitative content analysis and following repeated scrutiny of the smaller sub-samples. In particular, while coding the 12,000-tweet sample, I found some tweets to be particularly interesting, and, believing that I was unable to capture the complexity and shades of signification of those tweets by means of the content analysis, I saved them in a separate Microsoft Word document, in which I recorded what I felt was their noteworthiness. Before commencing the thematic analysis, I scrutinised and scrutinised the tweets in this document to decide whether any of them could be codes for the thematic analysis. I subsequently re-read the smaller sample of tweets that I used for the thematic analysis to investigate if any of the codes from the content analysis could be applied to the smaller sample. Some codes were derived from the content analysis and some were derived from reading the sub-sample of tweets. I then started attaching initial codes to the sub-sample in Microsoft Excel, a phase which involves “succinctly and systematically identifying meaning throughout the dataset” (Braun et al., 2019, p. 48). This exercise was mostly data-driven (inductive), which means that the codes were developed directly from the data. For each thematic analysis phase, I systematically read through the datasets and coded each data extract (each tweet). I had a specific goal in mind for each analysis. By way of example, for the third analysis, I was interested in aspects of personalisation in tweets. When I could not find any personalised aspects in a tweet, I assigned it the code ‘no personalised aspects’. The aim was to code as widely as possible and to assign as many descriptions as were pertinent. The number of descriptions ascribed to individual tweets ranged from one to five, but most tweets were allocated one or two codes. Figure 4.1 Example of raw data extract and its initial code presents an example of a raw data extract and some initial descriptions that I assigned to the text.

Account	Time stamp	Party	Gender	Tweet	Code(s)
kellytolhurst	5/26/2017 17:20	Conservative	Woman	Really pleased that my "Breathing Space" scheme for families in debt has made it in to manifesto #voteconservative https://t.co/8t6FHKCxz9	own contribution

Figure 4.1 Example of raw data extract and its initial code

Phase 3: Searching for themes

After all data had been coded, I began to consider how codes could form overarching themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006), or “stories about particular patterns of shared meaning across the dataset” (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 592). It is important to repeat that themes are ‘active creations’ of the researcher, and not ‘passive ideas’ emerging from the data (Clarke and Braun, 2018). For example, in the third thematic analysis, the codes ‘own contribution’ and ‘personal achievement’ informed the theme ‘credit-claiming’.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Having devised a list of initial themes, I started the process of refining these themes, to verify that they were fitted for the coded extracts (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and some themes that I had initially thought of as distinctive were merged. For example, I had originally developed two related themes, ‘pointing out online abuse the politician experienced’ and ‘sharing personal (negative) experience’. I decided that there could be similar motivations for politicians to share both types of content, and so chose to singularise them as ‘sharing negative personal experience’. Two other themes that I merged were ‘personalisation through own identity’ and ‘personalisation through localism’. In tweets of the former type, a sense of the tweet author’s geographical identity was commonly conveyed, and so I regarded these tweets sufficiently similar to those in the latter category and moved them there accordingly. When I was satisfied with my newly revised list of themes, I re-read the entire dataset, and coded any extracts that had been overlooked. For each theme, I copied and pasted all tweets that were assigned to that theme and reviewed them, to ensure that each tweet remained relevant (Braun *et al.*, 2019). I concluded that a small number of tweets (< 5) did not fit

an overall theme, and they were consequently removed.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

After I had produced a satisfactory list of themes for each analysis, I started the process of defining and refining the themes. In this phase, I began by writing a detailed analysis for each theme. Some scholars (among them Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017) recommend that solo researchers seek expert guidance, preferably from someone possessing deep knowledge of the subject area, to see whether the themes are sufficiently clear and fit for the purpose of corroboration. For each analysis, I produced a document with a list of themes and a detailed analysis thereof, which I shared and discussed with my principal supervisor, who has great familiarity with qualitative research and has widely published in the area of gender and political communication. Based on this discussion, I renamed some of the themes, as when the theme 'likeable politician' in the second thematic analysis was renamed 'the relatable politician' (see *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*).

Phase 6: Writing up the analysis

The final step of the thematic analysis is to put it in writing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). With part of the analysis having been drafted in the previous stages of the thematic analysis, this phase consisted primarily of linking themes to literature and theory and selecting illustrative tweets. Firstly, I applied theories from other literature to judge their relevance to my own data and to make a preliminary interpretation of the data, before reviewing prior research findings to determine their congruence or otherwise with my own findings. I selected examples of tweet content from each theme, since including elements of the original data is an important aspect in the presentation of research findings (King, 2004). Some scholars suggest that we "choose particularly vivid examples, or extracts which capture the essence of the point you are demonstrating" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 93), and I picked out examples which were illustrative, if not necessarily striking. I drew examples evenly from the four groups of politicians to provide balance, and avoided using overmuch content from one person. I reproduced

on average two tweets (in screenshot form) per theme, sometimes augmented with in-text quotes, to avoid the analysis becoming excessively descriptive.

§ 4.4 Data collection, description, and analysis

I now turn to the data I used to answer my research questions, with accounts of the data collection process, the composition of the data, and my analytical approach.

§ 4.4.1 Data collection

Data were gathered during three periods: between 8 May – 8 June 2017, which comprised the election campaign period for the UK ‘snap’ election of 2017; between 8 November – 8 December 2017; and between 8 May – 8 June, 2018. The latter two were non-election periods, required to provide tweet data produced from outside an election campaign period and thus constituting another layer of comparability in the work. For each data collection period, all tweets were gathered contemporaneously from all MPs active on Twitter during that period. By looking at politicians’ tweets, the current study thus makes use of observational data, which has the advantage that it directly measures politicians’ actual behaviour. However, observational data also have their limitations, most notably that it is difficult to make causal inferences, on which I further reflect at the end of Chapter 5 and 6, and in Chapter 8. I decided to consider only sitting MPs, including those seeking re-election, but not prospective political candidates (PPCs). The choice to include only sitting MPs and those seeking re-election enhanced the comparability of the three time periods while enabling me to explore gender and party difference within and without an election campaign, whereas a considerations of PPCs would not afford the same comparability: the PPCs might not, after all, be elected, while MPs who lost their seat are according also omitted from the second and third time periods covered by my study, allowing the continuity of comparability. The decision to focus only on the communication practices of sitting MPs and those who are seeking for re-election might limit the generalizability of the findings. However, I argue that the focus on sitting MPs could be considered as a ‘least-likely’ case for gender differences to become apparent, since research has repeatedly shown that women pursuing political advancement seem to adapt their self-presentational strategies according to the established, masculine status quo (Jones, 2017). This phenomenon is often explained

by women's minority position in politics, by which they are considered, and consider themselves, as 'interlopers', and therefore, feel inclined to adapt to and emulate traditionally male norms of behaviour and communication (Jones, 2017). For example, Shaw (2000) argues that in the British House of Commons, a masculine kind of discourse is considered the norm in debates, which results from the notion that men developed the discursive 'style' of the House of Commons, where women continue to be in a minority. From her analysis of Commons debates, Shaw (2000) concludes that female MPs are as likely as male MPs to apply an assertive and competitive communication style. Following this line of reasoning, we would expect to see more similarity in the self-presentational strategies of women and men MPs' communication on Twitter, than in the communication patterns of political candidates, because women MPs, in order to be elected, are more likely to have adopted masculine styles of communication, and so women's and men's communication styles begin to converge. Therefore, women and men MPs' communication patterns might show greater similarity than women's and men's communication patterns by political candidates. This means that if the current study discerns any gender differences between Members of Parliament, which can be argued to be the 'least-likely' case for such differences to emerge, then they are more significant than if they were found amongst women and men who are not yet influenced by the pressure of political performance.

Further, I decided to select only politicians using Twitter from what are currently the two major UK political parties, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. This decision may have limited the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of politicians on Twitter from other political parties, such as Liberal Democrats (LibDems), Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru, and Green Party. I further reflect on this limitation at the end of each empirical chapter and in the final chapter of the thesis, the conclusions. I had decided to focus on only politicians from the two largest parties inevitably dominate political communication in the UK. The two largest parties are those most visible to voters and are therefore probably more influential in shaping public perceptions of politics. As a result, it is important to investigate the parts that gender and party play in politicians' communication patterns, because, arguably, their

communication practices have the strongest bearing on the ways in which the public perceive women and men politicians generally. Further, other studies had identified a problem when stratifying along gender lines alone, namely a low number of women politicians from the smaller parties but who were high volume Twitter users, thus introducing potential gender skews (Ross, Bürger and Jansen, 2018) which make comparisons between gender and party membership difficult to distinguish because of too many additional variables in play. Limiting the study to MPs from the Labour and Conservative Parties thus intended to minimise the aforesaid problems. Sampling the same number of tweets from women and men MPs from each party allowed for gender and party differences to be more clearly identified. As some MPs lost their seats and some new MPs were voted in during the 2017 snap election, the politicians in the first sample differ from those in the second and third samples although considerable similarities were in evidence between the groups. Table 4.1 shows the number of politicians from each analytical group who were MPs at the time and had active Twitter accounts.

Table 4.1 Labour and Conservative Politicians in Parliament and on Twitter

	Election campaign 2017		Winter period 2017		Summer period 2018	
	Parliament	Twitter (%)	Parliament	Twitter (%)	Parliament	Twitter (%)
Labour women	101	97 (97%)	118	119 (93%)	118	115 (97%)
Conservative women	70	64 (91%)	67	57 (85%)	67	60 (90%)
Labour men	129	110 (85%)	142	132 (93%)	140	135 (96%)
Conservative men	261	205 (79%)	249	192 (77%)	249	207 (83%)
<i>Total (Labour + Conservative)</i>	<i>561</i>	<i>476 (85%)</i>	<i>576</i>	<i>491 (85%)</i>	<i>574</i>	<i>517 (90%)</i>

Note. There were two fewer Labour men in Parliament during the summer period 2018 than during the winter period 2017, due to the suspension of Ivan Lewis and John Woodcock, on 23 November 2017 and 30 April 2018, respectively, following allegations of sexual harassment, which they both denied (BBC News, 2017b, 2018a).

I compiled my sample list by checking all the account names recorded at the website www.mpsontwitter.co.uk, which provides an overview of active MPs on Twitter. The tweets were captured in real time¹⁵ with a simple script that saved all tweets from the listed politicians in Google Docs. Every time a politician from the sample sent a tweet, a single row was automatically added to a Google Doc worksheet, with each row containing the username of the politician, the content of the tweet, a URL to the original tweet, and a time stamp. The political party of each MP was imported from www.mpsontwitter.com, and I manually coded their gender after consulting their official Twitter account homepage. A politician's gender was determined by viewing the profile picture on their Twitter account, but if a politician's gender could not be identified from their profile photo (e.g. if multiple people, or no people at all were present¹⁶), then the politician's Wikipedia page was consulted to determine their gender on the basis of which pronouns were used to describe the politician.¹⁷ For every data collection period, I activated the script at midnight of the first day of the collection period, and I de-activated it on the last day of the data collection at midnight. A manual check was carried out for every data collection period to ensure that all tweets from the selected politicians were collected, which involved taking a stratified random sample of 40 politicians, 10 from each group (10 Labour women, 10 Conservative women, 10 Labour men, and 10 Conservative men), and manually comparing their original tweets as posted on their Twitter page with the tweets in the data set. For every period, the two sets of tweets matched exactly, which suggests that all tweets from Labour and Conservative politicians had been gathered.

§ 4.4.2 Data description

A total of 159,115 tweets were gathered: the first data set consisted of 82,890 tweets, the second of 40,444 tweets, and the third of 35,781 tweets. The proportion of original

¹⁵ Every tweet posted by one of the politicians was immediately and automatically saved, a process which is called 'real-time data collection'.

¹⁶ In the vast majority of cases, a politician's Twitter account featured a fairly formal photographed portrait of themselves. In very few cases, the politician was depicted in a group with members of the public or with their party leader, or had used a scenic image as their profile picture.

¹⁷ A politician's gender was coded as either 'woman' or 'man', which runs counter to the argument that gender should be seen as non-binary. However, to the best of my knowledge, all politicians in the sample identified themselves as either a woman or a man.

tweets to retweets was roughly equal in every period, which corresponds with other research in the UK (Mackenzie, 2018; Ross, Bürger and Jansen, 2018) and in the U.S. (Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017). Retweets (RTs) were excluded from the sample, since I was concerned with politicians' self-presentation and therefore focused on only original tweets in the three datasets, which included 38,255, 28,652 and 15,560 tweets respectively, to investigate how politicians tweeted in their own words. While I cannot be certain that all the collected tweets were created and sent by the account holder rather than political aides or other acquaintances, I am taking at face value that the 'self' being presented at least purports to be authentic. Table 4.2 gives an overview of the datasets that were used for the analyses and specifies the number of original tweets per analytical group.

Table 4.2 Description of datasets

Dataset no.	Time period	Original tweets	Tweets by Labour women	Tweets by Conservative women	Tweets by Labour men	Tweets by Conservative men
1	Election 2017*	38,255	13,095	2,546	12,658	9,956
2	Winter 2017**	28,649	8,140	2,680	9,801	8,027
3	Summer 2018***	15,552	4,676	1,556	5,049	4,271
Total		82,456	25,912	6,792	27,509	22,254

* 08/05/2017 – 08/06/2017; ** 08/11/2017 – 08/12/2017; *** 08/05/08/2018 – 08/06/2018

As expected, most tweets were sent during the election campaign, which agrees with other research showing that politicians are most active while campaigning (Vergeer, 2015). During campaigns, politicians routinely inform readers of their political stances, criticise opponents, and communicate with voters, in attempting to increase their vote share. Whether Twitter use actually anticipates vote share is debatable, with some scholars stressing that the predictive power of Twitter is very limited (Gayo-Avello, 2013), whilst other research suggests that Twitter activity is relevant to the number of votes a politician receives (Kruikemeier, 2014). We can also observe a difference

between the number of tweets sent during the two non-election periods, with more sent in the winter period than in the summer period. This could be due to the relative proximity of these periods to the election campaign: the winter period was a few months after the election, whereas the summer period was a year after the election. It might be that in the winter period, newly elected and re-elected MPs wished to increase their online visibility and announce their intentions now that they were (back) in political office, a transient effort which had ended before the election's one-year anniversary.

§ 4.4.2.1 Tweet frequencies

Figures 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 provide an overview of the daily volume of tweets. During the election campaign, several rises and falls can be observed in politicians' Twitter activity, which could be attributable to the following events (Figure 4.2). Firstly, on 13 May 2017, an increase in politicians' tweeting is observable, a reaction to the worldwide ransomware attacks of 12 May 2017, which severely disrupted parts of the NHS for several days. There was immediately afterwards a marked increase in Labour men's Twitter activity, perhaps because they politicised the cyber-attacks by linking them to cuts made to the NHS under the Conservative government. Another rising can be seen on 22 May 2017, again the result of Labour men's Twitter use. This increase could be ascribable to Labour criticism of the Conservatives' U-turn on their social care proposals. Two more prominences are apparent on 29 May 2017 and 2 June 2017, perhaps in response to two television broadcasts on those days, respectively Sky TV's Battle for Number 10 and the BBC's Question Time, in which party leaders Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn were questioned by the public and programme presenters. Other activity peaks occurred on Election Day itself, with Labour and Conservative MPs sending a total of 2,883 tweets, with two noteworthy falls in activity happening on 23/24 May 2017 and June 2017, possibly the result of the pause in campaigning that followed the Manchester Arena bombing of 22 May 2017 and London Bridge attack of 3 June 2017.

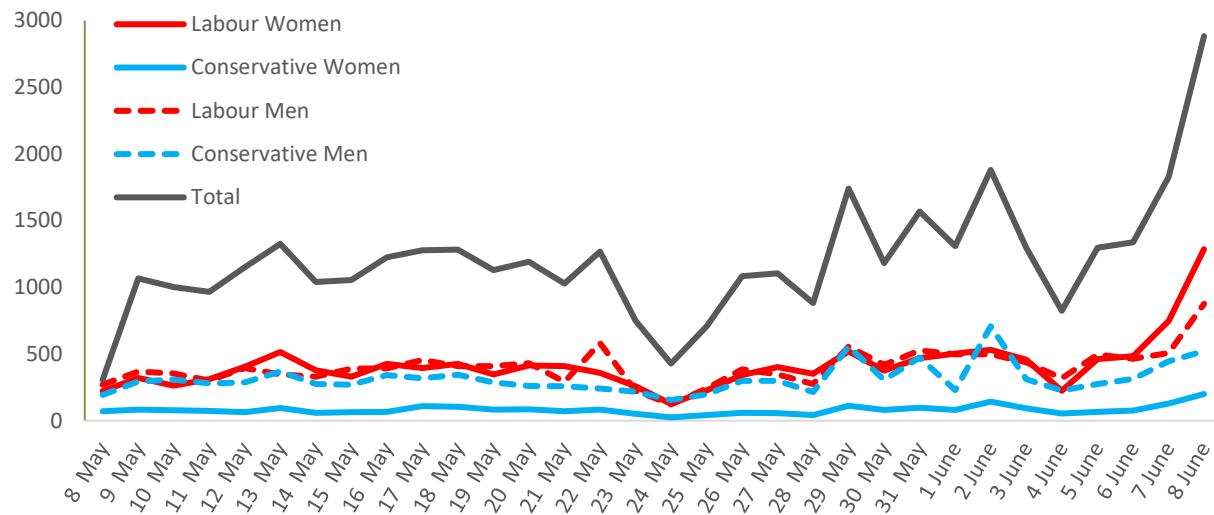


Figure 4.2 Tweet volumes during the campaign period 2017

The course of tweets during the winter period 2017 (Figure 4.3), is much more constant, with the only notable rise in politicians' Twitter activity occurring on 22 November 2017, when politicians collectively sent over 2,000 tweets, most of which were presumably in anticipation of or as a response to the presentation that day of the annual Budget, with Conservatives publicising government proposals and Labour responding accordingly. During the summer period 2018 (Figure 4.4) politicians' Twitter output was lower but relatively consistent, sending between 390 and 590 tweets per day.

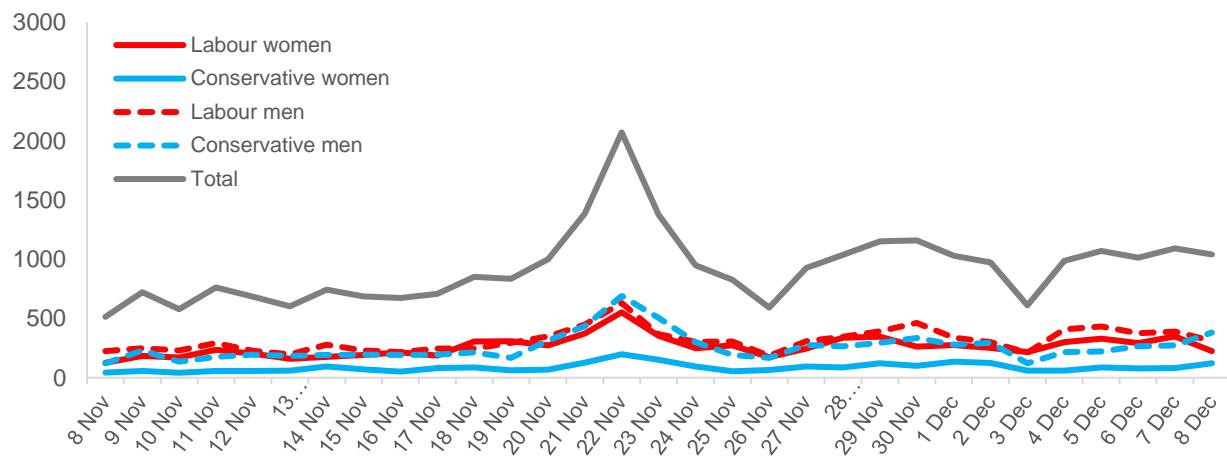


Figure 4.3 Tweet volumes during the winter period 2017

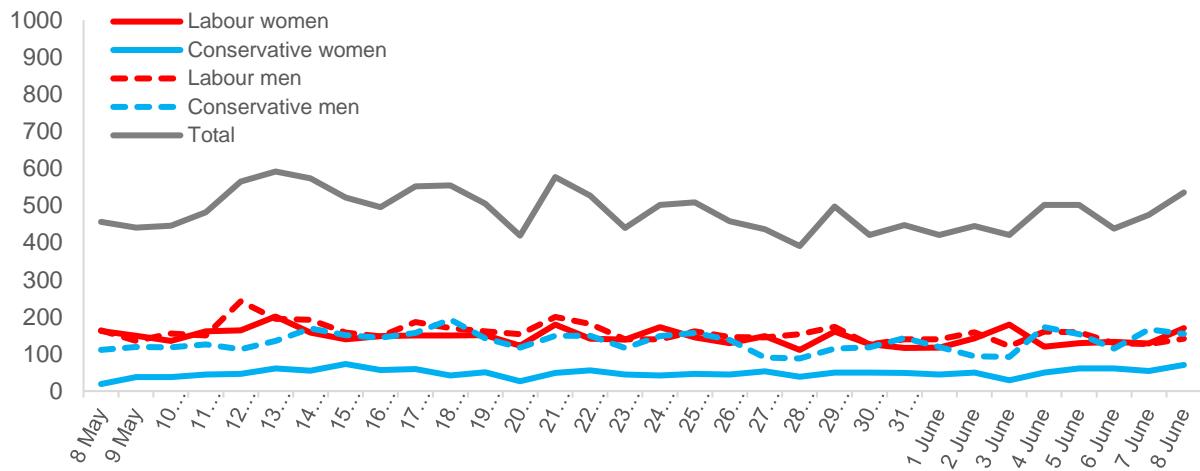


Figure 4.4 Tweet volumes during the summer period 2018

§ 4.4.2.1 Tweet averages

To compare the share of tweets sent by the four groups of politicians, I looked at the average number of tweets sent, instead of total number of tweets, since the four groups of politicians were not of equal size. Table 4.3 presents the average number of tweets sent individually by politicians of each group. From this table we can derive that on average, Labour women and men sent consistently more tweets than did Conservative women and men. Two possible explanations for this are, firstly, that Labour politicians, being in opposition and ‘playing catch-up’, are compelled to strive harder to gain support than the incumbent Conservative Party (Gainous and Wagner, 2014), while secondly, there might be a degree of hesitancy among Conservatives to use Twitter more frequently because, some scholarship suggests, Conservative politicians are more likely to receive online abuse than Labour politicians (Gorrell *et al.*, 2019). It is further noteworthy that Labour women sent the most tweets on average during the election campaign, which could be explained by their disadvantaged position by both their gender and party.

Table 4. 3 Tweet averages per group of politicians

	Labour women	Conservative women	Labour men	Conservative men	Total
<i>Election campaign 2017</i>	135	40	115	49	339
<i>Winter 2017</i>	74	47	74	42	58
<i>Summer 2018</i>	41	26	37	21	30

Note. Group averages were calculated by the number of politicians per group on Twitter divided by the total number of original tweets sent by that group. Total averages were calculated by the total number of politicians on Twitter divided by the total number of original tweets sent.

The total number of tweets sent per politician varied greatly during the election campaign (from 0 to 797 tweets), as well as during the winter period 2017 and summer period 2018 (from 0 to 538 tweets and 0 to 296 tweets respectively). The highest number of tweets sent by a single politician was 797 from the account of Barry Sheerman (LabM) during the course of the election campaign, closely followed by Will Quince (ConM), who sent 793 tweets across the same time span, and who through the winter period 2017 was the most frequent tweeter, with 538 tweets sent. Luke Pollard (LabM) sent the most tweets, 296 in all, during the summer period 2018. The number of politicians with an active Twitter account who did not send *any* tweets varied across the three time periods, with a total of 119 inactive politicians during the election campaign, 29 during the winter period, and 136 during the summer period. The non-tweeting politicians included, during the election campaign, Liz McInnes (LabW), Caroline Ansell (ConsW), Christopher Evans (LabM), and Jack Lopresti (ConsM); during the winter period 2017, Shabana Mahmood (LabW), Michelle Donelan (ConsW), Keith Vaz (LabM), and Steve Brine (ConsM); and during the summer period 2018, Marie Rimmer (LabW), Julia Lopez (ConsW), Hugh Gaffney (LabM), and Damien Moore (ConsM).

§ 4.4.3 Data analysis

§ 4.4.3.1 Data preparation

I aggregated my datasets to the level of the politician, that is, I collated all tweets sent by a politician across the three time periods, so that the politician became a single unit

of analysis. Some Twitter studies use the individual tweet as unit of analysis (for example, Graham *et al.*, 2013; Meeks, 2013; Graham, Jackson and Broersma, 2014, 2018), which means that in the dataset, each row represents one tweet. However, I argue that this is a problematic approach since it means the data have a multilevel structure: observations (in this case, tweets) are correlated because they are sent by the same politicians. For example, in my data, Labour politician Jess Phillips tweeted nine times about sexism and gender-related issues across the three time periods. Therefore, there are nine rows with tweets from Phillips. However, these nine tweets are intercorrelated, since they are all of Phillips's authorship. When taking the individual tweet as unit of analysis, statistical tests will consider every tweet a separate observation, which could lead to invalid statistical tests (since datasets with larger number of observations more readily produce significant results) and may produce biased findings, particularly since hundreds of tweets could be sent by a few politicians. After I completed the data coding, my dataset also had a multilevel structure: it contained 12,000 rows, one each for every individual tweet, which were sent by 483 politicians. I then aggregated the data at the level of the individual politician, so that I used the individual politician as the unit of analysis. After this process, my dataset contained 483 rows, each of them representing an individual politician. Thus, Phillips's nine tweets concerning sexism and gender were reduced to a single row, though of course the total number of single tweets was incorporated in the analysis. This aggregation process avoided attaching excess weight to politicians prolific in their tweeting.

After the aggregation process, one more step was required. I had included an equal number of tweets per analytical group (LabW, ConsW, LabW, ConsM), and after I had aggregated the data to the level of the politician, a skew was apparent: the scores of some of the groups comprising the smallest number of politicians in the datasets, in particular Conservative women, were excessive. For example, the first dataset included 44 individual Conservative women MPs and 4,000 of their tweets, and 105 individual Conservative men MPs and 4,000 of their tweets. This skew became visible when the analyses were run for the first time, at which point Conservative women scored higher

than the other groups of politicians, especially Conservative men, in a disproportionate number of categories. This skewness was remedied by deleting a certain number of tweets from the underrepresented groups, so that the average number of tweets per politician in each group was equal. In the first dataset, containing tweets posted during the election campaign, 581 tweets by Conservative women were deleted at random, along with 191 tweets by Labour women and 106 by Labour men. In the second dataset, containing tweets posted between 8 November and 8 December 2017, 641 tweets sent by Conservative women were randomly deleted, along with 296 tweets by Labour men and 324 by Labour women. Finally, for the third dataset, comprising tweets sent between 8 May and 8 June 2018, a total of 677 tweets by Conservative women were deleted at random, along with 69 tweets by Labour women and 40 by Conservative men.

I calculated the exact number of tweets that required deletion, and selected them at random. Because I was particularly interested in eliminating the bias, I repeated this process five times for each time period, thereby creating five differing datasets for each period (fifteen in total). I then ran all analyses again for each newly created dataset. The results across the five sets of datasets in each period showed much resemblance, with similar results across the datasets, and more importantly, the results gave me confidence that the removal of tweets had worked to eliminate the skew, as none of the groups of politicians scored higher in a disproportionate number of categories. I had decided *a priori* that I would use the results of the final iteration of analysis for each dataset. These datasets formed the basis of the analyses in *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content* and *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*.

§ 4.4.2.2 Analytical approach

In the content analysis, I was concerned with investigating gender and party differences in tweet frequencies of a certain tweet patterns. In particular, *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*, examines gender and party differences by the frequencies at which politicians sent different types of tweet content, and *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues* scrutinises gender and party differences by the frequencies at which

politicians sent political issue tweets. In both chapters, the quantitative analysis is a two-step process. In the first step, I analysed the degree of gender and party differences, for which I performed Mann-Whitney U tests (Mann and Whitney, 1947). The Mann-Whitney U test, also known as the Wilcoxon rank sum test (Wilcoxon, 1945),¹⁸ is a two-sample, non-parametric test that ascertains whether the independent observations of two groups differ from each other, and accounts for the skewed distribution of the data; in this case, it is used to test any variance between the number of times women or men politicians sent a particular type of tweet or mentioned a certain political issue.

In the second step, I investigated gender and party differences together, by looking at differences across the four groups of politicians (LabW, ConsW, LabM, and ConsM). For this purpose, I conducted a Kruskal-Wallis Rank Sum test (Kruskal and Wallis, 1952) (henceforth abbreviated as the Kruskal-Wallis test), another kind of non-parametric test that accounts for the skewed distribution of the data and looks at the ranking order of the number of times a politician sends a particular type of tweet, but extends the Mann-Whitney U test because it can accommodate more than two groups (McKnight and Najab, 2010). The Kruskal-Wallis test is an *omnibus test* which means that it indicates whether there is a significant difference between the different groups, in this case, the four groups of politicians. However, a statistically significant Kruskal-Wallis result does not indicate which groups scored significantly differently from one and other, it only indicates that at least two groups are significantly different from each other. For this purpose I conducted post-hoc analyses in the form of Dunn's tests of multiple comparisons using rank sums (Dunn, 1964) for the significant Kruskal-Wallis results. The significance values of the pairwise comparisons were adjusted with the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests. All statistical analyses were conducted using R (R Core Team, 2020).

In the thematic analysis, I was interested in *how* politicians discursively

¹⁸ The Mann-Whitney test, being considered equivalent to the Wilcoxon rank-sum test (Upton and Cook, 2014), is therefore sometimes referred to as the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test to recognise both contributions.

constructed their tweets. In *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*, I analyse how politicians differed in their tone, focus, and orientation when discussing political issues, and in *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*, I consider how politicians personalised their tweets. In both chapters, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method of carrying out a thematic analysis.

§ 4.5 Reliability, validity, dependability, and trustworthiness

Reliability and validity are terms used to describe the rigour of research: the former concerns the *consistency* of a method, the latter the *accuracy* of a method. The concepts are often discussed in union because they are interconnected (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), with reliability being a precursor to validity (Folger, Hewes and Poole, 1984). Both reliability and validity in terms of research language have roots in the positivist epistemological tradition (Winter, 2000), and are therefore mostly associated with quantitative methods, although some scholars, among them Patton (2015), argue that qualitative researchers too should be concerned with reliability and validity. Others have reasoned that the terms require redefinition in order to be meaningful for qualitative research. Golafshani (2003), for example, states that the issue of replicability – an important aspect of reliability – does not pertain to qualitative research, but that precision, credibility, and transferability do. Several alternative terms have been suggested for reliability and validity as used by the qualitative researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985), for example, utilise the term 'dependability', which is synonymous with the meaning of 'reliability' in quantitative research and in general. The term 'trustworthiness' has been suggested by several scholars (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006; Korstjens and Moser, 2018) as being analogous with the meaning of validity in quantitative research. Since I used quantitative and qualitative methods, I apply the terms 'reliability' and 'validity' to the quantitative research, and in agreement with the before-named scholars, the terms 'dependability' and 'trustworthiness' are used in relation to qualitative research.

Reliability can be defined as "[t]he degree to which a research technique or experiment yields the same results over repeated attempts and by different

researchers" (Calhoun, 2002, p. 408), and so *consistency* is requisite. I aimed to improve the consistency of the content analysis by way of forming a coding scheme with clear and detailed coding rules, which was uniformly applied throughout the coding process. The coding exercise began after the first of the three data-collection periods and throughout this process, I carefully took the same measures to strengthen the comparability of the three datasets. I had developed a preliminary group of codes from the first set of data, to which I added and made revisions when coding the second and third sets. A common means of estimating reliability in content analysis is to assess consistency between the thinking of different coders. Intercoder reliability, or intercoder agreement, is the extent to which coders, having independently evaluated a characteristic of a message, reach the same conclusion (Lombard, Snyder-Duch and Bracken, 2002). In the current study, I estimated intercoder reliability in two steps, the first of which involved having a sample of 30 tweets coded by a second coder, who used the initial coding scheme that I had created. Cohen's Kappa was used as an intercoder-reliability measure and yielded satisfactory results for 'Tweet Category' ($\kappa = .953$) and 'Political Issues' ($\kappa = .945$). I then started coding the first 1,000 tweets, during which I substantially amended the coding scheme, and carried out another intercoder reliability test as before, this time using a 100-tweet sample.¹⁹ Again, Cohen's Kappa values reached satisfactory results for 'Tweet Category' ($\kappa = .963$) and 'Political Issues' ($\kappa = .946$), following which I coded the rest of the 12,000-tweet sample. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), dependability refers to "the stability of findings over time" (p. 121), which can be enhanced by transparently describing the research steps taken throughout the study. I have striven for a high degree of openness in carrying out the thematic analysis, by detailing my coding procedure at § 4.3.2 *Thematic Analysis*, above.

Validity "refers to the degree to which the analysis is properly conceived to address the subject of study", and so whatever the reliability and accuracy of research, it should be carried out in an appropriate manner (Calhoun, 2002, p. 501). Trustworthiness refers to the extent to which findings can be relied upon (Korstjens and

¹⁹ Two different coders participated in the two intercoder reliability tests.

Moser, 2018). The validity and trustworthiness of the present thesis were supported by the use of two unobtrusive research methods, content analysis and thematic analysis, which meant that participants were unaware that they were under study (Allen and Lambertz-Berndt, 2017). While it might reasonably be expected that politicians are conscious of the potential for their tweets to be gathered and analysed for research purposes, since they are public figures posting on a public platform, they obviously do not have this in mind when drafting tweets in most cases. This counters 'social desirability bias', a problem that may arise from interpersonal research methods such as interviews and focus groups, or surveys, where participants may modify their responses in agreement with or opposition to what they assume are the expectations of the researcher (Hine, 2011). The reduction of social desirability is particularly relevant to the study of social media use by politicians, who may feel a need to present themselves in a positive light when being interviewed. Indeed, research has shown an inconsistency between what politicians say they do on social media and what they *actually* do on these platforms. Ross and Bürger (2014) interviewed New Zealand MPs and enquired their motivations for using social media, with the importance of citizen engagement being frequently mentioned in their responses, while studies of politicians' behaviour on social media repeatedly show that politicians use these platforms as a means to distribute information rather than interact with citizens (Ross, Fountaine and Comrie, 2020). To further improve the validity of the content analysis, I considered the extent to which tweet content could be coded using code categories produced in other studies, as a means of increasing comparability. I aimed to bolster trustworthiness of the thematic analysis through a 'processual approach', which requires measures being taken *before*, *during*, and *after* the analysis (Hayashi, Jr., Abib and Hoppen, 2019). Depending upon the phase in the research process, these steps included immersion in the research field, prolonged exposure to the material (in my case, tweets), and consultation with experts (in my case, with my supervisor). I carefully followed these steps in the application of the thematic analysis, as explained at § 4.3.2 *Thematic Analysis*.

§ 4.6 Personal research reflections and practical problems and issues

At the outset of my doctoral journey, the methodology of my research was not fixed, nor could or should it have been, and so changes were made early in the design and data-gathering stages. As much feminist research includes attention to some degree of self-reflexivity (Fonow and Cook, 1991, 2005), it was my aim to carry out my project as such a reflexive researcher. Attia and Edge (2017) think reflexivity is “a process of on-going mutual shaping between researcher and research” (p. 33) and therefore stress the importance of the researcher stepping back and reflecting on the research process. My reflexivity was primarily materialised by a diary that I updated monthly, by the everyday changes in the research environment of a Britain in a state of political flux and uncertainty, and by conversations with other researchers. Bridges (2016) considers conversation an integral part of research, and the most important discussions influencing the development of my research were those with my principal supervisor, which were extremely useful for encouraging me to reflect in the design of my research, particularly its methodology as an ongoing and organic process.

The most important reshaping of my original research design resulted from the opportunity to collect data during the, initially unanticipated, 2017 general election. Typically, general elections take place every five years (UK Parliament, 2019) and as I began my PhD, the most recent had been held 7 May 2015. On 18 April 2017, however, then Prime Minister Theresa May declared that a ‘snap’ election was to take place on 8 May 2017 (BBC News, 2017d), three years before a general election would have been required under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, and I decided to take advantage of this valuable opportunity to collect data from an early election period, given how important such moments are for politicians to communicate with voters (Oelsner and Heimrich, 2015). Fortunately, I had made most of the necessary arrangements for data collection and, most importantly, had already identified my sample. Nonetheless, I needed to collect the data a month sooner than anticipated and had not yet decided which data-gathering tool I was to use, nor had I run all the intended pilot tests. May’s announcement of a snap election and my resultant decision to collect data from that election period prompted me to bring forward my data-collecting and to modify the data

collection timeline accordingly. If no such announcement had been made, I would have run some further pilot tests to determine precisely how many tweets I would collect and in which manner. But the opportunity to gather data during an election campaign being too good to forego, I decided that I would collect an abundance of tweets from this period, thereby allowing me to decide later which might be used. I collected tweets from *all* MPs seeking re-election, but after the data collection, I decided to include only Labour and Conservative MPs, for the reasons given earlier (see *§ 4.4 Data collection, description, and analysis*).

Finally, I would like to acknowledge some practical problems and issues that arose during the research process. Whilst coding, I encountered several obstacles regarding the labelling of content. For example, I had devised my coding scheme based on other – mostly North American – research studies, but when I started coding the data, I noted that some tweets did not fit into the categories of other researchers. Though I initially coded such tweets as ‘miscellaneous’, I discerned certain patterns among them and decided therefore that some additional categories were merited, for example ‘constituency promotion’. I realised that too heterogeneous a classification of unattached tweets would neither be desirable nor sufficient for my research project, and so devised further tweet categories when it seemed justified. I encountered another coding conundrum when tweets could reasonably be placed into more than one category, a difficulty particularly evident when coding political issues. Occasionally, politicians would confront multiple political issues in a single tweet, and in such cases, I chose to code only the issue first mentioned by the politician.

§ 4.7 Ethical considerations for using Twitter data

Social media provide researchers with opportunities to gather vast amounts of data (Maddock, Starbird and Mason, 2015). Twitter is one of the platforms most widely studied by academic scholars (Williams, Terras and Warwick, 2013), in part because its data is more open and accessible than those of many other social media platforms (Vergeer, 2015; Ahmed, Bath and Demartini, 2017; Ahmed, 2019). Twitter’s terms of service state that public posts are available to third parties, including researchers, and by agreeing to these terms, users provide legal consent to this access (Twitter, 2020;

Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017). Besides, in 2010, the Library of Congress announced that they had been gifted the entire archive of public tweets from Twitter's launch in July 2006 to April 2010, after which they collected all public tweets up to the end of 2017, before announcing that as of 1 January 2018, tweets would be acquired selectively (Osterberg, 2017). Researchers anticipated that this archive would be a valuable resource (Zimmer, 2015), but at the time of writing, the Library of Congress is yet to make the archive accessible. Nonetheless, most Twitter researchers think of tweets as being in the public domain, and do not include an ethical consideration in their work. Zimmer and Proferes (2014) analysed 382 academic publications between 2006 and 2012 that relied on Twitter as their primary platform for data collection and analysis, and found that only 16 studies (4%) made mention of ethical issues. However, some scholars have argued that social media data collection and analysis pose ethical concerns that researchers must attend to (Townsend and Wallace, 2016), and that “[t]he process of evaluating the research ethics cannot be ignored simply because the data are seemingly public” (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 672).

Williams *et al.* (2017) advise researchers to look beyond legal perspectives of permissible data usage for research outputs, and as Beurskens (2014) points out, just because something is *legal* does not necessarily mean that it is *ethical*, since ethical requirements might be stricter than legal requirements. In my data collection and analysis, I reflected carefully on ethical considerations including obtaining ethics approval from the university, assuring the anonymity of non-public figures, paying heed to the practicability of gaining informed consent, carefully selecting the ways in which the data were stored, and striving for transparency in the way the data were collected. These ethical considerations will now be discussed in turn.

§ 4.7.1 *Ethics approval*

First ethics approval was obtained in accordance with the research ethics policy at Newcastle University.²⁰ This procedure required the completion of online ethics forms,

²⁰ For more information on Newcastle University's ethics policy and procedure, see <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/research/researchgovernance/ethics/process/> [accessed 25 October 2020].

and being satisfied with my responses, the University Ethics Committee approved my project, deeming it 'low risk', which meant that no additional, formal ethical review was necessary.

§ 4.7.2 Anonymity

Anonymity is a key consideration in research ethics (Townsend & Wallace, 2016), and I decided to distinguish between public and private figures, as suggested by Ackland (2013) and Ottovordemgentschenfelde (2017). I considered politicians to be public figures, and therefore chose not to anonymise their tweets, a reasoning shared by, for example, Webb *et al.* (2017). Townsend and Wallace (2016) point out that "data posted by public figures such as politicians, musicians and sportspeople on their public social media pages is less likely to be problematic because this data is intended to reach as wide an audience as possible" (p. 10). Townsend and Wallace (2016) therefore suggest that it is unnecessary to anonymise tweets from public figures. Walker (2016) draws a parallel between politicians' tweets and other campaign materials, such as speeches and flyers, which are all distributed to the public and have been used extensively for academic research without ethical concerns being raised. Townsend and Wallace (2016) observe that in almost all cases, it is essential to anonymise research subjects in research outputs, with one exception being the use of social media data from organisations or public figures aiming to share their data as widely as possible. However, politicians sometimes retweet or respond to a private individual's tweet or include that person's Twitter handle in their own posts. Consequently, my datasets contain information about persons who have not chosen a public life and I therefore anonymised their usernames. These users have agreed to Twitter's terms, which state that public tweets are available to third parties, researchers among them, but it should be kept in mind, as Beurskens (2014) observes, that legality is not coequal with ethics, and I appreciated that these users might well be unaware that their tweets could be used for academic research (Ahmed, Bath and Demartini, 2017). Of course, for the curious reader, it is still possible to identify these non-public figures by looking for the original text in a search engine, even when entire sentences are removed from that text (Webb *et al.*, 2017). Fully protecting the identity of private individuals would therefore have required the omission of all such tweets, including those included in the retweets

from politicians. I would say however that in the few instances where I did reproduce tweets from which the identity of the sender could be somehow identified, any risk to that private individual, such as reputational damage, is low, since the data are not considered highly sensitive (Ahmed, Bath and Demartini, 2017). Besides, politicians in the sample sometimes included photographs depicting themselves with members of the public. According to the ethical framework of Williams *et al.* (2017) for publishing Twitter data, photos that are embedded in tweets should be regarded as sensitive information and correspondingly, when including examples of tweets which contain photos of private individuals, those individuals' faces have been pixelated in this thesis, to the extent that they are unrecognisable. Even though these individuals have (presumably) agreed to be photographed with the politician and might be aware that this photograph will be shared online, they are probably unaware that the image could appear in academic work.

§ 4.7.3 Informed consent

Informed consent is another important ethical consideration for research which has potential consequences for the subjects of study (Alldred and Gillies, 2012). Whereas informed consent is usually integral to the practice of traditional research, social media research presents some specific issues in this regard (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Acquiring informed consent when working with large datasets encompassing many individuals is often unfeasible (Ahmed, Bath and Demartini, 2017). For the current study, I concluded that it would be very difficult to acquire informed consent from all private persons whose information was included in politicians' tweets. I decided that it would neither be practicable nor necessary to contact all such users, and therefore instead obscured their Twitter handles, as noted above.

§ 4.7.4 Data storage

For data confidentiality and back-up, I followed the steps of Ahmed *et al.* (2017) to safeguard data storage. I am responsible for the storage of all tweet data, which I kept in password-secured Excel files on a password-protected laptop, which when not in use was itself stored as safely as possible. I performed the data analysis at the university

and home, not in public places (Ahmed, Bath and Demartini, 2017). Apart from myself, only the supervisory team may access the data.

§ 4.7.5 Transparency

The last of the ethical measures here considered is transparency, the importance of which in social media research is noted by Ahmed *et al.* (2017). Earlier, at § 4.4 *Data collection, description, and analysis*, I detailed the steps that I took when collecting the data, thereby enabling other researchers to retrieve data from a similar time period and construct comparable datasets.

§ 4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the epistemology, methodology, methods, and sources that have guided my response to the research questions and have offered reflections on the research process. This thesis employs a feminist methodology by recognising the importance of gender in all facets of our social life, and by situating gender as the main analytical focus. Feminist research is accordingly often associated with the utilisation of qualitative research methods, whilst traditional scientific research is frequently connected with quantitative methods. However, scholars have argued that the gendering of methodologies limits the potential of social science research. I have therefore used a mixed-methodological design, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, as I believe that this is the most effective way to answer my research questions. Specifically, I have used content analysis with thematic analysis as a complementary analytical framework. The resultant way of proceeding counteracts the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of the other and the suitability of these methods to my research has been contemplated. The chapter was concluded with thoughts on the ethical aspects of gathering Twitter data and a description of the steps that I have taken to carry out this research in a proper manner.

Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content

This chapter aims to answer the first research question: 'To what extent were gender and party associated with British politicians' tweet content during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?' To achieve this, three datasets from three time periods (one election period and two subsequent non-election periods) were analysed. Each dataset was constructed by drawing a random stratified sample of 4,000 original tweets (1,000 from Labour women; 1,000 from Conservative women; 1,000 from Labour men; and 1,000 from Conservative men) per time period, and so 12,000 tweets were sampled in total. This sample was then coded for 'tweet content', the categories of which included 'attack', 'user interaction', 'political issue', and 'personal' tweets. The datasets were subsequently aggregated to the level of the politician, and a number of tweets were excluded to remedy a skew in the analysis (see previous chapter, section § 4.4 *Data collection, description, and analysis*). After contextualising the analysis, the chapter provides a preliminary description of the data and frequencies, which uses the original datasets containing 12,000 tweets in total. The chapter then presents the analyses, which uses the aggregated and adjusted datasets, and is performed in two stages: the first investigates the extent to which gender and party were related to politicians' tweet content, and the second considers gender and party *together* in relation to politicians' tweet content. The chapter concludes by summarising the findings and positioning them within the field of related study.

§ 5.1 Context

I manually coded three datasets of 4,000 original tweets (12,000 tweets in total), from three different time periods (an election period spanning 8 May – 8 June 2017; a winter period spanning 8 November – 8 December 2017; and a summer period spanning 8 May – 8 June 2017). Each of these tweets was coded for the variable 'tweet content', which referred to the *types of tweets* politicians sent, such as 'political issue', 'campaign', or 'mobilisation' tweets. The coding process was performed in a deductive as well as inductive manner – deductive in the sense that some tweet types were drawn from existing literature, and inductive because I allowed for other tweet types to emerge

from the coding process (Sun, 2018). Before commencing the data coding, I derived a set of tweet types from existing literature, largely borrowed from the work of Haber (2011) and Evans *et al.* (2014). From their research, tweet types such as ‘user interaction’, ‘political issues’, ‘attack’, ‘campaigning’, ‘mobilisation’, ‘media’ (Haber, 2011) and ‘personal’ (Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014) were derived. The coding process began with these predefined categories, but further classifications were made in the course of the coding process, including ‘visits’, ‘constituency promotion’, ‘reflection on terrorist attacks’, and ‘endorsements’. Some categories were added, merged, and redefined during the coding of the first 1,000 tweets of the first dataset, and of the first 500 tweets of the second and third datasets. After these initial 2,000 tweets were coded, I arrived at a final coding scheme, and began re-reading all tweets to ensure I had not missed any tweet types introduced by the coding process. The same coding scheme was used for all three datasets, including a newly added type, ‘memorial service’, which was added while coding the second dataset principally to record politicians mentioning their attendance at memorial services, the second period coinciding with the annual observance of Remembrance Day on 11 November. All miscellaneous tweets ($n = 90$) from the first dataset were checked to determine if there were any ‘memorial service’ tweets among them, to ensure that the three datasets were comparable, though it was found that no such tweets were present in the first dataset. Eventually, the variable ‘tweet content’ comprised 15 tweet types, plus a miscellaneous category, which included a wide variety of tweets that did not sufficiently fit any of the other categories. The final coding scheme can be found in *Appendix A: ‘Coding scheme’*.

§ 5.2 Preliminary description and frequencies

I will first describe the variables gender and party, and then turn to the variable ‘tweet content’. I created dichotomous variables (that is, variables limited to two distinct values or categories) for politicians’ gender and party: for gender, 0 refers to a man politician, and 1 to a woman politician; and for the variable political party, 0 refers to a Conservative politician, and 1 to a Labour politician. Since the datasets were stratified along gender and party lines, they were all formed of an equal number of tweets from

women and men politicians, and an equal number of tweets from Labour and Conservative politicians. I also created a composite variable with four categories, each representing a group of politicians: Labour women, Conservative women, Labour men, and Conservative men. The composite variable was used for the four-way analysis of potential differences in tweet content across the four groups of politicians. The variable 'tweet content' consisted of 15 tweet categories (plus the miscellaneous category).

Table 5.1 shows the frequencies of each tweet type over the three time periods. The descriptive statistics indicate that politicians' Twitter patterns varied across the three time periods, which is in accordance with research showing that politicians adapt their style of communication to electoral context (Kousser, 2019). It can be inferred from the table that, during the election campaign, politicians placed the primary focus on informing citizens of campaigning activities, which is unsurprising, since this is one of the key functions of Twitter for politicians during election campaigns (López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Following the campaign period, however, attention was redirected towards tweeting on political issues and interacting with users. In the following section, I describe each type of tweet, in the order of their frequency as presented in Table 5.1, while a more detailed description and coding instructions for each tweet type are presented in *Appendix A: 'Coding scheme.*

Table 5.1 Frequencies and percentages of tweet type

Tweet type	Election period	Winter 2017	Summer 2018	Total n (%)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
User Interaction	945 (23.6)	1209 (30.2)	1348 (33.7)	3502 (29.2)
Political issues	455 (11.4)	1284 (32.1)	1072 (26.8)	2811 (23.4)
Attack	593 (14.8)	445 (11.1)	272 (6.8)	1310 (10.9)
Campaigning	1028 (25.7)	57 (1.4)	24 (<1)	1109 (9.2)
Visits	48 (1.2)	249 (6.2)	332 (8.3)	629 (5.2)
Personal	133 (3.3)	98 (2.5)	246 (6.2)	477 (4)
Constituency promotion	67 (1.7)	121 (3)	209 (5.2)	397 (3.3)
Miscellaneous	90 (2.3)	110 (2.8)	104 (2.6)	304 (2.5)
Mobilisation	191 (4.8)	33 (<1)	46 (1.2)	270 (2.3)
Charity	66 (1.6)	89 (2.2)	99 (2.5)	254 (2.1)
News	40 (1)	107 (2.7)	103 (2.6)	250 (2.1)
Media	66 (1.7)	82 (2.1)	82 (2.1)	230 (1.9)
Reflection on terrorist attacks	204 (5.1)	0 (<1)	17 (<1)	221 (1.8)
Memorial service	0 (<1)	82 (2.1)	8 (<1)	90 (<1)
Endorsement	64 (1.6)	18 (<1)	5 (<1)	87 (<1)
Update	10 (<1)	16 (<1)	33 (.08)	59 (<1)
Total	4,000 (100)	4,000 (100)	4,000 (100)	12,000 (100)

Note. Tweet types are listed in descending order by the sum of all tweets of that type sent in the three periods, as shown in the final column.

Firstly, ‘user interaction’ tweets, consisting of replies to users’ questions or comments, were overall those most commonly sent by the politicians studied. During the campaign period, nearly 24% of politicians’ tweets were user interaction sort, which resembles Graham *et al.*’s (2013 a) finding that during the run-up to the 2010 UK General Election, 19% of politicians’ tweets were interactive. As the percentage of such tweets recorded in the present thesis slightly higher, it is possible that politicians became more responsive to other Twitter users in the intervening years. Interestingly, Graham and colleagues (2013 a) called for further research of politicians’ interaction tweets, particularly to discover if their number varied between election periods and non-election periods, remarking, “it might be that an election campaign triggers broadcasting

of political messages and campaign updates while politicians on Twitter might be more responsive to their followers and interacting with them in ‘off peak’ periods” (p. 19). My results seem to suggest that this is the case, since the percentage of user interaction tweets in the two non-election periods was substantially higher than during the election campaign (30% and 34% in the second and third periods respectively). These percentages of user interaction tweets might not seem very high at a glance, but as Wright (2012) points out, studies of how the internet has altered politics should not be valued only by how far they establish whether or not this change is revolutionary – the potential significance of smaller, more gradual changes must also be taken into account. Graham *et al.* (2013 a) think that the percentage of user interaction tweets detected *is* substantial. I concur with them, and deem the proportions of interactive tweets in my sample fairly high. It is understandable that politicians devoted some time to public interaction both inside and outside election campaign periods, because research has shown that interactivity can be highly beneficial for politicians by way of heightening public interest in politics (Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2013), improving the public estimation of candidates (Utz, 2009; Lyons and Veenstra, 2016), and as some studies have indicated, potentially increasing vote share (Kruikemeier, 2014; Kruikemeier *et al.*, 2015). Figure 5.1²¹ shows two representative examples of user interaction tweets in which Seema Malhotra (LabW) and Heather Wheeler (ConsW) responded in a similar manner to a comment and a question from two users who are presumably among their constituents.

²¹ All tweets in this thesis which have been reproduced in full (i.e. by way of screenshotting the original tweet) are given as they appeared three months after their posting, and therefore, the number of comments, retweets, and likes as displayed in the image of the tweet provided is a fairly accurate representation of the overall response that the tweet attracted, since research has shown that tweets generally stay relevant for only about one day, meaning that the vast majority of comments, retweets, and likes take place within the first day of its being posted, after which these numbers decrease significantly (Mackenzie, 2018).



Figure 5.1 Examples of 'user interaction' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Seema Malhotra, Labour woman (left), and Heather Wheeler, Conservative woman (right). Usernames and profile pictures of users have been pixelated to protect their identities.

Next, in 'political issue' tweets, politicians gave their position on particular issues, informed voters of how they voted on an issue in Parliament, or provided other information on a political issue. During the election campaign, the proportion of issue tweets was smaller (11%) than it was during the second and third period (32% and 27% respectively) and there are at least two possible explanations for these differences. The first is that during the campaign period, politicians wished and were expected to be seen busied on the campaign trail rather than communicating their opinions remotely as they sought (re-)election, and thus mostly sent tweets showing themselves among the community, by for example reporting their knocking on doors and speaking at local events. Perhaps by this time many politicians thought their views on particular issues were sufficiently established, and felt a need to appear more physically involved in the looming election. This corresponds with other research, such as that of Stier *et al.* (2018), who found that political candidates' tweets during the German federal election of 2013 primarily concerned local campaigning rather than wider discussions of political issues. The second explanation for a smaller volume of issue tweets during the election campaign could have resulted partly from the sampling procedure: I randomly selected a stratified sample of 4,000 tweets from each dataset, but the three complete datasets differed considerably in their size. The first dataset was made up of 38,255 original tweets, the second dataset 28,649, and the third 15,552. I randomly selected 4,000

tweets from each dataset, and can therefore be fairly confident that the distribution of issue tweets in the samples approximated the distribution of issue tweets in the larger datasets. However, it may be that politicians sent a similar number of issue tweets across the three time periods, but in the first period, this number was augmented by a high number of campaign and attack tweets. This would mean that rather than sending fewer issue tweets during the election campaign, politicians sent *more* tweets of other kinds, resulting in a higher overall number of tweets during the election campaign.

Politicians remarked a variety of political issues, such as healthcare, the economy and taxes, Brexit, and the environment, and the frequencies and percentages of the differing issues mentioned in ‘issue tweets’ are presented in Appendix B: Frequencies and percentages of political issue tweets. Figure 5.2 has two examples of tweets coded as political issue tweets, which were as elsewhere selected as being representative of their tweet category. In the first example, Chi Onwurah (LabW), in an economy-related tweet, epitomised the intent of Labour’s ‘industrial strategy’ – and embedded a video of herself giving a fuller explanation. In the other example, Chuka Umunna (LabM) sent a tweet concerned with Brexit in which he expressed his wish for the UK to stay within the Single Market and Customs Union, and asked the like-minded to retweet his message.



Figure 5.2 Examples of ‘issue’ tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Chi Onwurah, Labour woman (left), and Chuka Umunna, Labour man (right)

'Attack' tweets included criticisms of individual political opponents, another political party, or their leader. Politicians most frequently used attack tweets during the campaign period (15%), which roughly aligns with Graham *et al.*'s (2013 a) finding that 17% of British politicians' tweets during the 2010 General Election were of this type.²² Once the campaign was over, attacks on others remained a constant, though quite infrequent, feature of politicians' tweet content (11% and 7% in the second and third periods respectively). It is understandable that attack tweets were more prominent during the campaign period, because when the time is at hand to vote, members of the public who remain undecided might be swayed by the reputed failures or weaknesses of the candidates. Figure 5.3 shows two tweets illustrative of the kind of attacks directed at opposing parties: Charlie Elphicke (ConsM) derided the Labour party's apparently outdated reliance on unions for the bulk of their donations, whereas Chris Bryant (LabM) accused the Conservative party of planning an income tax 'rise for all but the wealthiest', both tweets including a news source to contextualise their criticisms.



Figure 5.3 Examples of 'attack' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Charlie Elphicke, Conservative man (left) and Chris Bryant, Labour man (right)

'Campaign' tweets often consisted of a note informing where the politician had been campaigning, accompanied by one or more photographs taken on the campaign

²² Although Graham *et al.* (2013a) refer to 'critiquing' instead of 'attacking', their reasoning for coding tweets thus is much the same as mine for coding certain tweets as attacks, namely because in such cases politicians criticized an opponent, another political party, or a leader of another party.

trail. Figure 5.4 provides examples of campaign tweets. In the first tweet, Siobhain McDonagh (LabW) named some of the local streets at which she had been conversing with the public, whose views she heard with ‘pleasure’, and observing that a ‘sunny afternoon’ is expected, playfully enquires if local readers care to ‘join us!?’ The ‘us’ refers to McDonagh and presumably her campaign team, pictured in the four photographs that she includes in her tweet. In the second tweet, Rehman Chishti (ConsM) said that he had encountered ‘great support’ among locals for the Conservative Party and their then leader Theresa May. He further thanked his campaign team, some of whom appear to be in the photograph he shares in the tweet. During the election campaign, politicians most commonly tweeted about their campaigning activities, a topic which made up 26% of all sampled tweets. This accords with other research that has recorded a preponderance of campaign-related tweets during election periods (Stier *et al.*, 2018), which is to be expected and can be profitable, since research has shown that in certain conditions the high visibility of a party’s local campaigning can persuade people to change their minds mid-campaign and vote for that party, or at least to vote against its rivals (Pattie and Johnston, 2010). Unsurprisingly, politicians sent far fewer tweets concerning campaigning activities in the two periods after the campaign, with only 1.4% and .6% campaign tweets respectively being sent during the second and third periods. When politicians did send campaign tweets outside the campaign period, they generally remarked their commitment to campaigning all year round, not just nearer election times. One such tweet was sent by Anneliese Dodds (LabW), who wrote, “Good morning out and about in Iffley Fields with @Oxford_Labour- on the #labourdoorstep all year round! <https://t.co/e8zA3TnmO0>” (13 May 2018), and included what appears to be a selfie in which she is surrounded by some of these Oxford & District Labour Party members.



Figure 5.4 Examples of ‘campaign’ tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Siobhain McDonagh, Labour woman (left), and Rehman Chishti, Conservative man (right).

Tweets in the ‘visits’ category reported politicians’ visits to local schools, businesses, or events. Andrew Lewer (ConsM), for example, related being at “@KingsHeathPri today. A truly inspiring visit to a top performing and sucessful [sic] school. Thank you so much J.D. and Marie. <https://t.co/jp0rqNAWwL>” (8 June 2018), his tweet featuring several photographs of this visit. During the election campaign, visit tweets comprised a much smaller proportion of politicians’ tweets (1%) than they did outside the campaign period (6% and 8% in the second and third time periods, respectively). This could be because while the election neared, politicians thought that their immediate concern was to use more of their time attending political surgeries and explicitly campaign-focused events, thereby engaging more directly with politically minded members of the public and potential voters, whilst visits to local schools and businesses are a regular part of their constituency role as an MP.

The next tweet category, ‘personal’, contained material which gave some personal knowledge of the politician, and did not pertain directly to politics. Personal tweets were not very common across the three time periods, with a total of 479 tweets

out of 12,000 tweets (3%) being coded as non-political (135 in the first dataset, 98 in the second, and 150 in the third dataset), which is largely in agreement with other UK-based studies. For example, Graham and colleagues (2013 b) analysed Conservative and Labour candidates' tweets during the 2010 UK General Election, 6% of which they recorded as being unrelated to politics. The manner in which Graham *et al.* (2013 b) coded personal tweets was comparable to my method, that is, by considering tweets containing no direct political information as personal, as when politicians tweeted about leisure activities, family, or popular culture. However, the relatively small proportion of personal tweets reported in both Graham *et al.* (2013 b) and this chapter does not accord with North American research, which usually announce a much higher number of personal tweets. For example, in their analysis of U.S. House candidates' tweets, Evans *et al.* (2014) discerned 29% personal tweets in the sample that they studied. Two of the potential reasons for these distinct findings are, firstly, that the British political landscape in many ways differs substantially from that of the U.S., inclusive of which is how vote choice is motivated. In the UK, vote choice is still predominantly guided by a preference for certain political parties, whereas in the U.S. vote choice is more dependent on the perceived qualities of individual candidates²³ (Norris, 2000; Stanyer, 2008). Accordingly, politicians in North America might feel that they must positively distinguish themselves from their rivals by disclosing elements of their private lives and therewith construct an image of a person worthy of the public's votes. A second possible cause for the variance between the findings of these British and U.S. studies might, at least in part, have something to do with the ways in which tweets were coded. Evans and colleagues (2014) analysed personal tweets in a more inclusive manner, by not only considering tweets containing, for example, family pictures or notifying attendance at church services as personal, but also tweets in which the politician reflected upon an event of wider public interest, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks. While I largely followed in the footsteps of Evans *et al.* (2014) when coding my tweets, I created a separate category for politicians' thoughts on two Islamist terrorist

²³ In the UK, constituency MPs still campaign in their own area and this can gain them the support of citizens who disagree with some aspects of their party's conduct, but in comparison with the U.S., vote choice remains more between parties than between persons.

attacks in the UK that occurred during the tweet collection periods, namely the Manchester Arena bombing of 22 May 2017 and the London Bridge attack of 3 June 2017. I deemed such tweets to be politically charged, because terrorism is itself an act of violence carried out in the pursuit of political aims (Ruby, 2002), and the Manchester Arena and London Bridge terrorist attacks of summer 2017 naturally featured prominently in political debates and political news coverage (Cushion and Beckett, 2018). Whether or not such tweets should be viewed as personal is open to question, but even if I had deemed them personal tweets, the total amount of such tweets would still be only be 8.4% ($n = 337$)²⁴ in the first dataset (during which the aforesaid terrorist attacks occurred), which is still considerably lower than the 29% of personal tweets Evans *et al.* (2014) recorded. I think therefore that the differing findings are partly attributable to distinctions in the political character of the two countries and, to a lesser extent perhaps, variance in the coding procedures. The personal tweets in my research were frequently remarks on sporting events (primarily football, but also cricket and rugby) and television shows. Figure 5.5 contains examples of typical personal tweets, these ones sent by Stephen Doughty (LabM), who offered commiserations to the UK's Eurovision Song Contest entrant while using his native Welsh and some Hebrew to congratulate the Israeli winners, and Rory Stewart (ConsM), who shared a picturesque photograph that he had taken while out walking that day. In *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*, I look more closely at the content of personal tweets by means of a thematic analysis.

²⁴ This number was calculated by adding the number of 'reflection on terrorist attacks' tweets ($n = 204$) to the number of 'personal' tweets ($n = 133$) in the first dataset.



Figure 5.5 Examples of ‘personal’ tweets

Note. Tweets by Stephen Doughty, Labour man (left) and Rory Stewart, Conservative man (right)

Tweets in the ‘constituency promotion’ category consisted of observations on the qualities of the constituency for which the politician was running or serving. An example is provided by Chris Ruane, who tweeted, “#Denbigh has a great spirit of community, pulling together for these great festivals and other events in the town” (15 May 2018). Tweets were categorised as ‘mobilisation tweets’ when politicians attempted to involve citizens in the campaign or the political process, by calling for action, such as encouraging supporters to join in with campaigning or to cast their vote (Russmann, Svensson and Larsson, 2019; Russmann and Svensson, 2020). During the election campaign, a total of 191 tweets (5%) were mobilisation tweets, whereas in the two periods after the election campaign, only a very small percentage were of this type (< 1% in both the second and third time periods). This finding is comparable with the research of Graham and colleagues (2013 a), who reported that 4% of British politicians’ tweets consisted of mobilisation tweets in the campaign period of the 2010 General Election. In most of the mobilising tweets sent during the 2017 election campaign, politicians prompted citizens to cast their vote (135 tweets, 71%) and in

particular, tried to persuade citizens to vote for that politician's party (84 tweets, 44%), to vote in general (25 tweets, 13%), to vote for them specifically (23 tweets, 12%), and very occasionally, to vote for a party colleague in another constituency (3 tweets, 2%). Figure 5.6 shows two instances of politicians encouraged voting in general, Jo Churchill (LabW) and James Duddridge (ConsM), who urged people to put their right to vote into practice. Other types of mobilisation tweets during the election campaign included attempts to move citizens to participate in the politician's campaign or in politics generally (34 tweets, 18%). For example, politicians asked citizens to assist them directly by joining their campaign team or making a donation, or enquired if they would like to receive campaign materials such as posters or yard signs. Other tweets in the mobilisation category include those in which politicians encouraged citizens to register to vote if they had not yet done so (22 tweets, 12%). In the second and third periods, politicians sent a total of 61 mobilisation tweets (33 and 28 tweets respectively). More than half of these tweets (35 tweets, 57%) included invitations to attend surgeries (17 tweets in the second period, 18 tweets in the third). Occasionally, politicians encouraged citizens to vote in by-elections (eight tweets in the first period, seven in the second, and one in the third, a total of 26%). In a small number of mobilisation tweets, politicians invited citizens to give their opinions on a topic (eight tweets: six in the second period, two in the third, 13%). Finally, in five tweets (one in the second period and four in the third, 8%), politicians appealed for citizens to join their campaign team.



Figure 5.6 Examples of 'mobilisation' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Jo Churchill, Labour woman (left), and James Duddridge, Conservative man (right)

In 'charity' tweets, politicians gave their support to a charitable petition, referred

to donations made to particular causes, or mentioned their volunteering for such causes. Eleanor Smith (LabW), for example, tweeted, “Enjoyed taking part in Highfield school fundraising event for [BBC] Children in Need <https://t.co/eJTD0tAfEU>” (18 November 2017), to which she subjoined a photograph of herself partaking in an activity with pupils at the school. The low percentage of charity tweets detected by the present study, which varied between 1% and 2.5% across the three time periods, agrees with research by Adi and colleagues (2014), who analysed tweets from 21 Labour Party Peers in the House of Lords, and found that charitable activity accounted for just over 1% of tweets in their sample. A more cynical reasoning for politicians sending charity tweets is that they wish at least in part to create favourable impressions of themselves, but they could be motivated by simple altruism, by which they intend to make use of their public status to raise awareness of and support for charitable causes. Next, in ‘news’ tweets, politicians shared news of current events, often with comment and opinion, as did for example Brandon Lewis (ConsM), who included a link to a news article concerning a Syrian refugee family who were forced to flee their house due to an arson attack, and added, “This is not how we welcome those who need our help. Hope police are able find & prosecute those responsible: <https://t.co/iD7IOrJdUI>” (16 November 2017). As Enli and Skogerbø (2013) observe, social media enable politicians to give their immediate and unprompted thoughts on what are often politically significant stories, and such was the case in the news tweets that I discerned. In ‘media’ tweets, politicians drew attention to news stories in which they themselves or their party featured, often accompanied by a link to those news stories. Among them was Michael Dugher, who tweeted, “My interview in today's @Telegraph <https://t.co/Ow2dL2BbGC>” (2 June 2017).

The next category is ‘reflection on terrorist attacks’ tweets. During the first data collection period, two Islamic terrorist attacks occurred: the Manchester Arena bombing of 22 May 2017 and the London Bridge attack of 3 June 2017. These events made terrorism a prominent issue for the media, and pushed other matters away from the news agenda (Cushion and Beckett, 2018). Inevitably, many politicians commented on these events and in the first dataset, 205 out of 4,000 tweets (5.1%) concerned the

terrorist attacks, of which 144 related to the Manchester Arena bombing and 61 to the London Bridge attack; see Figure 5.7 for the representative responses of Andrew Selous (ConsM) and Yasmin Qureshi (LabW). In more than half of these tweets (121 tweets, 59%), politicians remarked these events by offering their thoughts and prayers for the victims and their loved ones. In 42 tweets (20%), politicians directed anger at the attackers, or applied a defiant rhetoric, as is displayed in, for example, Steve Reed's (LabM) tweet: "What these deranged murderers don't realise is their attacks make London stronger and more determined. Terrorism can never win" (4 June 2017). In 28 tweets (13%), politicians thanked the emergency services, among them Madeleine Moon (LabW), who tweeted, "Watching the unfolding news coverage of London Bridge attack shows how much we all owe to professionalism of our emergency services#thankyou" (4 June 2017). In 27 tweets (13%) of this kind, politicians made gestures of solidarity with the victims of the attacks, and in 30 tweets (15%), politicians notified the public of a suspension of campaigning activities following the Manchester attack, beginning 23 May 2017, and likewise of campaign's resumption on 26 May 2017. Some politicians also recalled these events in the third time period (17 tweets, or 0.4% of the total number of coded tweets) to mark one year since their happening.



Figure 5.7 Examples of 'reflection on terrorist attacks' tweets

Note. Tweets reflecting on terrorist attacks, by Andrew Selous, Conservative man (left), and Yasmin Qureshi, Labour woman (right)

The tweets infrequently sent were of the 'memorial service', 'endorsement', and 'update' type. The category 'memorial service' comprised tweets in which politicians reported their attendance at memorial services, as for example did Conor Burns (ConsM), MP for Bournemouth West, who tweeted of his participation in the annual

Remembrance Day service at the Bournemouth War Memorial: “Proud to lay a wreath this morning with @PCCDorset in Bournemouth to honour those who gave everything for our freedom. We will remember them <https://t.co/7EkuVmiBVD>” (12 November 2017). Typical ‘endorsement’ tweets included expressions of gratitude from the politician to a voter, and during the election campaign, endorsement tweets often quoted from citizens who had cast their vote for the politician or their party, or who had shown their intention to do so. Emma Reynolds (LabW), for example, tweeted, “Big thank you! Great to have your support @[username] [hyperlink]”²⁵ (8 June 2017). Outside the election campaign, endorsements included quote-tweets in which citizens thanked MPs for their constituency work in general. Justin Madders (LabM), for example, quote-tweeted a user’s compliment: “Thank you, I’m doing what I was elected to do [hyperlink]”²⁶ (11 November 2017). By responding to the approbation of the public, politicians can readily offer evidence of their support while appearing less self-promotional, and research has generally shown that political endorsement can have a positive effect, which can increase intentions to vote for a party or candidate (Pease and Brewer, 2008; Chou, 2014). Finally, in ‘update’ tweets, politicians announced their latest newsletter, newspaper/magazine columns, videos, or bulletins with information on their activities. Among them was Caroline Dinenage (ConsW), who notified that “The November edition of my Newsletter is now available to read, here: <https://t.co/pA8wYs0k6P>” (30 November 2018). Finally, the ‘miscellaneous’ category constituted an assortment of tweets that did not reasonably fit within any of the other categories, and were as diverse as politicians wishing for their Muslim audience a blessed month of fasting by saying ‘Happy Ramadan’ (or ‘Ramadan Mubarak’), congratulating to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, on the occasion of their wedding (which took place during the third time period), and remarks that their campaign posters had been stolen or vandalised. The following section sets out the analytical approach that was used to analyse these categories.

²⁵ The username of the person quoted here and their original tweet have been removed to preserve their anonymity.

²⁶ The link to the user comment to which the politician was replying here has been removed to preserve their anonymity.

§ 5.3 Analytical approach

I used statistical methods to investigate relationships between variables to conclude if relationships were significant and did not occur to chance. The first step in the statistical analysis was to investigate the association of gender and party with politicians' tweet content separately, and for this purpose, a total of 90 Mann-Whitney U tests were performed. Recall from Chapter 4 that the Mann-Whitney U test is a non-parametric test that considers the skewed distribution of the data and looks at the ranking order of the number of times a politician sent a particular type of tweet. The second step in the analysis was to examine any significant differences between the four groups of politicians (LabW, ConsW, LabM, ConsM), for which a total of 90 Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted. As described in the previous chapter, the Kruskal-Wallis is also a non-parametric test that accounts for the skewed distribution of the data and looks at the ranking order of the number of times a politician sends a particular type of tweet, but, unlike the Mann Whitney test, it can accommodate more than two groups.

§ 5.4 Results

I firstly analysed the association between gender and tweet content, for which I conducted Mann-Whitney tests for each of the 15 'types' of tweet, for all three time periods, which resulted in a total of 45 tests. The results are presented in Table 5.2, and show that some gender differences were present in the three time periods. For example, men sent more attack tweets than did women during each time period, but this effect only reached the significance level of .05 during the election campaign ($p < .01$). Women sent more issue tweets and endorsement tweets than men politicians, but only during the election campaign: a marginally significant (issue tweets: $p = .059$) and significant effect (endorsement tweets: $p < .001$). The reverse effect can be observed in the number of personal tweets: women politicians sent significantly more personal tweets during the winter period 2017 and summer period 2018 (both $p < .01$), but not significantly more during the election ($p = .424$). The only significant gender difference that remained somewhat constant throughout the three time periods is observable in user interaction tweets (women+), a significant effect during the two non-election

periods and marginally significant effect during the election ($p = .071$).

Table 5.2 Gender comparisons in relation to 'Tweet Content'

Tweet type	Election period 2017				Winter period 2017				Summer period 2018			
	W	z	r	p	W	Z	r	p	W	Z	r	p
User Interaction	11196	1.803	.100	.071	14540	2.958	.150	.003	10160	2.983	.165	.003
Political issues	11147	1.892	.105	.059	18484	-.894	-.045	.371	12400	.226	.013	.821
Attack	15082	-3.112	-.172	.002	17900	-.385	-.020	.700	12705	-.162	-.009	.871
Campaigning	12235	.489	.027	.625	18446	-1.714	-.008	.086	12124	1.375	.076	.169
Visits	12426	.507	.028	.612	17924	-.437	-.022	.662	12932	-.466	-.026	.641
Personal	13102	.799	.044	.424	15896	2.716	.138	.007	11014	2.478	.137	.013
Const. promotion	13345	-1.550	-.086	.121	17643	-.155	-.008	.877	14678	-3.091	-.171	.002
Mobilisation	11394	1.794	.099	.073	17788	-.662	-.034	.508	12966	-.914	-.051	.361
Charity	12630	.012	.001	.990	17636	-.166	-.008	.868	12530	.099	.005	.921
News	13083	-1.073	-.059	.283	17693	-.228	-.012	.820	12652	-.116	-.006	.907
Media	13124	-1.053	.058	.292	17149	.625	.032	.532	13091	-.981	-.054	.327
Reflection	13856	-1.688	-.093	.091	x	x	x	x	12409	.630	.035	.528
Memorial service	x	x	x	x	17794	-.433	-.022	.665	12470	.604	.033	.546
Endorsement	10742	3.88	.215	<.001	17277	.890	.045	.374	12772	-1.358	-.075	.175
Update	12628	.048	.003	.961	18318	-2.547	-.129	.012	12268	.849	.047	.396

Note. A positive z-value and r-value indicates that women sent more tweets of the tweet type concerned, whereas a negative value indicates that men sent more tweets of the tweet type concerned, and the higher the z-value, the greater the frequency of women or men politicians sending particular types of tweets.

These results seem to accord with the existing literature suggesting that women politicians are more interactive and personal in their communication than are men politicians (Banwart and McKinney, 2005; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016). Regarding interaction tweets, my findings seem to correspond with research concluding that women politicians are more interactive than are men politicians (Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016), though in my study this effect is more pronounced during the two non-election periods than during the election campaign. Respecting personal tweets, the current findings also support previous research showing that women politicians send more personal tweets (Banwart and McKinney, 2005), but expand upon it by observing that this effect is situational, since this effect was only present during the two non-election periods. Perhaps women decreased their number of personal tweets during the election campaign relative to the two non-election periods, and instead focused more on political issues, whereas men politicians increased their number of personal tweets during the election campaign relative to the two non-election periods, though not more so than women politicians. I propose that these findings are explicable by men politicians perhaps sending more personal tweets during the election campaign than they would ordinarily in an attempt to appear relatable (Coleman, 2006), while women politicians might have felt a greater need to put across their political issues, since the media gives them less issue-coverage and devotes more attention to their personal attributes, experiences, and physical appearances (Heldman, Carroll and Olson, 2005; Ross, 2010; Van Der Pas and Aaldering, 2020). Women politicians might also have deemed that a greater emphasis on their personality would be of lesser effect, since it could have made them look less credible, which seems to agree with McGregor (2018), who conducted an experimental study on the effects of personalisation on Twitter and showed that such a personalised strategy ‘worked’ better for men politicians than it did for women politicians.²⁷ It should also be noted that gender did not play a determining role in many other tweet types. Specifically, no significant gender differences could be observed throughout the three time periods in tweets concerning campaigning, visits, charity, news, media, and

²⁷ To be more specific, McGregor (2018) found that when men politicians sent personalised messages on Twitter it generated a heightened sense of social presence and parasocial interaction, regardless of any shared partisan identity with the respondents, whereas only women politicians with a shared-party status were able to elicit the same feelings from respondents when sending personalised tweets.

memorial services, which suggests that only sometimes is gender associated with certain aspects of politicians' Twitter communication.

I then investigated the association between political party and tweet content for each time period, for which I performed 45 Mann-Whitney tests. The results are shown in Table 5.3, and indicate that, like gender differences, party differences were highly contingent upon the political context. Conservative politicians sent significantly more political issue tweets than did Labour politicians, but only during the winter period 2017 ($p = .002$). This finding may be attributable to Conservative politicians tweeting more on political issues than did Labour politicians because of the Conservatives' incumbent status, as incumbent politicians can simply focus on their declared record of accomplishment (Denton *et al.*, 2019). Besides, Labour politicians sent more endorsement tweets across the three time periods, but this effect only reached significance levels during the election campaign ($p < .001$), but not during the winter period 2017 ($p = .217$), or during the summer period 2018 ($p = .828$). Perhaps tweeting endorsements was part of Labour's strategy to energise voters (Walsh, 2017), or it could be ascribed to their challenging status and a consequently greater need to demonstrate their popularity among voters than Conservatives, whose expectation was election victory (Tonge, Leston-Bandeira and Wilks-Heeg, 2018). The effect did perhaps not reach the significance level of .05 during the winter and summer periods, because of the low number of endorsement tweets overall during these periods ($n = 18$ and $n = 5$, respectively).

Table 5.3 Party comparisons in relation to 'Tweet Content'

Tweet type	Election period 2017				Winter period 2017				Summer period 2018			
	<i>W</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
User Interaction	11286	2.295	.127	.022	16212	2.569	.130	.010	10394	2.901	.160	.004
Political issues	13050	.133	.007	.895	24144	-4.753	-.241	.002	14078	-1.574	-.087	.115
Attack	10568	3.230	.180	.001	10372	8.743	.443	<.001	7878	6.626	.366	<.001
Campaigning	14618	-1.742	-.096	.081	18054	1.564	.079	.118	12042	2.152	.119	.031
Visits	13877	-1.697	-.094	.090	22969	-4.412	-.224	.010	16628	-5.158	-.285	<.001
Personal	13916	-1.278	-.071	.201	17043	2.981	.151	.003	12298	.740	.041	.459
Const. prom.	14548	-2.983	-.165	.003	19840	-1.302	-.066	.193	15095	-3.410	-.189	<.001
Mobilisation	11781	1.946	.108	.052	18848	.169	.009	.866	12640	.314	.017	.753
Charity	12840	.618	.034	.537	19649	-1.194	-.061	.233	13980	-2.129	-.118	.033
News	13056	.238	.013	.812	18624	.408	.021	.683	12874	-.179	-.010	.858
Media	13441	-.603	-.033	.547	18171	1.153	.058	.249	13296	-1.012	-.056	.312
Reflection	14114	-1.294	-.072	.194	x	x	x	x	12418	1.246	.069	.213
Memorial service	x	x	x	x	19209	-.478	-.024	.633	12874	-.533	-.029	.594
Endorsement	10620	.5094	.282	<.001	18539	1.234	.063	.217	12741	.217	.012	.828
Update	13440	-1.573	-.087	.116	19027	-.355	-.018	.723	12881	-.291	-.016	.771

Note. A positive z-value and r-value indicates that Labour politicians sent more tweets of the tweet type concerned, whereas a negative value indicates that Conservative politicians sent more tweets of the tweet type concerned, and the higher the z-value, the greater the frequency of Labour or Conservative politicians sending particular types of tweets.

Further, Conservative politicians sent marginally significantly more campaign-related tweets during the election campaign ($p = .081$), while Labour politicians sent more campaigning tweets during the summer period 2018 ($p < .05$). This could be explained by the notion that Labour politicians, as members of the opposition party, felt a greater need to campaign during non-election periods to attract the attention of potential supporters, while during the election campaign, Conservative politicians needed to show that they were not taking voters for ‘granted’. Further, Labour politicians sent more mobilisation tweets than did Conservative politicians across the three periods, but this effect only approached significance levels during the election campaign ($p = .052$). This appears representative of Labour’s overall campaign strategy during the 2017 General Election, when an effort was made to energise voters who had drifted from the Party by voting for other left-wing parties or by refraining altogether from voting, and accordingly much of Labour’s online communication was aimed at mobilising people by encouraging them to register to vote (Walsh, 2017). This finding is also in agreement with other research, which has shown that during elections, opposition and left-wing politicians post more mobilising content than do incumbents and politicians from other parties (Filimonov, Russmann and Svensson, 2016; Russmann, Svensson and Larsson, 2019). The effect did not reach significance levels during the two non-election periods ($p = .398$ and $p = .985$), which could be a result of the low number of mobilisation tweets during these periods ($n = 33$ and $n = 46$ respectively).²⁸

Some party differences remained consistent throughout the three time periods. Notably, Labour politicians sent significantly more attack tweets in each time period, a finding accordant with existing literature, which has suggested that challengers often adopt an ‘attacking style’ in which they criticise the incumbents’ record of accomplishment (Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019). Labour politicians also sent significantly more user interaction tweets than did Conservative politicians during each

²⁸ These low numbers signify a risk of making type II errors, that is, drawing the conclusion that there is no relationship. That Labour politicians sent more mobilisation tweets in the two non-election periods (winter period 2017 and summer period 2018), even when the number of such tweets is low, is suggestive of a relationship.

time period, which is in line with the finding that Labour politicians are generally more interactive than are Conservative politicians, as attested by previous research (Graham *et al.*, 2013 a), perhaps because the Party has a history of encouraging interactive practices (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011).

The results considered so far demonstrate that both gender and party were associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with the ways in which politicians constructed their tweets, but it is important to further investigate the combined influence of gender and party on politicians' tweet content. The finding that Labour and women politicians were more interactive than were Conservative and men politicians across the three time periods could be a result of the contribution of Labour women, who were possibly more interactive than any of the other groups of politicians. To ascertain this, Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to examine significant differences between the four groups of politicians (LabW, ConsW, LabM, ConsM). I performed a Kruskal-Wallis test for the 15 'types' of tweet to investigate the combined influence of gender and party during every time period (45 Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed in total). During the election campaign, the tests yielded significant results for user interaction, attack, visits, constituency promotion, and endorsement tweets. During the winter period 2017, the tests indicated a significant difference between the four groups in the sending of issue, attack, personal, user interaction, and visits tweets. Finally, for the summer period 2018, the tests showed a significant difference between the four groups of politicians in terms of attack, personal, user interaction, constituency promotion, and visits tweets. The full results, with test statistics, degrees of freedom, and *p* values are presented in Appendix C: 'Statistical results Kruskal-Wallis Omnibus test for tweet content'. The overall effects indicated differences between the four groups concerning some tweet categories, but did not precisely signify *which* groups differed significantly from each other. Post-hoc analyses by way of Dunn's tests were therefore conducted for the 15 tweet types, against which the Kruskal-Wallis tests pointed to a significant variance among the four groups, and the results are presented in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4 Four-way comparisons in relation to 'Tweet Content'

	Election period 2017				Winter period 2017				Summer period 2018			
	<i>LabW</i>	<i>ConsW</i>	<i>LabM</i>	<i>ConsM</i>	<i>LabW</i>	<i>ConsW</i>	<i>LabM</i>	<i>ConsM</i>	<i>LabW</i>	<i>ConsW</i>	<i>LabM</i>	<i>ConsM</i>
User Interaction	187,13a	149,98ab	162,04ab	151,09b	221,14a	206,23ab	197,40ab	172,64b	187,07a	172,09ab	165,80ab	137,89b
Political issues			x		183,09b	198,59 ^{ab}	154,70b	229,88a			x	
Attack	159,96ab	112,45c	194,24a	159,26b	221,18a	136,18b	254,62a	155,56b	174,83a	124,43b	201,52a	126,55b
Campaigning			x				x				x	
Visits	156,02b	183,65a	162,60ab	162,30ab	173,08b	229,86a	175,45b	211,42a	146,80b	208,41a	142,42b	189,69a
Personal			x		212,10a	195,71 ^{ab}	197,58ab	181,86b	170,75 ^{ab}	196,07a	162,36ab	149,97b
Const. prom.	150,73b	172,48ab	160,25ab	173,16a			x		143,31b	159,66ab	160,52ab	188,50a
Mobilisation			x				x				x	
Charity			x				x				x	
News			x				x				x	
Media			x				x				x	
Reflection attacks			x				x				x	
Memorial service			x				x				x	
Endorsement	192,64a	149,64b	164,14b	144,89b			x				x	
Update		x					x				x	

Groups of politicians with different subscripts (a, b, c) were statistically significantly different from one other ($p < .05$). Significance values have been adjusted with the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests. For fields marked with an 'x' the Kruskal-Wallis test did not indicate a significant difference between the four groups of politicians.

As can be derived from Table 5.4, some differences between the four groups of politicians persisted across the three time periods. For example, Labour women and men sent consistently more attack tweets than Conservative women and men, except for the election period where Labour women and Conservative men did not significantly differ in the number of attack tweets sent, perhaps because Conservative men increased their 'attack' tweets during the election campaign relative to the two non-election periods. I interpret this finding of Labour sending more attack tweets than Conservatives as a result of Labour's position in Opposition, since attacking is considered a typical challenger strategy. Indeed, an abundant amount of research has shown that incumbents are more likely to adopt a positive campaigning style, whereas challengers are more inclined to use a negative campaigning style and engage in attack (Benoit, 2004; Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014; Gainous and Wagner, 2014; Walter, Van Der Brug and Van Praag, 2014; Frechette and Ancu, 2017; Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017; Stromer-Galley *et al.*, 2018). Walter and her colleagues (2014) add that parties that do not hold office are more likely to make use of negative campaigning strategies, since they have to make a greater effort to persuade voters why they deserve to be in power. Political advertising research also finds that challengers send more attack messages than incumbents (Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019). Denton and colleagues (2019) argue that the central task of challengers is to persuade voters why change is needed, and they are therefore more likely to attack the record of the incumbents.

Additionally, I think that that it is common for challengers to attack the incumbent party because they can disapprove of the real-world impact of particular policies rather than simply a manifesto pledge which might never actually materialise. Indeed, in the attack tweets from Labour politicians, I could discern that they frequently criticised the Conservative party in relation to their policies. It is also noteworthy that Labour men, in particular, sent the most attack tweets throughout the three time periods, which could be explained by the dual influence of party and gender. For Labour men, as members of the opposition, an attacking style is common (Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019), while in general men being on the attack upholds those norms of masculinity which expect men to be tough and dominant, in opposition to the traditionally feminine norms which ascribe to women

warmth and friendliness (Dolan and Lynch, 2014). Further, it is interesting to note that Conservative men sent significantly more attack tweets than Conservative women during the election campaign, implying that for attack tweets, party applies a stronger influence on Labour politicians, whereas gender has a greater effect on Conservative politicians, as there was a closer congruence between Labour women and men in this respect than there was between Conservative women and men.

Further, Conservative women sent more 'visits' tweets than Labour women during the election campaign period. In 'visit' tweets, politicians reported on visits to local schools and businesses within their constituency, and previous research has suggested that women MPs are more constituency-oriented than men MPs (Campbell and Lovenduski, 2015), but my findings suggest that this does not necessarily apply to Labour women, who seemed more interested in tweeting 'campaigning' and 'user interaction' tweets. This difference between Labour women and Conservative women highlights the importance of not solely focusing on gender. During the two non-election periods, both Conservative women and men sent significantly more of 'visits' tweets than Labour women and men, which could be in part because they were recollecting visits made to business premises, which accords with their self-portrayal as the 'Party of Business' (The Conservative Party, 2020). The results further indicate that Labour women sent significantly more user interaction tweets than did Conservative men during each time period, while the relationships between the other groups of politicians in their use of user interaction tweets were all non-significant. While the two-way analysis (Mann-Whitney U tests) indicated a gender difference in 'user interaction' tweets (women+), which coincided with existing literature suggesting that women are more interactive than men politicians (Lawless, 2012; Meeks, 2013; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016), the four-way analysis shows that this gender difference is contingent on political party.

Other differences between the four groups of politicians arose only in certain periods. For example, Labour women sent significantly more endorsement tweets than any of the other three groups of politicians during the election campaign, while the other relationships between the other groups were all non-significant. This finding could be attributable to the dual influence of party and gender, since Labour women might have felt a greater need to show they receive support. However, during the

two non-election periods, no significant differences across the four groups of politicians were found, which could be a result of the low number of endorsement tweets during these periods, which is unsurprising because there is less of a need to send 'endorsement' tweets outside an election.

In relation to personal tweets, significant differences arose during the two non-election periods: during the winter period 2017, Labour women sent significantly more personal tweets than Conservative men, and during the summer period 2018, Conservative women sent more personal tweets than Conservative men. Again, these findings suggest that party has a stronger effect on Labour politicians and gender has a greater influence on Conservative politicians, since there was more mutuality in the Labour Party than in the Conservative Party. During the election campaign no significant differences were found, which could be attributable to Conservative men sending a higher number of personal tweets during the election campaign relative to the two non-election campaign, perhaps in an attempt to appear 'relatable', a notion I further discuss in *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*.

§ 5.5 Discussion

I decided to firstly calculate Mann-Whitney tests to study the salience of gender and party to tweet content, rather than only conducting the four-way Kruskal-Wallis analysis, because I wanted to demonstrate how focusing on gender or party alone, as has been done in most previous research, can obscure certain differences found in the four-way analysis. At the same time, two-way analyses can suggest gender or party differences, while they are in fact contingent upon each other. It was my aim to show that the four-way analysis refines the results obtained in the preceding two-way analysis. Some of the main effects of gender and party that were reported during the first iteration, were shown to be a result of differences between the four groups of politicians. For example, the Mann-Whitney tests had shown a gender and party difference in user interaction tweets across the three time periods (women+ and Lab+),²⁹ but the four-way analysis demonstrated that these effects were due to

²⁹ During the election campaign, the gender difference in 'user interaction' tweets is marginally significant ($p = .071$).

Labour women sending significantly more user interaction tweets than did Conservative men. Similarly, the first iteration of the analysis showed a gender (women+) and party (Lab+) difference in endorsement tweets during the election period, but the four-way analysis revealed that this effect could be attributed to Labour women sending more endorsement tweets than did all the other groups of politicians. This two-step approach therefore demonstrates the importance of analysing gender and party *in tandem*.

At first glance, some of the findings obtained in this chapter are in line with existing literature. For example, the finding that women politicians sent more user interaction tweets than men, accords with gendered communication patterns which suggest that due to traditional role divisions, women focus much more on connectedness, while men focus more on autonomy and separateness from others (Cross and Madson, 1997). Women's communication style is therefore more focused on the establishment and maintenance of relationships (Bate and Bowker, 1997), audience participation and creating connections with audience members (Campbell, 1973; Dow and Tonn, 1993). Further, the finding that women politicians sent more personal tweets than men politicians, corresponds with theories of women and men's differing communication styles. A 'feminine style' is generally considered to be a more personal communication style, whereas a 'masculine style' is generally deemed to be more directed at establishing control and status and more matter-of-fact and impersonal (Wood, 1994; Banwart and McKinney, 2005; Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2017; Jones, 2017). It is interesting to see that the gendered 'styles', which have been historically identified as part of analogue communication forms can be seen to be replicated, to some extent, in digital forms such as tweets.

So far, my results of gender and party largely accord with North American-based research, such as that of Meeks (2013), Evans *et al.* (2016), and Lawless (2012), who also found that women politicians were more likely to send user interaction and personal tweets than men politicians. However, my research adds a layer of nuance to the existing body of research, by analysing gender and party jointly and by analysing different time periods. First of all, during the four-way iteration of the analysis, the results demonstrated that the significant difference in user interaction tweets between women politicians and men politicians can largely be

attributed to a significant difference between Labour women and Conservative men. Secondly, North American studies indicated that women politicians sent more personal tweets than did men politicians, but the current analysis suggests that in the UK, this effect only emerged in the two periods after the campaign period.

A particular striking way in which my research findings deviate from those produced by North American scholars can be observed in the association of gender with attack tweets. North American studies have repeatedly shown that women politicians are more likely to attack than their male counterparts (Kahn, 1993; Evans and Clark, 2016; Evans, Brown and Wimberly, 2018). For example, Evans and colleagues (2016) found that women candidates spent more time attacking their opponents than did men candidates in the two months leading up to the 2012 House elections. In contrast, I did not find a significant difference between women and men politicians during the two non-election periods, while during the election campaign in fact, I found the opposite effect, with men politicians sending more attack tweets than women politicians. This is in line with the research of Ross and colleagues (2018), who also found that during the UK General Election 2015, men politicians were more likely to tweet negative and hostile content than women politicians. I suggest that this stark contrast between mine and other research on British politicians and research on North American politicians could be attributed to cultural factors. Some scholars suggest that the US political environment is a mostly negative one (see, for example, Fowler and Ridout, 2010), which creates an environment in which politicians do not shy away from brusqueness and incivility. Americans may be more used to attack messages, since the vast majority of national and state campaign ads are 'attack ads' and negative in nature (Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019; Phillips, 2019). Arguably, this general negative context had been exacerbated when Donald Trump was in office, who uses offensive and insulting language and who attacks his opponents directly and personally (Korostelina, 2017; Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019), which can further normalise an uncivil style of political conduct. In such a political environment, women politicians may be more comfortable or feel more compelled to go on the attack to show that they are 'tough enough' for politics. British politics, on the other hand, is not as negative as the US and British voters have traditionally been intolerant of attack politics. Pattie, Denver, Johns and Mitchell (2011), for example, investigated perceptions among Scottish voters of the campaign

tone during the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, and found that parties who used negative campaign tactics were perceived to be less likeable and voters were therefore less inclined to vote for them. Importantly, voters may be even less tolerant of negativity when it is communicated by women who may, in turn, be disproportionately punished for negative campaigning tactics (Herrnson, Lay and Stokes, 2003). Indeed, Krupnikov and Bauer (2014) find that women candidates are more likely to face a backlash from voters for going negative if the woman is perceived as the instigator of negativity and she is of a different party than the voter. Women are being disproportionately punished for negativity because it transgresses stereotypical understandings of femininity, since women are expected to be a 'positive force' against 'business-as-usual politics', which encompasses negative campaigning (Fox, 1997; Herrnson and Lucas, 2006). These expectations are rooted in gender stereotypes that suggest that women are generally perceived to be warmer, friendlier and more compassionate than men (Dolan and Lynch, 2014) and are therefore criticised if they deviate from such gender-based expectations (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993).

Apart from negative tactics potentially costing women politicians votes, British women politicians may refrain from attacking more than their male counterparts during the election campaign because they wish to avoid attracting hostility online. Unlike other social media platforms such as Facebook, where consent needs to be given in order for others to access messages, at least for private/personal pages, Twitter is a public platform to which anyone can subscribe to a user's Twitter feed.³⁰ This means that politicians can and are being followed by people with similar *and* opposing viewpoints (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012). Although it was beyond the scope of the current research to focus on the responses politicians received to their tweets, I nevertheless noted that politicians often received negative, derogatory, and hateful responses from the public, and politicians occasionally described cases of online abuse in their own tweets, which I will further discuss in *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*. Research has demonstrated that women politicians are much more prone to such online abuse, including sexist remarks, trolling, and

³⁰ Unless, that is, the user has adjusted their settings so that only particular users have access to their tweets, but this is an uncommon strategy among politicians during election campaigns, when they aim to reach as wide audience as possible.

threats, than are men politicians (Dhrodia, 2017; Macfarlane, 2018; Beltran *et al.*, 2020). Macfarlane (2018) finds that women candidates for the 2017 UK General Election received substantially more abuse than did men candidates, and since people generally disapprove of politicians employing negativity (Lau and Rovner, 2009), women might be particularly careful about what they tweet for fear of abusive responses and threats from other Twitter users.

The findings of the current chapter should be considered in the light of their methodological limitations. Firstly, the results from the current study hold for a single country – the United Kingdom - which means that they are not necessarily generalisable to other countries, since political context is an important determinant of politicians' communication practices. It is likely that studies conducted in other countries would generate different findings. For example, politicians in North America might send more attack tweets than politicians in the UK, because the U.S. political environment is generally a negative one (Fowler and Ridout, 2010). A second limitation results from the decision to focus on only politicians from the two main national parties, Labour and the Conservatives. On the one hand, this approach allowed me to perform direct comparative analyses according to gender and party distinctions and there are other justifications, which I set out in *§ 4.4 Data collection, description, and analysis*. However, this also means that the findings do not provide a full picture of the tweet content of all UK politicians, since it is unclear how other politicians, from parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru, and Green Party, used Twitter during and after the GE2017. It is conceivable that politicians from other parties used Twitter in different ways, since previous research has shown that smaller and fringe parties make more use of social media than do established parties (Ross, Bürger and Jansen, 2018; Southern and Lee, 2019), because they struggle to garner mainstream media coverage. This might result in politicians from smaller parties sending more interactive and mobilisation tweets than would politicians from established parties. While this is a limitation concerning diversity and generalizability, the benefits of focusing on the two major parties to enable comparisons without the complications of small-party skew are significant.

Some limitations also follow from the reliance of the current study on

observational data, in this case, tweets posted from the public accounts of the politicians in the sample. One limitation of observational data is access: the researcher can only study what is in front of them (Schubert, 1988). This means that I cannot be certain that the tweets actually originated in the imagination of the politicians themselves rather than being devised by, for example, political aides. Further, the use of observational data neither admits of answering the question of *why* politicians tweeted certain content nor explains *why* certain gender or party differences in their communication emerged. Lastly, the aim of the current research project was causal inference (King, et al., 1994) and in particular, to identify the influence of gender and party on politicians' communication on Twitter. However, it is unclear how far observational research findings are able to demonstrate causal relationships. This is because the use of observational data is subject to confounding biases which can lead to an overestimation or underestimation of these effects (Hammerton and Munafò, 2021). It is therefore uncertain that the pattern of findings reported in this chapter can be *solely* attributed to gender and party. The current study endeavoured to control for certain confounding factors by design, such as incumbency status (by selecting only MPs), but not for others, such as seat competitiveness, qualification bias, age, class, and personality, which could have affected the estimates.

§ 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has responded to the first research question, which asked to what extent gender and party were associated with politicians' tweet content both during and after the General Election campaign 2017. The findings showed that both gender and party are associated with what politicians tweet about in important ways, and notably, this chapter contributed something new to existing literature by tackling three major gaps therein. Firstly, by analysing gender and party jointly, the research has added a layer of nuance to the existing body of research. For example, the two-way iteration of analysis demonstrated a significant difference in user interaction tweets between women and men politicians, but the four-way analysis showed that this effect can largely be attributed to a significant difference between Labour *women* and Conservative *men*. Secondly, research on politicians' Twitter behaviour has predominantly been performed during election campaigns, thereby providing an incomplete picture of how politicians behave on Twitter. This chapter has focused on

an election campaign as well as two non-election periods, which has enabled me to draw the conclusion that gender and party differences were highly contextual, with some differences emerging solely in the campaign period, and others appearing only outside this period. Finally, by focusing on how British politicians are communicating on Twitter, this chapter has to an extent remedied another shortcoming of the extant literature in that most contemporary research on politicians' use of Twitter has been set within the North American political landscape, which provides a rather partial picture of how politicians are utilising Twitter. Importantly, the findings of this chapter suggested that the gender and party differences in Twitter communication observed in North America studies, which have thus far dominated the field of political communication, are not consistent with those generated by a British-focused study, such as that which I have conducted. The following chapters will further analyse tweets that included a political issue (Chapter 6) and personal tweets (Chapter 7).

Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues

This chapter sets out to answer the second research question: 'To what extent were gender and party associated with politicians' discussion of political issues on Twitter during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?' In particular, this chapter asks whether, and if so how, gender and party, both separately and together, were associated with the *quantity* of politicians' tweets on certain political issues as well as the *tone*, *focus*, and *orientation* of their discussion of these issues. A quantitative content analysis was first performed to study the number of tweets which concerned a political issue. Subsequently, a qualitative thematic analysis was carried out to explore more thoroughly the content of a sub-sample of 388 tweets, all of which considered one of five political issues: Brexit, the economy, education, the environment, and gender and sexism-related matters. The purpose of this second analysis was to explore whether the four groups of politicians differed in the tone, focus, and orientation of their discussion of these tweets. Together, these two analyses offer a sophisticated understanding of how party and gender were associated with politicians' discussion of political issues. This chapter is structured as follows: the next two sub-sections contextualise the two analyses and describe the data and basic frequencies of the complete datasets of 12,000 tweets in total. The analytical approach is afterward outlined, which employs the aggregated, adjusted datasets with the individual politician as the unit of analysis. Then, the results of the content analysis are presented, after which is a brief consideration of the analytical method of the thematic analysis and the results thereof. The discussion and conclusion reflect upon the combined results of the content and thematic analysis, which bring the chapter to a close.

§ 6.1 Context

The first analysis considers whether, and if so how, party and gender were related to the kinds of political issues politicians chose to confront on Twitter. Politicians' issue emphasis on Twitter holds a prominent place in the field of political communication (Niven and Zilber, 2001; Stier *et al.*, 2018). I had manually coded three datasets, each containing 4,000 tweets (12,000 tweets in total), stratified along gender and party lines (each dataset comprised 1,000 tweets from LabW, ConsW, LabM, and ConsM). Each of these tweets were coded for the variable 'political issue', which

signified the presence of a political issue in a tweet, such as Brexit, the economy, health and care or the environment. The variable consisted of 13 issue categories, plus a miscellaneous one, to which tweets were ascribed when they mentioned a political issue that did not fit in the other 13 categories. All 12,000 tweets were coded for the variable 'political issue', independently of the variable 'tweet content', which was the focus of the previous chapter. This means that all types of tweets (campaign-related, user interaction, political issue tweets) were coded for the presence of a political issue. A total of 5,589 tweets out of the 12,000 tweets (47%) were coded for as inclusive of a political issue, and these tweets formed the basis of the content analysis in this chapter.

Of these 5,589 tweets containing a political issue, only a relatively small number of which were sent during the election campaign (1,170 tweets) when compared to the two non-election periods (2,383 tweets in the second period, and 2,036 in the third). A smaller proportion of tweets that includes a political issue during the election campaign period corresponds with other research, including a study by Stier et al. (2018), who analysed political candidates' tweets during the German federal election of 2013, and noted that most tweets concerned local campaigning and campaign events, rather than wider discussions of political issues. As discussed in the previous chapter (see § 5.2 *Preliminary description and frequencies*), there are at least two potential explanations for these findings. Firstly, during the election campaign, politicians tended to send tweets representative of their efforts to achieve (re-)election, such as those in which the politician recalled speaking at events or canvassing door-to-door. Secondly, I randomly selected 4,000 tweets from three datasets of differing sizes and therefore, it might be that politicians sent the same number of issue tweets during the three time periods, but in the first period, this number is augmented by a large number of campaign and attack tweets, which would signify that fewer issue tweets were sent only because politicians were producing *more* tweets of another sort, resulting in a higher overall number of tweets during the election campaign.

Further, because the previous chapter discerned not many gender or party difference in the extent to which politicians tweeted about political issues, though in the second time period (winter 2017) Conservative men sent more issue tweets than

Labour women and men, a fuller consideration of any correspondence between gender and political issue is made in this chapter. As highlighted in the theoretical framework, this is a relevant research question, since gender issue ownership theory propounds that women candidates are frequently thought better able to handle supposedly 'feminine' issues, while men candidates are often considered superior at dealing with putatively 'masculine' issues (Herrnson, Lay and Stokes, 2003), assumptions which are reinforced by news media covering 'masculine' issue in such a way that associates them with men politicians, and likewise, 'feminine' issues are often linked to women politicians (Ross *et al.*, 2013). Besides, research into candidates' online strategies and the issues that they tackle yield varying results, which could be due to differing methodological approaches or alternative ways of selecting and coding tweets. Further still, existing literature is heavily dominated by North American studies (Meeks, 2013; Lee and Lim, 2016; for example, Evans, Brown and Wimberly, 2018).

The thematic analysis subsequently examined a sub-sample of 388 political issue tweets as identified in the manual content analysis, to determine if the four groups of politicians differed in their tone, focus, and orientation when referring to political issues. This sub-sample constituted tweets of five political issues: Brexit, the economy, education, the environment, and gender and sexism-related matters. These five issues were selected because they represent a balance of so-called feminine issues (education and gender/sexism) and supposedly masculine issues (Brexit and the economy), alongside a more neutral issue (the environment). While the environment is sometimes considered of more interest to women in certain countries, this does not seem to be the case for the United Kingdom, where leading environmentalists include women *and* men (among the more well-known of the latter are Bob Watson, George Monbiot, Jonathan Porritt, and David Attenborough). Furthermore, although the Green Party has only one MP and she is a woman (Caroline Lucas), the Party itself now has a woman-man co-leadership. The sample also represents an even mix of issues at which the Labour Party and the Conservative Party are traditionally considered superior, since the Labour Party, as a left-wing party, is deemed to be better able at handling education (Seeburg, 2017) and gender and sexism (Celis and Erzeel, 2015), while the Conservative Party is thought more able to take care of Brexit-related matters (Dommett, 2015) and the

economy (Ball, 2014). Again, environmental issues are thought to be a multi-party concern (Carter, 2006). To avoid having a sample dominated by several tweets sent by a few politicians, I selected tweets at the level of the individual politician rather than the individual tweet, which means that for each issue, I randomly selected 80 tweets from a stratified sample of 80 individual politicians, 20 from each of the four groups of politicians. Because only 17 individual Conservative men tweeted concerning gender and sexism issues, I randomly selected one tweet from 17 individual politicians of each group to permit a reasonable comparison between their remarks on such issues. This approach resulted in a sample of 80 tweets about Brexit, the economy, education, and the environment, and 68 tweets concerning gender and sexism (388 tweets in total). The following section provides a preliminary description of the data.

§ 6.2 Preliminary description and frequencies

Table 6.1 shows that, in general, the political issues mentioned most frequently by politicians were Brexit, the economy, health and care, transport, and the environment. The least-discussed issues that were coded include local concerns³¹ and immigration. The economy was widely alluded to across the three time periods, but the other kinds of issues upon which politicians commented varied across the three time periods, as during the election campaign, the most common issues talked of was health and care, while in the winter period of 2017, concerns such as Brexit, and the environment took precedence in politicians' tweets. In the summer period of 2018, politicians mostly focused on transport, Brexit, and health and care. These findings suggest that to some extent, politicians tweeted on the same topics of interest to the news media at that time (Deacon *et al.*, 2017). However, politicians also used Twitter to further their own issue agendas, independent of salient issues or news media trends. For example, politicians gave prominence to issues such as the environment and transport, which were not much covered in the news media around that time (Deacon *et al.*, 2017). The most common political issues discerned in politicians' tweets will now be discussed in turn.

³¹ The low number of local issue tweets can at least partly be explained by coding decisions: tweets were only coded as local issues if the issue was constituency-specific and could not be related to one of the main issue categories. For example, if a tweet concerned jobs in the constituency, the tweet was coded as an economy issue, but a tweet concerning the opening of a local shop or the closure of a community centre or post office was coded as a local issue.

Table 6.1 Frequencies and percentages of political issue tweets

Political issue	Election n (%)	Winter 2017 n (%)	Summer 2018 n (%)	Total n (%)
Brexit	140 (12)	471 (19.8)	269 (13.2)	880 (15.7)
Economy and taxes	174 (14.9)	351 (14.7)	211 (10.4)	736 (13.2)
Health and care	181 (15.5)	240 (10.1)	226 (11.1)	647 (11.6)
Transport	67 (5.7)	150 (6.3)	325 (16)	542 (9.7)
Environment	111 (9.5)	267 (11.2)	133 (6.5)	511 (9.1)
Sexism/gender	65 (5.6)	151 (6.3)	204 (10)	420 (7.5)
Foreign policy, Military, and Defence	77 (6.6)	152 (6.4)	99 (4.9)	328 (5.9)
Crime, Justice and Security	85 (7.3)	105 (4.4)	128 (6.3)	318 (5.7)
Education	115 (9.8)	89 (3.7)	93 (4.6)	297 (5.3)
Miscellaneous	42 (3.6)	88 (3.7)	88 (4.3)	218 (3.9)
Welfare, Poverty, and Pensions	54 (4.6)	164 (6.9)	56 (2.8)	274 (4.9)
Housing	28 (2.4)	78 (3.3)	69 (3.4)	175 (3.1)
Local	15 (1.3)	46 (1.9)	83 (4.1)	144 (2.6)
Immigration	16 (1.4)	31 (1.3)	52 (2.6)	99 (1.8)
Total (%)	1,170 (100)	2,383 (100)	2,036 (100)	5,589 (100)

Note. Political issues are listed in descending order by the total number of tweets, as shown in the final column.

Percentages are column percentages and are rounded to one decimal.

Brexit was in general the most widely discussed issue, comprising almost 16% of politicians' issue-related tweets, which was expected, since the election, as James Cleverly (ConsM) observes in a tweet (see Figure 6.1), has often been called the 'Brexit election' (Heath and Goodwin, 2017), while after the campaign, Brexit naturally remained a salient issue in British political debate. In Brexit-related tweets, politicians considered the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, the Brexit negotiations, and future relations with EU countries. Two representative examples of Brexit-tweets were provided by Angela Smith (LabW) and the aforementioned Cleverly; see Figure 6.1. Smith informed her audience that she had registered her support for an amendment that would give MPs a vote on any Brexit deal, while Cleverly asserted that the election had always been about the fulfilment of Brexit and securing a good deal for the UK, while referring by way of the hashtag #bbcqt to the BBC's *Question Time Election Special*, in which then Conservative leader Theresa May and then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn faced questions from an audience in York, and which was being broadcast as Cleverly's tweet was sent.



Angela Smith 
@angelasmithmp

Already signed up to this crucially important amendment.

 People's Vote HQ  @peoplesvote_hq · 1 Dec 2017
Open Britain is launching our #YesTo7 campaign, supporting amendment 7 in the EU Withdrawal bill.
If Amendment 7 is passed, MPs would be given a meaningful vote on any Brexit deal.
Write to your MP now & say #YesTo7 open-britain.co.uk/email_your_mp Please RT:



5:55 pm · 1 Dec 2017 · Twitter for iPad

23 Retweets 29 Likes



James Cleverly 
@JamesCleverly

This election was always about delivering Brexit and getting a good deal for the UK. #bbcqt

9:35 pm · 2 Jun 2017 · Twitter for iPad

21 Retweets 42 Likes

Figure 6.1 Examples of 'Brexit' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Angela Smith, Labour woman (left) and James Cleverly, Conservative man (right)

After Brexit, the politicians studied were concerned mostly with the economy (13%), which is again unsurprising, since the British public has long deemed the economy an important influence of their voting intentions (Corbett, 2016). In economy-related tweets, politicians discussed, for example, the deficit, (un)employment, taxation, and the Budget. Figure 6.2 has two examples of typical economy-related tweets. While Matthew Offord (ConsM) boasted about his party apparently managing to reduce the deficit by three quarters in seven years.

Matthew Offord MP @Offord4Hendon

Under the Conservatives the deficit is being cut, helping to keep our economy strong #Budget2017

Since 2010 we have cut the deficit by over three quarters.

Conservatives

1:56 pm · 22 Nov 2017 · Twitter Web Client

3 Retweets

Barry Sheerman MP @BarrySheerman

Corporation tax rates are significantly lower in Britain than in many other countries @BBCr4today

7:55 a.m. · 10 mei 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

1 Retweet

Figure 6.2 Examples of 'economy' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Matthew Offord, Conservative man (left) and Barry Sheerman, Labour man (right)

Another popular matter of interest to politicians was health and care, with nearly 12% of all issue tweets related to this subject. Health and care-related tweets were generally concerned with an aspect of the National Health Service (NHS) – its funding, for example. Figure 6.3 has two illustrative examples of health and care-related tweets, as sent by Preet Kaur Gill (LabW) and Victoria Prentis (ConsW), who both included a video of themselves speaking in the House of Commons. Gill tweeted in opposition to the privatisation of the NHS, while Prentis shared a question directed to the Secretary of State for Health, in which she communicates her expectation of an increased availability of services England-wide for 'people with obesity'.

Preet Kaur Gill MP @PreetKGillMP

The issue of privatisation within the NHS is both an important and an emotive one. I believe in a publicly owned NHS, free at the point of delivery, but the creeping privatisation of services poses a very real threat to that most essential of principles. (2/2)

2017 MANIFESTO LABOUR PROMISED IMMEDIATE INVESTMENT IN OUR NHS

2:17 | 436 views

3:22 am · 5 Jun 2018 from Lambeth, London · Twitter for iPhone

11 Retweets 26 Likes

Victoria Prentis @VictoriaPrentis

Just asked the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to develop more widely available services across England for people with obesity. @DHScgovuk @Jeremy_Hunt @OHA_updates

0:40 | 135 views

4:39 pm · 8 May 2018 · Twitter Web Client

2 Retweets 2 Likes

Figure 6.3 Examples of 'health and care' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Preet Kaur Gill, Labour woman (left), and Victoria Prentis, Conservative woman (right)

Transport-related tweets, which generally concerned the development of local and national transport systems and infrastructure such as railways, bus services, and airports, comprised nearly 10% of politicians' issue tweets. Figure 6.4 presents examples of transport-related tweets by David Crausby (LabM) and Stephen Hammond (ConsM). Both politicians referred to transport issues local to their own constituencies: Crausby's tweet concerned the need for 'good quality' train and bus services for Greater Manchester, and by including a video message by the Department for Transport promoting their improvements to local roads countrywide, seems to be offering them a fairly unsubtle suggestion, while Hammond in his own embedded video declared that he will continue his 'fight for local transport improvements', should he be re-elected.

 **David Crausby** 
@DavidCrausby

One thing that would really help congestion around Greater Manchester - good quality train and bus services

 **Dept for Transport #StayHomeSaveLives**  @transportgovuk · 17 May 2018
We're working to improve journeys on local roads by tackling congestion and making it easier to get around. Find out more: gov.uk/dft

 0:32 4.4K views

2:10 pm · 17 May 2018 · Twitter Web Client

10 Likes

 **Stephen Hammond MP** 
@S_Hammond

I know how important transport is to people across our area. If re-elected I will continue to fight for local transport improvements.

 0:47 543 views

6:08 pm · 29 May 2017 · Twitter for Android

4 Retweets 8 Likes

Figure 6.4 Examples of 'transport' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by David Crausby, Labour man (left) and Stephen Hammond, Conservative man (right)

In another 9% of tweets, politicians thought on topics related to the environment, including climate change, air and water quality/pollution, and animal welfare/rights, among the latter being the ban on fox-hunting. Figure 6.5 gives an example of a tweet concerning the environment, this one sent by Kate Green (LabW), who vowed to 'fight for clean air in Stretford and Urmston' if re-elected for that constituency.

Kate Green 
 @KateGreenSU

If re-elected on 8th June I will continue to fight for clean air in Salford and Urmston: theguardian.com/environment/20... #airpollution #AirQuality

UK government sued for third time over illegal air pollution fr... Environmental lawyers who have defeated ministers twice return to court in a bid to remove 'major flaws' from air qualit... theguardian.com

5:20 pm · 31 May 2017 · Twitter Web Client

12 Retweets 15 Likes

Royston Smith MP 
 @Royston_Smith

I was opposed last time fox hunting was discussed and remain opposed now. If there was a vote I would vote against repealing the Hunting Act

10:08 a.m. · 13 mei 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

Figure 6.5 Examples of 'environment' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Kate Green, Labour woman (left) and Royston Smith, Conservative man (right)

Gender and sexism-related tweets comprised 7.5% of politicians' issue tweets, and concerned topics such as women's rights, domestic violence, the gender pay gap, gendered discrimination, and women's representation in politics and business. A representative example is provided by Karin Smyth (LabW) (see Figure 6.6), whose tweet was related to abortion rights, as became clear from her use of #MyPledgeHerChoice, which refers to a campaign launched shortly before the 2017 General Election by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, committed to preserving clinical access to and funding for abortions for all UK women, resisting parliamentary attacks on abortion rights, and supporting measures to decriminalise abortion.

Karin Smyth MP 
 @karinsmyth

If elected, I will stand up for a woman's right to choose #MyPledgeHerChoice

IF ELECTED, I WILL STAND UP FOR A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE

MyPledgeHerChoice.org

7:00 pm · 5 Jun 2017 · TweetDeck

17 Retweets 42 Likes

Lucy Allan MP 
 @lucyallan

Attitudes to women and girls promote a culture in which it is ok to trade women like commodities and blame victims." goo.gl/uYQKZO

10:03 p.m. · 17 mei 2017 · Twitter Web Client

3 Retweets 4 Vind-ik-leuks

Figure 6.6 Examples of 'gender and sexism' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Karin Smyth, Labour woman (left) and Lucy Allan, Conservative woman (right)

Finally, in tweets concerned with crime, justice, and security, which made up 5.7% of issue-related tweets, politicians considered topics such as prisons, drugs, theft, human trafficking, law and order, and the police. Figure 6.7 gives two examples as sent by Caroline Nokes (ConsW) and Liz Truss (ConsW). Nokes in a tweet on human trafficking highlighted her own contribution by mentioning her pride at having served on a Bill Committee for the Modern Slavery Act, a kind of self-attribution that will be discussed more fully in the next chapter (*Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*). Truss tweeted in relation to crime more generally, by suggesting that her Party leader was responsible for a decrease in crime rates while Home Secretary. The practice of name-checking party leaders will be further expounded in the thematic analysis later in this chapter.



Figure 6.7 Examples of ‘crime, justice, and security’ tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Caroline Nokes, Conservative woman (left) and Liz Truss, Conservative woman (right)

§ 6.3 Analytical approach to Content Analysis

A similar analytical approach was utilised as in the previous chapter and the data were investigated in two steps. Firstly, Mann-Whitney tests were performed to investigate gender and party differences separately for each of the 13 political issue

categories were identified in the manual content analysis. As highlighted in the methodology chapter, the Mann-Whitney test is a non-parametric two-sample test that calculates if the observations of two groups differ from each other, looking at the ranking order of the number of times a politician sends a particular political issue. Secondly, Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to examine significant differences between the four groups of politicians (LabW, ConsW, LabM, ConsM) in their discussion of political issues. Like the Mann-Whitney test, the Kruskal-Wallis test also looks at ranking orders, but is able to compare more than two groups.

§ 6.4 Results Content Analysis

I first conducted statistical tests to investigate gender differences for each of 13 political issue categories and the results are presented in Table 6.2, which suggest that gender differences in political issues were contextual. During the election, the only difference could be observed in the discussion of sexism and gender issues (women+), a difference that arose during the two non-election periods as well. In the periods after the campaign, however, women politicians also sent more tweets related to health and care issues than men politicians, whereas men politicians tweeted significantly more on foreign policy, military and defence issues (winter 2017 and summer 2018) and Brexit (summer 2018) than women politicians. These results suggest that, during the election campaign, women and men politicians did not campaign on different issues, whereas in non-election periods, they tended to tweet slightly more in accordance with their 'strength' issues, since health and care are considered to be 'feminine' in nature, whereas foreign policy issues are deemed to be 'masculine'. It should also be noted that there were no significant gender differences across the three time periods in tweets related to the economy and taxes, immigration, education, housing, welfare and poverty, the environment, transport, 'crime, justice and security', and local issues. In this sense, my findings are in line with existing research on campaign communication, which has found that women and men politicians do not differ in their issue frequency, because they both emphasise a wide range of issues (Niven and Zilber, 2001; Dolan, 2005), but also extends it, by suggesting that in non-election campaigns, women and men politicians seem to capitalise slightly more upon their 'strength' issues.

Table 6.2 Gender comparisons in relation to 'Political Issues'

Political issue	Election period 2017				Winter period 2017				Summer period 2018			
	W	z	r	p	U	Z	r	p	U	Z	r	p
Brexit	8131	-.677	-.042	.499	14169	-.625	-.034	.532	12480	-3.350	-.195	< .001
Economy etc.*	8451	-1.272	-.079	.203	14396	-.927	-.050	.354	10950	-.875	-.051	.381
Health and care	7848.5	-.042	-.003	.967	11710	2.818	.151	.005	9021.5	2.295	.134	.022
Environment	7273	1.275	.080	.203	13766	-.150	-.008	.881	10197	.404	.024	.686
Transport	7696.5	.351	.022	.726	14496	-1.272	-.068	.203	10410	.004	< .001	.997
Sexism/gender	6837.5	2.626	.164	.009	11230	4.043	.217	<.001	8167	4.180	.243	< .000
Crime etc.**	8103	-.667	-.042	.505	13066	1.021	.055	.308	10741	-.607	-.035	.544
Foreign etc.***	8595	-2.056	-.128	.040	15118	-2.280	-.123	.023	12442	-4.199	-.244	<.000
Education	7355	1.062	.066	.288	13253	.833	.045	.405	10740	-.724	-.42	.469
Welfare/poverty	7615	.575	.036	.565	13468	.326	.018	.744	9933.5	1.191	.069	.234
Housing	7661.5	.590	.037	.555	13566	.193	.010	.847	10314	.239	.014	.811
Local	7871	-.214	-.013	.831	13714	-.109	-.006	.914	10634	-.450	< -.001	.653
Immigration	7927	-.469	-.029	.639	14244	-1.695	-.091	.090	10451	-.103	-.006	.918

Note. A positive z-value and r-value indicates that women sent more tweets of the tweet type concerned, whereas a negative value indicates that men sent

more tweets of the tweet type concerned, and the higher the z-value, the greater the frequency of women or men politicians sending particular types of

tweets. * Refers to the category 'Economy and taxes', * Refers to the category 'Crime, Justice and Security', ** Refers to the category 'Foreign policy,

Military, and Defence'; these terms have been abbreviated for formatting purposes.

I subsequently performed Mann-Whitney tests to investigate political party differences, and the results are presented in Table 6.3, and show that party differences in political issues were also contingent upon context, but in a different manner than gender differences. Whereas gender differences became slightly more pronounced during the two non-election periods, party differences, contrastingly, seem *more* pronounced during the election campaign, during which, it seems, politicians tweeted more in accordance with their 'strength' issues. In particular, during the election campaign, Labour politicians tweeted significantly more than Conservative politicians in relation to gender and sexism ($p < .001$), welfare and poverty ($p < .05$), health and care ($p < .01$), and marginally significantly more in relation to education ($p < .051$), all issues with which they are considered to be superior. Conservative politicians, on the other hand, tweeted more than Labour politicians on matters related to Brexit ($p < .001$), the economy and taxes ($p < .01$) and foreign policy, military and defence ($p < .01$), all of which are issues they are deemed to prioritise. These results seem to accord with 'party ownership theory', which posits that parties highlight those issues with which they are perceived to be particularly concerned. However, during the two periods after the election campaign, this effect becomes less pronounced. Labour politicians still tweeted more than Conservative politicians related to their 'strength' issues of gender and sexism ($p < .01$, winter 2017), welfare and poverty ($p < .001$, winter 2017 and $p < .05$, summer 2018), but not more in relation to health and care or education. Similarly, Conservatives kept tweeting more than Labour in relation to foreign policy ($p < .05$, summer 2018), but in the two periods after the election campaign, they no longer tweeted more than Labour in relation to Brexit or the economy and taxes. It is also noteworthy that during the two non-election periods some party differences emerged that run counter to party ownership theory: Labour politicians tweeted more in relation to 'crime, justice and security' issues ($p < .05$, winter 2017) and Conservatives tweeted more on the environment ($p < .000$, winter 2017 and $p < .05$, summer 2018). In the following section I will provide some further reflections as to why Labour and Conservative tweeted seemingly against their 'strength' issues outside the election campaign.

Table 6.3 Party comparisons in relation to 'Political Issues'

Political issue	Election period 2017				Winter period 2017				Summer period 2018			
	W	z	r	p	W	Z	r	p	W	Z	r	p
Brexit	10198	-4.673	-.292	< .000	14381	.688	-.037	.492	1066	-.411	-.024	.681
Economy etc.*	9355.5	-2.595	-.162	.009	15517	-.671	-.036	.502	11418	-1.637	-.095	.102
Health and care	6669	2.723	.170	.006	13743	1.680	.090	.093	9763.5	1.071	.062	.284
Environment	8037	.061	.004	.951	19166	-5.906	.318	< .000	11758	-2.515	-.146	.012
Transport	8228.5	-.434	-.027	.664	15654	-1.012	-.054	.312	10846	-.704	-.041	.482
Sexism/gender	6409	4.326	.270	< .000	13008	3.103	.167	.002	9535.5	1.633	.095	.102
Crime etc.**	7736	.783	.049	.434	13408	2.532	.136	.011	10306	.197	.011	.844
Foreign etc.***	9052.5	-2.608	-.163	.009	15388	-.639	-.034	.523	11409	-2.060	-.120	.039
Education	7183	1.950	.122	.051	14774	.364	.020	.716	9642.5	1.703	.099	.089
Welfare/poverty	7185	2.343	.146	.019	12132	4.494	.242	< .000	9516	2.229	.130	.026
Housing	7595.5	1.640	.102	.101	14366	1.131	.061	.258	9981.5	1.046	.061	.295
Local	8465	-1.942	-.121	.052	15329	-.753	-.040	.451	10908	-1.009	-.059	.313
Immigration	8035.5	.132	.008	.895	15283	-.895	-.048	.371	9868	1.472	.086	.141

Note. A positive z-value indicates that women sent more tweets of the tweet type concerned, whereas a negative value indicates that men sent more tweets of the tweet type concerned, and the higher the z-value, the greater the frequency of women or men politicians sending particular types of tweets. * Refers to the category 'Economy and taxes', * Refers to the category 'Crime, Justice and Security', ** Refers to the category 'Foreign policy, Military, and Defence'; these terms have been abbreviated for formatting purposes.

Firstly, it is interesting that Conservative politicians tweeted more on the environment than Labour politicians outside the election campaign, which could be because they wanted to counter claims they are uncaring about the environment. During the winter period 2017, the high number of environment-related tweets from Conservative MPs might be because they responded to a social media campaign that had accused the Conservatives of voting against an amendment to the EU Withdrawal Bill put forward by Green Party co-leader Caroline Lucas (Belam, 2017). Conservative MPs may have used Twitter in an attempt to 'set the record straight', responding that the UK's existing laws already recognise animal sentience,

exemplified by Heidi Allen's (ConsW) tweet: "For people concerned by the animals being sentinel beings issue - pls be reassured I and the Gov are totally in support. There was no need for a separate amdt [amendment] as @michaelgove had already committed to" (21 November 2017) and by Mims Davies' (ConsW) tweets: "Dispelling #fakenews good stuff by @HenrySmithUK who is also a vegetarian & committed animal welfare campaigner! <https://t.co/N82svgNDxK>" (22 November 2017).

Secondly, Labour politicians tweeted more in relation to 'crime, justice and security' than Conservative politicians during the winter period 2017, and one possible explanation for them doing so might be due to Labour's tweets in relation to cuts in policing funding announced in the autumn Budget statement on 22 November 2017. This is exemplified by Dan Carden's (LabM) tweet: "Just a week after outrageously claiming that police budgets were "protected", Commons figures reveal the Prime Minister has quietly slashed another £413million in funding for forces. #PMQs #Budget2017 <https://t.co/MErtK6yXSj>" (22 November 2017).

Thirdly, in comparison with Labour politicians, Conservatives tweeted more than Labour regarding Brexit during the election campaign, but not during the non-election periods. It is probable that Conservative politicians tweeted more regarding Brexit during the election campaign for strategic reasons, attempting to frame it as a Conservative issue, since the referendum resulted from a Conservative Party manifesto pledge, and the election, which *their* leader had called, was largely branded as the Brexit election. Therefore, they may have wanted to capitalise on their 'owned' issue of Brexit by framing the election as the 'Brexit election' and emphasising that only the Conservative Party would be in a position to ensure its successful fulfilment. Later in this chapter, in the qualitative analysis, I will further explore the differences in the tone and orientation of Brexit-related tweets, but for now it is interesting to note that in the two periods after the election campaign, this significant effect disappeared, and Conservatives no longer tweeted significantly more on Brexit than did Labour politicians. This might have been a conscious decision following the election result, which left the Conservatives short of the majority for which they had hoped, and which according to some, among them Michael Ashcroft, deputy chairman of the Conservative Party from 2005 – 2010, was partly because they had misjudged the level of support for this Brexit-centric strategy.

In his analysis, Ashcroft (2017), shows that when asked which issue was the most important facing the country, many voters deemed Brexit the top priority, but when asked which issue would impact them the most personally, they mentioned the NHS and the cost of living as being more important than Brexit. Ashcroft (2017) concludes that the Conservatives had perhaps overestimated the importance of Brexit to voters. Further, some have pointed out that by heavily focusing on Brexit, people who had voted 'Remain' felt neglected by May and the Conservatives (Curtice, 2017; Kavanagh, 2018).

Though the aforementioned results provide some interesting insights into politicians' Twitter behaviour, they are limited because they only focus on gender and party differences individually, but not together. Accordingly, Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to examine significant differences between the four groups of politicians (LabW, ConsW, LabM, ConsM). I performed a Kruskal-Wallis test for each political issue ($n = 13$) to investigate gender and party differences together. During the election period, the tests yielded significant results for Brexit, the economy and taxes, health and care, foreign policy, and gender and sexism. During the winter period 2017, the tests indicated a significant difference between the four groups for the issues of health and care, welfare, the environment and gender and sexism. Finally, during the summer period 2018, the tests yielded significance levels for the issues Brexit, foreign policy, the environment and gender and sexism. The full results are presented in Appendix C: 'Statistical results Kruskal-Wallis Omnibus test for political issues'. The overall effects demonstrate there were some differences between the four groups regarding some of the issues, but the results do not indicate *which* groups were significantly different from one another. Therefore, post-hoc analyses, in the manner of pairwise comparisons with adjusted p -values,³² were conducted for those issues where the Kruskal-Wallis tests indicated a significant difference among the four groups of politicians. The results of the post-hoc analyses are displayed in Table 6.4.

³² Significance values have been adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.

Table 6.4 Four-way comparisons in relation to 'Tweet Content'

	Election period 2017				Winter period 2017				Summer period 2018			
	LabW	ConsW	LabM	ConsM	LabW	ConsW	LabM	ConsM	LabW	ConsW	LabM	ConsM
Brexit	116.36c	142.70ab	111.42c	149.76a		x			128.77c	135.30bc	164.38ab	154.84 ^{bc}
Economy etc.*	<i>No significant differences at the .05 level</i>					x				x		
Health and care	<i>No significant differences at the .05 level</i>				191.84a	184.78 ^{ab}	170.31ab	161.13b		x		
Environment	x				150.88b	217.33a	147.12b	191.65a	<i>No significant differences at the .05 level</i>			
Transport	x					x				x		
Sexism/gender	148.92a	118.27bc	132.14ab	111.66c	201.96a	176.00 ^{ab}	169.24b	158.28b	164.56a	175.57a	141.30ab	129.47b
Crime etc.**	x					x			x			
Foreign etc.***	122.31b	118.24b	121.06b	146.00a		x			133.69b	121.00bc	151.12ab	167.68a
Education	x					x				x		
Welfare/poverty	x				187.18a	150.36b	192.70a	159.39b		x		
Housing	x					x				x		
Local	x					x				x		
Immigration	x									x		

Note. Groups of politicians with different subscripts (a, b, c) were statistically significantly different from one other ($p < .05$). It must be noted also that the Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a significant difference between the four groups of politicians in the use of 'economy and taxes' and 'health and care' tweets during the election campaign, and in the use of 'environment' tweets during the summer period 2018, but the post-hoc pairwise comparisons found only a marginally significant difference between Labour women (+) and Conservative men (-), while the relationships between all other groups were non-significant. Differences in results between the two tests can be attributed to the fact that these two comparison methods use dissimilar thresholds for testing significance levels. * Refers to the category 'Economy and taxes', * Refers to the category 'Crime, Justice and Security', ** Refers to the category 'Foreign policy, Military, and Defence'; these terms have been abbreviated for formatting purposes.

The results suggest that Labour women tweeted significantly more on welfare and poverty issues than did Conservative men during the winter period 2018, but not during the other two periods. Further, Labour women tweeted consistently more on gender and sexism issues than did Conservative men (and during winter 2017 more than LabM), but interestingly, during the summer period 2018, Conservative women also tweeted significantly more content related to gender and sexism than did Conservative men. I suggest that this finding shows that Conservative women capitalised on their gender-specific ‘strength’ issue, but only when the issue was made salient, such as during the summer period of 2018, when the Irish Abortion Referendum took place.

Importantly, the four-way and time-specific analyses problematised some of the differences found when gender and party were analysed separately. For example, the party difference that I observed in foreign policy related tweets (Cons+) during the election period, can largely be attributed to Conservative men, who tweeted more about foreign policy during the election than any other group of politicians. Further, related to sexism and gender-related tweets, the four-way analysis suggested that both the differences between the genders (women+) and parties (Lab+) were attributable to Labour women, who tweeted more on this issue than any other group of politicians. These results suggest that in some ways, women politicians tweeted more related to ‘feminine’ issues than men politicians, but mostly in the non-election periods, and party determined by *which* feminine issues they capitalised on. Labour women prioritised issues such as welfare and poverty, and gender and sexism, whereas Conservative women highlighted the environment. It is important to note that whilst the content analysis has provided us with some interesting insights into the ways gender and party influence politicians’ Twitter communication, it does not tell us anything about differences in the tone, focus, and orientation of the political issues being discussed. It is therefore important to have a closer look at the content and tone of political issue tweets and I therefore conducted a qualitative, thematic analysis on five smaller sub samples of tweets.

§ 6.5 Analytical approach Thematic Analysis

I followed the six phases devised by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarisation with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and, finally, 6) . This process is described in more detail in § 4.3.2 *Thematic Analysis*.

§ 6.6 Results Thematic Analysis

I first describe the findings for Brexit-related tweets, followed in turn by those concerning the economy and taxes, education, gender and sexism, and the environment.

§ 6.6.1 Brexit

The quantitative analysis indicated a significant party difference in the extent to which politicians tweeted about Brexit during the election campaign (Cons+), and the thematic analysis shed some further light on *how* Conservative and Labour politicians tweeted concerning Brexit. Firstly, the analysis indicated that Conservative politicians were apparently inclined to mention their Party leader, Theresa May, when tweeting about Brexit, whereas Labour politicians largely refrained from mentioning their Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Secondly, the analysis suggested that politicians' thoughts on Brexit mostly resembled news media coverage and the public debate in the lead-up to the referendum: dualistic, polarised, and sometimes oversimplified. Political scholars, among them Seaton (2016), have pointed out that referendums tend towards binary and Manichean thinking. Seaton (2016) observes that there was not much serious UK media reporting of the European Union, but coverage was largely restricted to stories of its supposed bureaucracy and stifling regulations, from which an apparently clean break could be achieved. Yet the complexities of leaving the EU have become all too clear following the referendum (Bulmer and Quaglia, 2018; Gamble, 2018). Both the Labour Party and Conservative Party had promised to accept the referendum result (The Conservative Party, 2017; The Labour Party, 2017), but the Twitter discussion of Brexit of the politicians included in the sample largely developed along party lines, with Conservatives mostly stressing the opportunities that Brexit promised and the necessity to respect 'the will of the people', while Labour politicians mostly emphasised the

negative consequences of (a hard) Brexit and what they believed to be the misguidedness of the Leave Campaign. This is an interesting finding, because the Brexit referendum, which had not been contested according to established party lines, illustrated clear divisions among the electorate, some of which overcut traditional political loyalties (Kavanagh, 2018). While the Leave vote was largely driven by right-wing populist Euroscepticism (Corbett, 2016), there was a parallel left-wing critique of the apparently undemocratic character of the EU, or its 'democratic deficit'. At the same time, the 'official' campaign for the UK to remain in the EU was led by a cross-party lobbying group. The various Brexit-related topics discerned in the tweets here studied will now be discussed in turn.

"[O]nly Theresa May should be leading the Brexit negotiations"³³: Name-checking party leaders

The dominant theme of Brexit-related tweets was the role of the party leader (22 tweets), almost all such tweets being sent by Conservative politicians. It is interesting to note that Conservative politicians seemed more likely to mention their Party leader, Theresa May, than were Labour politicians mentioning theirs, Jeremy Corbyn. By way of example, Liz Truss tweeted, "Clear only Theresa May should be leading the Brexit negotiations that start 11 days after election.#BattleForNumber10", (29 June 2017), and Stephen Kerr wrote, "Our Prime Minister has my full support as she works to get the best result out of leaving the EU. <https://t.co/LoXYiQnKfs>" (13 May 2018). Dawn Butler is the only Labour politician in the sample who directly showed support for her Party leader in relation to Brexit: "The difference between @jeremycorbyn and #TheresaMay is that JC has friends in EU and will therefore be in a better position to negotiate" (18 May 2017). Labour women did though name-check other Labour politicians both past and present in relation to Brexit, among them Keir Starmer (then Shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, and currently leader of the Labour Party since 4 April 2020), Chuka Umunna (then a Labour politician), and David Miliband (a Labour Party MP up to 2013 and from 2007-2010 Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs). Lyn Brown (LabW), for example, tweeted, "Sir Keir Starmer will

³³ Truss, L., 29 June 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/trussliz/status/869290365047767040>

take lead in face-to-face Brexit talks with EU's top negotiator if Labour win general election <https://t.co/HXvElxxqbJ>" (3 June 2017), and included a link to an *Independent* article on Starmer's Brexit intentions. Jenny Chapman meanwhile wrote, "Very much looking forward to hearing David Milliband's [sic] thoughts on Brexit today. Promises to be a thoughtful contribution" (14 May 2018).

These Labour women perhaps referred to these politicians rather than Corbyn because they seemed more vocal about Brexit, and in particular had adopted a stronger anti-Brexit stance in the news media than had Corbyn (BBC News, 2017a, 2019a; Mohdin, 2019). Whilst Corbyn was not much mentioned by Labour politicians in respect of any tweet issues, especially in comparison with Conservatives referring to Theresa May, Labour politicians seemed still more disinclined to acknowledge Corbyn when discussing Brexit. This could be explained by the respective levels of open support both party leaders received from their own MPs. The Conservative Party had united behind May's efforts to negotiate a good Brexit deal for the UK (Gamble, 2018), and had therefore built a 'Presidential-style' campaign, which centred around her rather than her party (Cowley & Kavanagh, 2018). Corbyn, alternatively, had been widely criticised throughout the election campaign for failing to deliver a clear and supportive case for remaining in the EU (Ford and Goodwin, 2017). Labour MPs repeatedly voiced their dissatisfaction with his leadership on this issue, which was further fuelled by a television interview in which Corbyn rated his desire to stay in the EU as a 7 or 7.5 out of 10 (Ford and Goodwin, 2017), and as a result several of his front-benchers resigned due to his apparently uncertain position on Europe (Gamble, 2018).

*"Brexit would have serious consequences"*³⁴: *The consequences of Brexit* Politicians in the sample also commonly tweeted their predictions of the consequences of Brexit, a theme that emerged from 19 tweets. It is unlikely that there will be general consensus on the effects of Brexit anytime soon, particularly the longer-term prospects (Gamble, 2018), but Conservative politicians in the sample mostly stressed what they

³⁴ Wollaston, S., 2 June 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/sarahwollaston/status/1003031148195401730>

expected to be the positive consequences, whereas Labour politicians included in the sample highlighted potentially harmful outcomes. Conservative Eric Pickles, for example, wrote, “Early start with my chum @alexburghart with @BwdChamber and Brentwood à Becket discussing business prospects post #brexit <https://t.co/MNeb8MgVsn>” (12 May 2017), and included a photograph of himself flanked by said colleagues, while Geraint Davies (LabM) contrastingly warned, “If UK leaves the EU fundamental rights at work like paid holiday & maternity leave will no longer be guaranteed, national income will fall and austerity will rise. So the TUC [Trades Union Congress] needs a #PeoplesVote” (12 May 2018). The presumed benefits of Brexit communicated by Conservative politicians resembled the official Leave campaign for the referendum, whereas the damaging developments expected by Labour politicians repeated the warnings of the official Remain campaign (Ford and Goodwin, 2017).

Interestingly, in one tweet, a Conservative woman, Sarah Wollaston, also pointed out the possibly injurious consequences of a hard Brexit: “As @CommonsHealth has pointed out, walk-away no deal hard Brexit would have serious consequences. Why risk everyday essential medical supplies not being on the shelves? We still need to see the evidence of actual vs fantasy contingency planning” (2 June 2018). Indeed, there has never been agreement on European integration and Brexit within the Conservative Party (Moore, 2018), and one year after the above-quoted tweet, Wollaston, together with two other Conservative women, Heidi Allen and Anna Soubry, resigned from their Party in protest at its Brexit stance to join an independent political group set up by former Labour MPs, ‘The Independent Group for Change’, which later became Change UK (BBC News, 2019b; Savage, 2019). Wollaston would subsequently join the Liberal Democrats to continue her fight for the UK to remain in the EU (BBC News, 2019c). Anna Soubry had herself earlier tweeted, “Time for sensible Ministers to take back control of #Brexit & put Michael [Gove] & Boris [Johnson] on the back seat <http://dailym.ai/2hJ8Yof> via @MailOnline” (19 November 2017), the attached link being to a newspaper article censuring Gove and Johnson for the content of a leaked letter they had addressed to Theresa May. The tweets of Wollaston and Soubry imply that some issues had cross-party support in contravention of the official party line, and

therefore that Twitter was being used to signal dissent. This is in line with earlier research showing that some MPs had used their personal websites to communicate differences of opinion with their party (Norton, 2008). This finding may offer a hint that Twitter does facilitate a more MP-centric approach to politics (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011), and that increasing Twitter usage might lead to an “erosion of central party control over individual candidates” (Bright *et al.*, 2020, p. 2).

“Time to get real”³⁵: An invalid referendum

Another topic was the accused misdoing of the Leave Campaign for Brexit, or its misleading the public, which for some meant that the referendum result was invalid (9 tweets). Unsurprisingly, all such tweets were from Labour politicians. David Lammy (LabM) tweeted, “So they’ve finally scrapped the science fiction “technology will fix the border issue”. Time to get real and finally acknowledge what has been clear right from the very start that leaving the Customs Union makes a hard border inevitable and unavoidable. <https://t.co/lxg0zC5thO>” (2 June 2018), with a link to a *Sunday Times* article. Some politicians deemed the apparently illuding nature of the Leave Campaign a justification for a second referendum or a People’s Vote on the Brexit Deal, among them Steve Reed (Lab), who also cited a newspaper article, this one from *The Guardian*: “Project Fear has become Brexit cold reality. It is time to vote again says Peter Westmacott <https://t.co/Pdh0DUV54g>” (1 December 2017).

“[A] fair and free referendum”³⁶: The referendum as a democratic act

While some Labour politicians highlighted the supposed wrongs of the referendum campaign, a number of Conservative politicians pointed out the democratic need to honour the result, an observation upholding May’s adage “Brexit means Brexit”, as used in her first speech as Conservative leader (May, 2016, n.p.). Ross Thomson, for example, tweeted, “In a free and fair referendum the people of the U.K. voted to leave the EU. To take back control of our laws, our money and our borders    . The PM

³⁵ Lammy, D., 2 June 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/DavidLammy/status/1002860005727653888>

³⁶ Thomson, R., 13 May 2018, derived from http://twitter.com/RossThomson_MP/status/995596485491294208

@theresa_may sets out how the @Conservatives Government will deliver on the instructions of the people  #Brexit" (13 May 2018). On the same theme of ensuring that the referendum result be accepted, Nadine Dorries (ConsW) called for constituents in leave-voting areas to resist, should their MPs attempt to thwart Brexit: "If your constituency voted leave, but your MP is attempting to stop or frustrate #Brexit Let them know how you feel and hold your MP to account. <https://t.co/ySfYN1NA6i>" (23 May 2018).

*Other Brexit themes: "Only Theresa May as PM will make a success of Brexit"*³⁷

Other, less prevalent Brexit themes included the party politicisation of Brexit (n = 5). Party politicisation is "the process by which this issue ascends the political agenda to become electorally salient and the subject of party competition" (Carter, 2006, p. 748). All such tweets were sent by Conservative politicians. Caroline Spelman, for example, insisted that "Only the @Conservatives & @theresa_may offer the leadership Britain needs to see us through Brexit & beyond #VoteConservative. #Meriden <https://t.co/R4ut5fNRC7>" (8 June 2017), and Anne-Marie Trevelyan (ConsW) similarly averred that "Only Theresa May as PM will make a success of Brexit by enacting the will of the British people. #BattleForNumber10" (29 May 2018). The word 'only' is of significance in both Spelman's and Trevelyan's tweets, by which they suggest that only their Party would be able to deliver Brexit, but both assertions would prove premature, as May resigned in June 2019 after her Brexit withdraw bill was repeatedly rejected by Parliament. It was perhaps inevitable that Conservative politicians would assume responsibility for delivering a successful Brexit, since the referendum was a result of a Conservative party manifesto pledge. Further, in four tweets, the idea of restored sovereignty was prevalent, and again, all these tweets were sent by Conservative politicians. In tweets of this type, politicians assured their audience that Brexit would mean the UK could take back control of its affairs. Rachel Maclean (ConsW) wrote, "Redditch voted for #Brexit; so did the country; we voted for the chance to trade around the world and regain national sovereignty. I welcome the time limited agreement on

³⁷ Trevelyan, A., 29 May 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/annietrev/status/869293568820695040>

#customs if it means we can progress to our destination of a #sensiblebrexit. <https://t.co/r635E3ch5y>" (7 June 2018), and added a link to a webpage published that day on the gov.uk website containing a document on the temporary UK-EU customs arrangement. It might be expected that the subject of sovereignty featured in some Conservative politicians' tweets, since Euroscepticism within the Conservative party is influenced by nationalist values (Moore, 2018), and Leave supporters had placed much emphasis on the reputed meddling of the EU in UK concerns during the referendum campaign (Ringisen-Biardeaud, 2017).

§ 6.6.2 The economy and taxes

The quantitative analysis showed that Conservative politicians were more likely to send tweets regarding the economy and taxes than were Labour politicians during the election campaign, but the qualitative analysis indicated that the tone, focus, and orientation of economy and taxes-related comments had some cross-party and cross-gender likeness. In general, politicians from the four groups tweeted in much the same manner about the economy, with a common stress on the importance of a strong economy and proposals for how this should be accomplished. This was perhaps to be expected, given that economy has long been considered a natural and central concern for the British public when making voting decisions (Corbett, 2016). There were however variances in politicians' considerations of the economy, such as varying opinions of how a stronger economy could or should be achieved, which will now be discussed in turn.

"There's no better system to promote prosperity than the free market"³⁸: Partisan-ideological differences

In 14 of economy and taxes-related tweets, one could infer differing ideologies in relation to the economy. Whilst politicians from both parties repeated the commonplace that a strong economy is of great importance, a closer inspection of economy-related tweets hints at differences between the parties in how they believed a stronger economy could or should be achieved. This variance might be explained by the

³⁸ Baker, S. 25 May 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/SteveBakerHW/status/867757832791359492>

partisan–ideological thesis (Haupt, 2010), particularly since one of the most fundamental differences between right- and left-wing ideologies is how they view the economy and the market. The partisan–ideological thesis states that right-wing parties typically advocate a less-regulated economy, and argue for limiting state involvement in its running, while seeking increased market discipline, and accordingly that left-wing parties generally call for greater regulation to the economy and contend for greater state involvement in the provision of welfare and various public services (Haupt, 2010). Indeed, it was in respect of the running of the economy that Conservative and Labour politicians were most neatly divided by their respective attachment to traditionally right- or left-wing economic thinking. The customarily left-wing promotion of a central role of government in the supply of welfare and other public services could be observed in Labour politicians' tweets, as when Sarah Champion (LabW) addressed Conservative MP Phillip Hammond, then Chancellor of the Exchequer with an entreaty: ".@PhilipHammondUK on @pestononsunday next. Please can he actually understand the need to support our public services & have compassion for those struggling under austerity." (19 November 2017).

Labour had in the General Election that year reached out to and attracted more lower-income voters 'struggling under austerity' than did the Conservatives, whose appeal to such voters rather rested on Brexit (Goodwin and Heath, 2017). One common criticism of Conservative government, their apparent favouring of the wealthy, was conveyed by a tweet from Liz Kendall (LabW), who in response to a since-deleted tweet from a Conservative MP objected, "Aka even greater tax cuts for businesses & even less money for vital public services. Small state, tax haven Britain. Not what people voted for. <https://t.co/ObFXTUwk2q>" (21 November 2017). Alternatively, a commonly right-wing preference for an economic system in which prices are set by unlimited competition among privately owned businesses was expressed in Conservative politicians' tweets. Steve Baker (ConsM) for example wrote, "There's no better system to promote prosperity than the free market: <https://t.co/gO53VrNe8R> <https://t.co/megZroEOKq>" (25 May 2017), and included a link to a page in his Facebook account where he expanded on this declaration, and two images, the first carrying a

quotation from Theresa May on a stronger and more prosperous Britain, the second with an apparently approving remark from Labour MP John McDonnell on Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* (McDonnell said 'there's a lot to learn' from this work, which of course is not the same as saying it should be used as the basis of an economy), used here to suggest that a Labour government would result in 'economic chaos'.

"Small businesses are the backbone of our economy"³⁹: The importance of small businesses

In 13 of sampled economy and taxes-themed tweets, politicians highlighted the importance of small businesses to the economy. More than half of these tweets were in anticipation of or in response to 'Small Business Saturday UK', 'a grassroots, non-commercial campaign, which highlights small business success and encourages consumers to 'shop local'', which takes play annually on the first Saturday in December (Small Business Saturday UK, 2020). In this small sample, mostly Conservative politicians tweeted on the need to support small businesses, which might have something to do with their party's historical reputation and self-designation as 'the Party of business' (Ball, 2014; The Conservative Party, 2020). Eddie Hughes (ConsM) for example tweeted, "There are 92,200 more small businesses in the West Midlands now than in 2010 under @Conservatives. Please support #SmallBizSaturday not just today but everyday [sic]. They are the lifeblood of our communities, jobs and prosperity." (2 December 2017), and Alun Cairns (ConsM) likewise entreated, "Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and key to our #IndustrialStrategy. Think big by shopping small this #SmallBizSatUK <https://t.co/S7qg6hHDGL>" (2 December 2017), to which he subjoined a short video of himself promoting the event. But Labour women too tweeted on the important role of small businesses, perhaps in some way to counter assumptions that the Labour Party is "anti-business" (Valero, 2015, p. 1). Eleanor Smith (LabW) notified in a tweet which featured a photograph of herself with promotional material for the event that, "Tomorrow is Small Business Saturday. I'll be visiting businesses over the weekend in Wolverhampton, to discuss their business needs and how I can support them. <https://t.co/zOV5fx2h9S>" (1 December 2017).

³⁹ Cairns, A. 2 December 2017, derived from <https://twitter.com/AlunCairns/status/936959974261055488>

“Workers rights [sic] at forefront of @Conservatives manifesto”⁴⁰: Emphasis on workers’ rights

In 10 tweets, politicians gave attention to workers’ rights. One of them was Gareth Thomas (LabM), who tweeted, “High time there was a law in the UK, as there is in France, where 5% of a company’s profit is allotted to its workers.

<https://t.co/TZl6i8uohu>” (30 May 2018), and supported his point with a graphic suggesting that the communications services company BT Group could use 5% of its annual profits to provide a decent bonus payment to its 105,000 employees. We can see that in this small sample, predominantly Labour politicians tweeted regarding workers’ rights, which upholds Labour’s historical reputation as the party of the working-class (James, Markey and Markey, 2006), though the results of the 2019 General Election would suggest that this bond is now much weakened (British Election Study, 2020). Some Conservative women affirmed their party’s commitment to improve and protect workers’ rights, among them Caroline Dinenage (ConsW), who tweeted, “Workers rights [sic] at forefront of @Conservatives manifesto <https://t.co/DACJz694tP>” (15 May 2017), and attached a link to a *Telegraph* article on the same. Dinenage and other Conservative politicians were perhaps conscious when tweeting about workers’ rights of their party’s rebranding, begun under David Cameron, from the ‘Party for the Rich’ to the ‘Party for the Workers’ (Watt, 2014).

“A strong economy under @Conservatives”⁴¹: Owning the economy

I found in the sample of 80 economy-related tweets twelve instances of politicians publicising their party’s economic accomplishments, all of which were sent by Conservative politicians. The Conservative Party in general have long pointed to their reputation for economic prudence (Eaton, 2018), and this was observable in the sub-sample of economy-related tweets. Some tweets of this kind specified apparent economic successes, such as low levels of unemployment, as did Chris Pincher’s (ConsM): “Unemployment has fallen to its lowest level in 42 years. Some people ask me

⁴⁰ Dinenage, C., 15 May 2017, derived from http://twitter.com/cj_dinenage/status/864020647785189376

⁴¹ Javid, S., 29 May 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/sajidjavid/status/869289322557706241>

about this Government's achievements. That's an achievement." (17 May 2017). Sajid Javid (ConsM) declared, contrary to what some of the Labour politicians mentioned earlier might have believed, that "A strong economy under @Conservatives = world-class public services #BattleforNumber10" (29 May 2017), and Jane Ellison (ConsW) using the same term said "A strong economy is vital, it underpins everything.

#VoteConservative to secure the progress made & keep the economy growing #Battersea <https://t.co/GAZcScXtNX>" (8 June 2017), and to underscore the point included a promotional graphic reading, 'Today I'm voting for: A Strong Economy. I'm voting Conservative'.

"[T]he UK the best place in the world"⁴²: The economy as a vehicle for global competitiveness

In 6 of the 80 tweets sampled, politicians estimated the economy as a tool for global competitiveness, that is, they valued the UK's economic strength in relation to other countries, and again, all these tweets were sent by Conservative politicians. For example, Craig Whittaker positioned UK industry as world-leading by tweeting, "Today, the PM has announced the biggest ever increase in research and development investment, with the government investing billions to ensure British industry remains a world leader and creates the high skilled jobs of the future." (20 November 2017), and Jeremy Lefroy (ConsM) remarked, "This new Deal [Artificial Intelligence Sector Deal] shows that the Government is harnessing our strengths and looking to make the UK the best place in the world to start a digital business. <https://t.co/FI5vq994wl>" (14 May 2018). It is perhaps to be expected that economic competitiveness was more a characteristic of Conservative politicians' tweets, since the Conservative Party has made much of the idea that after Brexit UK businesses will prosper internationally (The Conservative Party, 2017).

"The UK's extraordinary tech story"⁴³: The role of technology in the economy

⁴² Lefroy, J., 14 May 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/JeremyLefroy/status/996013539717451777>

⁴³ Jenrick, R., 26 May 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/RobertJenrick/status/1000272223863738368>

In five tweets, politicians noted the importance of the technology sector to the economy, and yet again, all these tweets were sent by Conservative politicians. Sam Gyimah (ConsM) for example tweeted in response to an announcement by fellow Conservative MP Matt Hancock that Amazon were to create new UK jobs, “Fantastic news confirming strength of UK Tech sector and importance to our economy. <https://t.co/0Cs55N6MRv>” (6 June 2018), and Robert Jenrick (ConsM) self-referenced a ‘Tech Nation UK’ speech of his that had been uploaded to the gov.uk website: “The UK’s extraordinary tech story: my speech in Cambridge last week. @hmtreasury <https://t.co/7VMVHhwDd7>” (26 May 2018). That only Conservative politicians in this sample highlighted the need of a strong technology sector seems appropriate, because their 2017 manifesto laid great weight upon building a digital economy (techUK, 2017), though by the time of the 2019 General Election, Labour’s was the more technology-focused manifesto (Trendall, 2019).

Other economy themes

Other themes of economy-related tweets included the role of party leader in building a strong economy ($n = 4$), all such tweets being from Conservative politicians, perhaps in part because Theresa May received greater overt support from her own MPs in comparison with Jeremy Corbyn (Ford and Goodwin, 2017). Matt Hancock, for example, wrote, ““This is just a start” says PM as she outlines package of support for Tech sector: helping make UK best place to start and grow a digital business <https://t.co/ZPZFc0qNoz>” (15 November 2015), and attached two photographs taken at a Downing Street reception for members of the technology sector. Another less prevalent theme to emerge was the need to maintain a strong economy for future generations ($n = 3$; all Conservative MPs), as when Stephen Kerr (ConsM) said that “No Chancellor worthy of the name would want to burden our children and grandchildren with such a debt. @PhilipHammondUK found the right balance between spending and saving in the #Budget2017 - as a %” (3 December 2017).

§ 6.6.3 Education

Politicians’ thoughts on matters of education seemed substantially more alike in comparison with the apparent left-wing/right-wing divide of their economic opinions.

Indeed, education researchers have observed that British political parties' positions on education are remarkably similar, and that when it comes to their educational views, "it is difficult to tell the parties apart" (Wiborg, 2015, p. 484). Although there are differences in Labour and Conservative considerations of education, such as the Conservatives' backing of selective education and the correspondent Labour Party disapproval thereof, in the sample politicians of both parties predominantly focused on financial resources and suggested that their party was better able to handle educational demands.

Alongside these two dominant themes – educational funding and the party politicisation of education – others emerged, such as education as a vehicle for economic prosperity, the importance of tackling educational disadvantage, the improvement of school standards, the politicisation of certain teaching content and methods, and grammar schools.

Investing in education: "#schoolsjustwannahavefunds"⁴⁴

A total of 19 tweets in the sample of education-related tweets concerned investment in education, a theme discernible in the tweets of all four groups of politicians. Maria Caulfield (ConsW) for example tweeted, "Pleased to meet with local school heads in Parliament to work together to improve funding for local schools.

<https://t.co/0EjVA7cdjE> (16 May 2018), 'local' being East Sussex, and a photograph of this meeting was included in the tweet which Caulfield quoted in her comment. It is understandable that politicians from all groups focused on financial resources for education, since the underfunding of education has long been a much-discussed subject within UK politics, and an increasing number of schools in the UK are under considerable financial pressure (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019).

Some Labour politicians suggested that these financial stresses were the result of Conservative reductions to educational funding, and vowed that the Labour Party would reverse these cutbacks. So said Chuka Umunna (LabM) when tweeting, "Labour would reverse the Tory school cuts and invest in our children's futures. RT if you agree. #schoolsjustwannahavefunds #ge2017 <https://t.co/FRcrc0KjYh>" (19 May 2017), to which he appended a graph declaring his intended fight against planned Conservative

⁴⁴ Umunna, C., 19 May 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/ChukaUmunna/status/865526468884832256>

cuts to the funding of schools in Lambeth, the borough in which he was born and part of the Streatham constituency he then represented. Such avowals accord with the 2017 Labour Party manifesto: “[W]e will make sure schools are properly resourced by *reversing the Conservatives' cuts* and ensuring that all schools have the resources they need” (Labour Party, 2017, p. 37, emphasis added).

*Party politicisation of education: “The @WelshLabour Gov’t have led the way”*⁴⁵

Politicians in the sample also made education subject to the process of party politicisation, a theme that emerged in another 19 tweets. Left-wing parties in general seem to take up issue ownership of education (Seeberg, 2017), and in the UK, the Labour Party has attempted to claim education as ‘their’ issue (Souto-Otero, 2011). In particular, former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair amplified his rhetoric with a zealous commitment to education, and stated throughout his office that his top priorities were ‘education, education, education’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2019). A seeming attempt to frame education as a Labour issue was observable in some Labour politicians’ tweets, one of which was sent by Chris Elmore (LabM), who in his tweet linked to a BBC News story on an updating of sex education in Welsh schools: “The @WelshLabour Gov’t have led the way on so many positive reforms to education in #Wales. Today is no exception. These changes are needed, should be welcomed & show truly progressive [sic] policies to support children & young people. <https://t.co/GQAj7oKII0>” (22 May 2018). Though education is generally associated with left-wing parties such as Labour, Conservative politicians, especially Conservative men, rather presented it as one of their chief concerns. Sam Gyimah (ConsM), for example, tweeted, “Overall schools spending will go up in real terms under the next Conservative government. Extra £4bn for schools. #BattleForNo10” (29 May 2017), while Victoria Prentis argued that schools have improved as a result of Government action: “Another promising step in supporting children’s education. Great to see such improvement as a result of this Government’s reforms.  <https://t.co/qCSRkO6Eor>” (5 December 2017). Though an issue of perennial interest to voters, education was it seems of somewhat lesser concern to

⁴⁵ Elmore, C., 22 May 2018, derived from <https://twitter.com/CPJElmore/status/999028199446245376>

voters in the run-up to the 2017 General Election, where Brexit, immigration, health, and the economy were of more interest (Fieldhouse and Prosser, 2017; Prescott-Smith, 2019).

Education for economic growth: “[Education]: a cornerstone of our future productivity and prosperity”⁴⁶

In nine tweets, politicians presented a view of education as a tool for economic development. One globally pervasive conservative perspective on education is that it should produce a qualified labour force for the health of an economy (Souto-Otero, 2011). The relationship between education and economic growth is well-established in the education debate (Granouhac, 2018), and governments across the globe have adopted such an instrumental view (Pearce, 2004). Granouhac (2018) points towards several factors that have played a role in the alignment of educational objectives with economic growth, one of them being the shift from an industrial economy towards a knowledge economy. Since the 1990s, the industrial economy has been undergoing such a transformation, where the value was added by humans – through the creation of knowledge – rather than machines of manufacture (Granouhac, 2018). The implications of this were that educational standards had to be improved, people’s qualifications had to better match the demands of the job market, and the goal of educational institutions became to efficiently prepare their students for the jobs of the future (Granouhac, 2018). Since 1979, the Conservatives have advocated an instrumental approach to education by attributing to it an important role in the UK’s prosperity (Souto-Otero, 2011). This thinking is exemplified by Seema Kennedy’s (ConsW) tweet, in which she correlates improvements in educational achievement with future prosperity: “Great news from @PhilipHammondUK in today’s #Budget2017 More money to help improve maths skills, helping the UK economy. @Conservatives are building a country fit for the future <https://t.co/YyO8vN>” (22 November 2017). The wording ‘a country fit for the future’ echoes a phrasing used by Theresa May in a tweet also sent 22 November 2017, in which she said that the Budget to be delivered later that day was ‘setting out how my Government is building a Britain fit for the future’ – and closely resembles the title of a

⁴⁶ Baker, S., 27 May 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/SteveBakerHW/status/1000734518788182018>

policy paper published five days later, 'Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future' (HM Government, 2017). In Kennedy's tweet, the principal beneficiaries of education appeared not to be the pupils and students, but rather the economy and the nation as a whole (Pearce, 2004). Kennedy's focus on *mathematical* skills is also interesting, as it concurs with the Conservatives' policy to invest in those areas that they consider promotive of economic growth and international competitiveness, such as scientific, engineering, and technological courses (Souto-Otero, 2011).

A similar valuing of scientific or technical disciplines was present in Steve Baker's (ConsM) tweet: "As an aerospace and software engineer, I'm delighted to see this Government's commitment to technical education, a cornerstone of our future productivity and prosperity  <https://t.co/9WKfH2WA2>" (27 May 2018). By specifying the value of technical education to a thriving future, Baker seems to be hinting that certain forms of knowledge are more economically important than others (those that do not, supposedly, contribute to economic growth), though his own experiences and interests would suggest a natural affinity for applied or industrial knowledge. Baker clearly also associated education with productivity and prosperity, which is indicative of an instrumental view of education. Baker also personalises his tweet, by mentioning his non-political education and career (he studied aerospace engineering and later computation at university, and was a Royal Air Force engineer), which gave his observation some grounding in first-hand experience. The referral to unpolitical employments in tweets and its potential significance is expounded in the next chapter, at § 7.3 *Second analysis: personalising the political*.

Though almost all tweets with an 'education for economic prosperity' outlook were sent by Conservative politicians, a similar perspective could be discerned in Chi Onwurah's (LabW) tweet: "Education can transform our country #forthemanynotthefew Proud to member of a party that will support everyone to reach their true potential <https://t.co/aL1lw4IQON>" (10 May 2017). Onwurah did not explicitly link education to economic growth, though she did remark the potential of education to transform the country, and thereby pointed towards the nation in sum as the beneficiary of education,

as well as or even more so than the individual student (Pearce, 2004). Although Onwurah does not specify what sort of transformation she means (socially, culturally, or economically), she could also be endorsing an ‘education for prosperity’ view. As Pearce (2004) points out, if we considered Onwurah’s comment “support[ing] everyone to reach their true potential” in isolation, it may sound inclusive in nature – meaning that children of all abilities should be helped to maximise their potential for their own sake – but if we view it in the light of the preceding aphorism (‘education can transform a country’), it suggests that this ‘potential’ needs to be reached in order to help the country above and beyond the individual. Indeed, such an instrumental view has been endorsed by both the Conservative and Labour Parties, and both Tony Blair (Labour Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007) and Gordon Brown (Labour Prime Minister from 2007 to 2010) repeatedly articulated the view that education and the economy are interlinked (Granoulhac, 2018), which was a relatively new development for the Labour Party (Pearce, 2004). Under Blair, Labour brought its education policy broadly into line with that of the Conservatives (Raey, 2008), which itself has remained largely constant (Wiborg, 2015).

More specifically, Pearce (2004) argues that in 1987, the views of the Labour and Conservative Parties on education were disparate and accorded with their core party ideologies of the time. Pearce (2004) compares the Labour and Conservative manifestos from the 1987 election and the Labour 1997 manifesto and concludes that in 1987, the Labour Party conceptualised education as inclusive, whereas the Conservative Party proposed a set of policies to restructure education to meet the demands of the market. However, Pearce (2004) found that Labour’s comprehensive vision of education in the 1997 Labour Party manifesto bore little resemblance to that of its manifesto ten years earlier, since education was, in some respects, even more thoroughly marketised in 1997 than the Conservative manifesto of 1987 had anticipated. It is perhaps notable that only one of the sampled Labour MPs even hinted at education being the means to a commercial end, which is perhaps because an instrumental perspective of education is not as well-established within the Labour Party as it is the Conservative Party. It could be that a large proportion of Labour politicians still hold

inclusive and holistic view where education is seen principally as a vehicle for personal development and the acquisition of knowledge and life skills, which agrees with the core ideology of the Labour Party (Pearce, 2004), but such views were largely absent from Labour politicians' tweets. In other words, Labour politicians seemingly had little to say on the role of education, whether comprehensive, instrumental, or otherwise, despite their party manifesto proposing a lifelong 'National Education Service' and promising to abolish university tuition fees (The Labour Party, 2017).

Tackling disadvantage: “[M]ore young ppl [sic] from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university than ever before”⁴⁷

In ten tweets, politicians stressed the importance of tackling educational disadvantage . For example, David Lammy (LabM) tweeted, “Yet more proof that it really matters who gets into Oxbridge [the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge] and our top universities - if we are to open up the establishment and top jobs our elite universities need to open up first <https://t.co/0j>” (19 November 2017). Lammy embedded a URL to a BBC news article reporting substantial variances between the earnings of graduates from different universities, and he clearly desired that ‘elite universities’ should become accessible to a wider group of prospective students so that in turn political and commercial institutions would be more representative of wider society. An emphasis on fairness in Labour politicians’ discussions on education accords with their historical dedication to speak up for the underprivileged and economically disadvantaged (Ingle, 2008) and a commitment to promote a fair and equitable society which recognises structural class-based and other inequalities (Osamor, 2018).

Conservative politicians also tweeted on the problem of educational disadvantage, among them Sarah Wollaston (ConsW), who was asked on Twitter whether, had she pursued her medical studies, she would be faced with the equivalent in fees that students are expected to pay to now, to which she responded: “@[username] Yes. I'm glad that more young ppl [sic] from disadvantaged backgrounds

⁴⁷ Wollaston, S., 7 June 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/sarahwollaston/status/872440760217501696>

going [sic] to university than ever before & 1500 more med student places pledged" (7 June 2017). Measures to help the less advantaged in society fall under the 'compassionate' promise of the Conservatives (Olasky, 2000), and Theresa May had undertaken to fight societal injustices among which are the relative lack of opportunities for the economically deprived (May, 2016). 'Compassionate Conservatism' is an American political philosophy, which propounds conservative ideas to improve the welfare of society and help the disadvantaged (Olasky, 2000). Rather than enhancing equality through measures aimed at redistributing the wealth of citizens, 'Compassionate Conservatism' advocates providing underprivileged individuals the opportunity to create their own wealth. In the UK, the term was initially used by William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith, and later became a priority for David Cameron (Souto-Otero, 2011). Cameron diversified the rhetoric on education, by placing educational inequality, poverty, inclusion, and social mobility at the centre of the debate (Bochel, 2011). Theresa May followed Cameron's approach to education and committed to make education 'work for everyone' (Granoulhac, 2018). This pledge was also made in the 2017 Conservative Party manifesto, which stated that: "To succeed, we must redouble our efforts to ensure that everyone, no matter who they are or where they are from, can have a world-class education" (The Conservative Party, 2017, p. 49). However, the 'Compassionate Conservative' approach to education has been criticised because it is considered an ideal unrealised in any policies that differ much from past courses of action (Bochel, 2011). Rather, it is viewed as an attempt to dissociate the Conservative Party from its image as the 'Nasty Party' while still appealing to traditional Conservative supporters (Bochel and Powell, 2018).

*Improvement of standards: "School standards have dramatically improved"*⁴⁸

The improvement of school standards was the main theme of nine tweets, all of them from Conservative politicians. For example, Antoinette Sandbach (ConsW) tweeted, "Great to see the difference #improving #teaching and #Standards <https://t.co/gxlyt13iAf>" (6 December 2017), her comment accompanied by a graphic illustrating an apparently rapid and substantial increase in six-year-old children 'passing

⁴⁸ Ghani, N., 5 December 2017, derived from http://twitter.com/Nus_Ghani/status/938057352502239233

reading checks', from 58% in 2012 to 81% in 2017, while Nusrat Ghani (ConsW), who included the same image showing the rise in children's reading abilities, likewise observed, "School standards have dramatically improved, a tribute not only to the reforms of the last seven years, but also the hard work of teachers across #Wealden <https://t.co/xd2IAJyJJR>" (5 December 2017), Wealden being her constituency. The source of the data presented in the graphic was the 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' or PIRLS, a five-yearly assessment of primary-aged children's reading performance last conducted in 2016, the results being presented on the day of Ghani's tweet. It is worth saying that a report prepared for the Department for Education itself remarked that these results should be viewed with some caution, because it was too early to ascribe the improvement to policy changes which by nature require some time to take effect in a complex educational system like England's, while in general girls continued to outperform boys by some margin (McGrane *et al.*, 2017). But Sandbach and Ghani, representing a Conservative government responsible for some of these policies, were perhaps unlikely to repeat such caveats, had they been aware of them when tweeting.

*Less prevalent education themes: "This Government is backing grammar schools"*⁴⁹

Less prevalent education themes included teaching content and methods, and the expansion of grammar schools. Firstly, in six tweets, Conservatives politicised certain teaching content and methods. In particular, Conservatives applauded their own legislation on the use of phonics to teach children how to read. Examples were provided by Suella Braverman (ConsW), who tweeted, "It's official. The UK's phonics revolution has dramatically improved school standards <https://t.co/jOhic4NJIN> via @telegraphnews" (5 December 2017), this being the headline of *The Telegraph* story to which she provides a link, while Rory Stewart (ConsM) wrote, "Really impressive improvements in UK reading skills - a tribute to primary school teachers embracing phonics - championed by @NickGibbUK -<https://t.co/rPw9KrVOPn>" (5 December 2017), Gibb being Minister of State for School Standards, and a link is provided to the same *Telegraph* story as quoted by Braverman. The efficacy of phonics, a teaching method

⁴⁹ Pawsey, M., 11 May 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/MarkPawsey/status/994936639855132672>

by which children and other beginning readers first learn the sounds of individual letters before learning the sounds of letters in combination with others and in simple words (Stahl, 1992), or in fact the type of phonics employed, continues to be a topic of linguistic debate in the UK (Bowers, 2020). Though the use of phonics in schools began to increase under Labour in the late 1990s (Chew, 2018), when in 2010 the Conservatives came into office (in coalition with the Liberal Democrats), they required schools to use phonics when teaching children how to read (Stoll, 2019). Marshall (2017) argues that Conservatives are keen on phonics as a teaching method because, by their nature, the Conservatives wish to 'conserve', and phonics is, alongside grammar and the canon, a traditional aspect of language-learning.

Furthermore, a total of five tweets concerned the expansion of grammar schools. Grammar schools select all or a proportion of their pupils based on an examination of higher academic ability (Foster, Roberts and Long, 2018). Labour and the Conservatives clearly advocated opposing viewpoints regarding grammar schools. Since 1998, there has been a ban on the opening of new grammar schools in England, but Theresa May had announced her desire to lift this (Rayner, 2017). The Labour Party manifesto opposingly reads, "Labour will not waste money on inefficient free schools and the Conservatives' grammar schools vanity project" (Labour Party, 2017, p. 37). It is therefore not surprising that the two Labour women who tweeted about grammar schools objected to their expansion; one of them, Julie Cooper, wrote, "Grammar school pupils 'gain no social or emotional advantages' by age 14 <https://t.co/Yu2eMBF8Ym>" (22 May 2018), quoting the headline of *The Guardian* article to which she provides a link. Contrastingly, all three Conservative politicians tweeting on the subject favoured the expansion of grammar schools, among them Mark Pawsey, who tweeted, "This Government is backing grammar schools such as those in Rugby with £50 million of new funding to enable expansion and ensure that even more youngsters can benefit from an excellent education" (11 May 2018).

§ 6.6.4 Gender and Sexism

The quantitative analysis showed that Labour women were significantly more prolific tweeters of gender and sexism issues in comparison with the other groups of politicians, but the analysis did not tell us *how* gender and sexism issues were discussed. The thematic analysis discovered four prevalent themes: abortion rights in Northern Ireland; state pension equality; representation of women in politics and business; and economic gender inequality. These themes will now be discussed in turn.

“[E]qual rights to access safe legal abortion”⁵⁰: Abortion law in Northern Ireland

The most popular theme (16 tweets) in the discussion of gender and sexism-related issues concerned abortion rights in the Republic of Ireland. During the third data collection period, much debate occurred on abortion legislation in Northern Ireland, because The Irish Abortion Referendum took place on 25 May 2018. Northern Ireland’s abortion laws were among the most restrictive in the world, effectively banning abortions under almost all circumstances (Amnesty International UK, 2020). In the referendum, people voted to overturn the abortion ban by 66.4% to 33.6% (BBC, 2018a). It is interesting to note that neither women nor men politicians in the sample politicised the issue of abortion, given that research has shown that abortion is a typical ‘women’s issue’, and that women politicians who have liberal abortion stances can have an electoral advantage when the issue is salient (Blome, Lloren and Rosset, 2020), as it was during the summer of 2018. The Conservative Party did not mention abortion in their manifesto for the 2017 General Election (The Conservative Party, 2017), while the Labour manifesto read: “Labour will continue to ensure a woman’s right to choose a safe, legal abortion – and we will work with the Assembly to extend that right to women in Northern Ireland.” (The Labour Party, 2017, p. 109). All politicians (Labour and Conservative) in the sample who tweeted on the issue of abortion spoke in favour of having an emergency debate in Parliament and of decriminalising abortion.

⁵⁰ Wollaston, S., 2 June 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/sarahwollaston/status/1002978534065885185>

Labour's Stephanie Peacock for example reported that she was "In the Commons today to support calls for an emergency debate on abortion law in Northern Ireland. <https://t.co/fU3HpeCOvQ>" (4 June 2018), and quoted a tweet from BBC Politics featuring then Speaker of the House of Commons John Bercow asking MPs whether they supported Labour MP Stella Creasy's appeal for this debate, which they did *en masse*, while Luke Pollard (Lab) likewise related, "I'm in the Commons to support @stellacreasy and her call for women in Northern Ireland to be given the right to choose what happens to their own bodies. It's about time we repealed articles 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861" (5 June 2018). None of the politicians from the sample tweeted in support of maintaining the Eighth Amendment, while those who kept their silence on the matter perhaps wished to avoid the kind of fierce criticism directed at Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, a devout Catholic, who had openly commented that he opposes abortion in all cases, including pregnancies resulting from rape (Peck, 2017). Rees-Mogg was censured for his remarks by many in the public as well as from some of his Conservative colleagues, who had expressed their disagreement with him via Twitter (Horton, 2017). None of the politicians in the sample, nor the larger sample of 12,000 tweets, tweeted in favour of maintaining the restrictive legislation of abortion, although Conservative James Cleverly pointed out that it might not be desirable for Westminster to attempt to influence the decisions of Northern Ireland: "Northern Ireland has a difficult and unique history within the British Isles. Calls for Westminster to impose its will upon Stormont [seat of the government and assembly of Northern Ireland] should be treated with extreme caution, particularly on an issue as sensitive as abortion" (30 May 2018).

Cleverly is one of two Conservative men from the sample who tweeted on abortion. The other, Johnny Mercer, conversely argued that where appropriate the UK has a duty to intervene in important matters: "Tired of the "it's a devolved matter" issue. Devolution clearly a great thing, but people's lives must not be put on hold when the politics pauses. Real lives; real issues. Women's rights, historical allegations against Servicemen in their 80's. [sic] the list is too long already.

<https://twitter.com/stellacreasy/status/1003691916779716611>" (4 June 2018). Mercer's

post included a link to a tweet from Labour backbencher Stella Creasy, which shows that there was intra-party communication and support on the issue of abortion. Creasy's request for an emergency debate on Northern Ireland's proposed abortion ban (Kentish, 2018) resulted in a cross-party coalition of MPs calling for an end to legislation that criminalises abortion (Rankin, 2018). Support for Creasy was also apparent in several tweets from Conservative women. Heidi Allen (ConsW), for example, tweeted, "Proud to stand with you @stellacreasy #trustallwomen" (4 June, 2018); and Sarah Wollaston, who shared a *Guardian* article about cross-party support for Northern Ireland abortion reforms, notified "I'm joining MPs across Parliament including @stellacreasy @joswinson @CarolineLucas @DianaJohnsonMP @LSRPlaid to make sure the women of Northern Ireland have equal rights to access safe legal abortion- please ask your MP to support <https://t.co/P4bNmRsswq>" (2 June, 2018). Wollaston included the Twitter handles of Labour MPs Stella Creasy and Diana Johnson, then-Liberal Democrat Spokesperson Jo Swinson, then-co-leader of the Green Party Caroline Lucas, and Plaid Cymru Westminster leader Liz Saville Roberts.

*"[S]tate pensions justice for these ladies"*⁵¹: *State pension age inequality*

After abortion rights in Northern Ireland, the most popular theme concerning gender and sexism was the charge of gender inequality due to changes to the state pension age. Most politicians referenced WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality), which campaigns against the manner in which the state pension age for men and women was increased. The Conservative government's Pensions Act 1995 included a rule raising the pensionable age of women from 60 to 65, which WASPI and others say has adversely affected hundreds of thousands of women born in the 1950s (WASPI, 2020). Some women have needed to wait up to six years longer for their state pension than they had expected, which affected their retirement plans. Campaigners contend that the rise is unfair because the women affected were given insufficient notice of the change to adjust such plans (BBC, 2019d). Politicians, most of them Labour, tweeted their support for the WASPI campaign, which is not too surprising since the organisation is campaigning against a Conservative policy. Only two Conservative politicians from the

⁵¹ Gwynne, A. 29 November 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/GwynneMP/status/935885613118689>

sample tweeted regarding changes to the state pension age, although one of them, Ross Thompson, did not explicitly mention WASPI: “A day full of meeting constituents. Was good to meet with local women affected by the changes to the state pension age. I’ve added my support to a backbench business debate in the @HouseofCommons on this important issue” (24 November 2017). This is in contrast with Labour politicians, all of whom directly referenced WASPI. For example, Barbara Keeley (LabW) wrote, “I led the first debate on issues for 1950s-born women like Denise & I have spoken up for them since & will continue to fight for them #WASPI <https://t.co/QoCoxn0baF>” (1 June 2017), her tweet quoting one from the official Labour Party Twitter account in which a video tells the story of one woman affected by the ruling. Andrew Gwynne (Lab) tweeted, “Ahead of today’s debate, I pledge to STILL support the @WASPI_Campaign in Parliament, until we get state pensions justice for these ladies  #WASPI <https://t.co/mAuzEtnCyR>” (29 November 2017), and shared two photographs of himself with a group of women campaigners and a third displaying a poster pledging his support to WASPI bearing his signature.

“[M]ore women to the highest levels in business”⁵²: Women’s representation in business and politics

Another theme that emerged from politicians’ discussions of gender and sexism-related issues was the representation of women in business and politics (11 tweets), and most of these tweets were sent by Conservative politicians. Interestingly, Conservative politicians seemed mostly concerned with the representation of women in *business*, whereas Labour politicians appeared particularly interested in tweeting on the representation of women in *politics*. For example, Tom Pursglove (ConsM) tweeted, “In @womenequalities Qs, I asked about the availability of mentoring to encourage more women to the highest levels in business. Very encouraging to hear about so many initiatives with businesses from the Minister” (23 May 2018); and Helen Whately (ConsW) wrote, “Staggered to read the reasons given by companies for not having women on boards. If this is what they say for a survey, what do they say behind closed

⁵² Pursglove, T. 23 May 2018, derived from <http://twitter.com/VotePursglove/status/999308017962283008>

doors? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-44310225>" (31 May 2018), the BBC News article to which she links titled 'Top 10 worst excuses for not appointing women executives'. This concern might betoken the idea that the Conservative Party is 'the Party of business', as mentioned earlier in this chapter (Ball, 2014). Chris Elmore (LabM) commented on the lack of women in Cabinet positions at Vale of Glamorgan Council, in response to a tweet carrying a photograph of the recently announced all-male, seven-person Cabinet: "Truly sad to see my former council going backwards like this. Truly depressing #wherearethewomen <https://t.co/vw4PpWOvnR>" (25 May 2017). It is worth noting that at the time of writing, the Cabinet had three women members, and four men. Dawn Butler (LabW) tweeted concerning women's representation within the Labour Party, and presented a letter addressed to its then leader Jeremy Corbyn: "Labour has a proud record on gender equality. More women MPs than all parties combined and have a 50/50 gender balance in our Shadow Cabinet. Here is our letter to @jeremycorbyn and @JennieGenSec, asking them to ensure @UKLabour candidate in #LewishamEast by-election is a woman" (14 May 2018); '@JennieGenSec' refers to Jennie Formby, General Secretary of the Labour Party at that time. It is perhaps to be expected that Labour politicians gave attention to political representation, since leftist parties in general are said to have a concern for promoting 'equality of outcome' (Kenny & Verge, 2013), whereas right-wing parties more often espouse an 'equality of opportunity' view, which focuses on a gender-neutral understanding of access to political power (Chiva, 2014). Even though the Conservatives have had two female leaders (Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May) and Labour none, the Labour Party were first to introduce all-women shortlists for the selection of candidates in certain constituencies), and this does not seem to have affected the party's performance at the 2010 General Election (Cutts and Widdop, 2013), while at the 2017 General Election such shortlists appear to have contributed to a record number of women MPs being elected, though women continued to be underrepresented (Childs, Kenny and Smith, 2017). All-women shortlists have been the source of some controversy (Kelly and White, 2016), but it has been argued that common criticisms of the practice do not hold up to scrutiny (Nugent and Krook, 2015). The Labour Party is thought to have shown a greater willingness in general to use positive discrimination to improve women's political

representation when compared with the Conservative Party (Campbell & Lovenduski, 2005).

“[R]educing the #GenderPayGap”⁵³: Economic gender inequality

Economic gender inequality was another theme discernible in politicians' discussions of sexism and gender (10 tweets). Politicians mainly discussed the gender pay gap and called for (gender) equality impact assessments of government policies. For example, Alan Mak (ConsM) tweeted, “Welcoming the Government's commitment in the @HouseofCommons today to reducing the #GenderPayGap by requiring employers to report gender pay data & clamping down on unfair practices. @WomenEqualities” (17 May 2017). Labour politicians tweeted mostly concerning the need for an equality impact assessment of the 2017 Budget, among whom was Sarah Jones (Lab), who included in her tweet a letter to this effect that she had addressed to Justine Greening, then Minister for Women and Equalities: “86% of cuts have fallen on the shoulders of women. Proud to stand with 127 MPs calling for comprehensive equality impact assessment of #Budget2017 and future policies” (1 December 2017). A gender impact assessment had been completed by the Women's Budget Group shortly after the Budget's announcement (Women's Budget Group (WBG), 2017), but Jones and her colleagues desired the Government to carry out the assessment and commission an independent evaluation of its practices in this respect.

Other gender and sexism themes

Other, less prevalent themes that emerged concerned domestic abuse and sexual violence (5 tweets), women's (mental) health (4 tweets), and international aid for women's education (3 tweets), and finally, the issue of gender/sexism was also subject to party politicisation, with four tweets containing declarations from politicians that their party was most gender-sensitive (4 tweets). It is interesting to observe that in the sample, only Conservative politicians tweeted about women's (mental) health services, which could be because in the past few years, the Conservative Party has placed a heavy focus on mental health in their political communication, both during (Gillett, 2017)

⁵³ Mak, A. 17 May 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/AlanMakMP/status/997178396282105857>

and after election campaigns (Coughlan, 2019). An example is provided by Jackie Doyle-Prince (ConsW), who wrote, “Today I co-chaired the Women’s Mental Health Taskforce with the brilliant @KatharineSJ. Our mission is to bring together the key players to improve women’s mental health. We’ll report findings this summer - watch this space #MentalHealthAwarenessWeek” (15 May 2018), here including the username of Katharine Sacks-Jones, then Chief Executive of Agenda (the alliance for women and girls at risk), and a short video of herself introducing the Taskforce, which had been established early 2017. The Labour Party has itself campaigned for more resources for mental health services (Mental Health Foundation, 2017), but this was not reflected in the sampled tweets. Finally, it is interesting to note that Conservative men seemed very keen to mention their party’s involvement in gender-related concerns, especially since an analysis of Conservative and Labour Party’s manifestos for the General Election 2017 has shown that the Conservative manifesto was fairly light on gender-specific policy details, whereas Labour’s manifesto offered a more extensive range of gendered policy pledges (Harmer and Southern, 2018). Alec Shelbrook (ConsM), for example, tweeted, “Very proud of the role @Conservatives are playing internationally to support the Westminster Foundation for Democracy’s work to establish a women’s network in Latin America. Our international relationships are key to global action. Today I hosted a roundtable on women in politics”, here referring to the UPLA (Union of Latin American Parties) Latin American Women’s Network.

§ 6.6.5 The environment

The quantitative analysis revealed that Conservative politicians sent more environment-related issue tweets than did Labour politicians during the winter period 2017 and summer period 2018, but as previously mentioned, it is useful to further investigate the precise content of their tweets. In all such tweets, whether sent by Conservative or Labour politicians, there appeared to be a consensus, whether explicit or implicit, on the need to protect the environment. This finding can be at least partly explained by saliency theory of party competition; that is, the theory that when making public announcements, competing political parties lay stress upon particular policies or concerns according to what they believe voters will find of most importance. In

particular, Stokes (1963) differentiated between ‘valence issues’ and ‘position issues’. For valence issues, broad public agreement exists about the desired outcome, namely low unemployment, good healthcare, and a clean environment (Stokes, 1963; Budge, Klingemann, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001; Carter, 2006; Budge, 2015). Accordingly, the environment can be considered a ‘valence’ issue. Saliency theory further assumes that parties will generally avoid taking sharply contrasting ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ positions on valence issues, and this appeared to be the case in the sample of environment-related tweets. From the thematic analysis, several trends were discernible in the ways that politicians discussed the environment on Twitter. One such tendency was to stress our collective responsibility as humankind to improve the environment. Further, politicians politicised the environment, and suggested that their party was the most attentive to this issue. Finally, politicians urged the importance of working together for a healthier environment for the sake of future generations. These differing themes will now be considered more closely.

“[I]t’s our planet and we all have a duty to look after it”⁵⁴: Emphasising human responsibility

Of the 80 sampled environment-related issue tweets, 14 referenced the human contribution to climate change. Jo Churchill (ConsW) wrote of a report produced by The Wildlife Trusts for the government on a ‘Nature Recovery Network’ to recover and protect wildlife habitats countrywide: “Delighted to have been able to lend my support to @WildlifeTrusts and the launch of their recent report. Amongst everything we do we must never forget the responsibility we owe to the environment around us #naturenetworks” (10 May 2018). Vernon Coaker (LabM) meanwhile posed the rhetorical question, “Will we ever learn and more importantly now act with the urgency and determination required to save other species? <https://t.co/hMY1yeH0K7>” (8 November 2017) in response to a tweet from the biologist Daniel Schneider, who had shared an affecting photograph of the last surviving male Northern White Rhino (this male died in March 2018; at the time of writing, only two females of this species were still living). Ann Clwyd (LabW) on the topic of climate change tweeted, “When next in

⁵⁴ Clwyd, A. 15 November 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/AnnClwyd/status/930864710651703296>

power, Labour will make the challenge of climate change a major priority - it's our planet and we all have a duty to look after it <https://t.co/9yMQh5Ojmj>" (15 November 2017), and linked to a *Guardian* article on this avowal. It is perhaps noteworthy that Labour politicians, in particular acknowledged anthropogenic climate change. Since the mid-1990s, there has been increasing consensus among scientists about the influence of human behaviour on climate change (Anderson, 2009; Carvalho, 2007). However, in their analysis of print media coverage of climate change in the UK, Boykoff and Mansfield (2008) found that tabloid coverage (*The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, and *Mirror*) significantly diverged from the scientific consensus. They concluded that nearly a third of tabloid coverage suggested that the human contribution to climate change was negligible (Boykoff and Mansfield, 2008).

In another study, Carvalho (2007) found differences across three British newspapers – *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* – in the way human agency was implicated in regard to climate change. Carvalho found that, since the end of the 1980s, *The Times* had cast doubt on the human causes of climate change, compared with *The Guardian* and more so *The Independent*, which supported the weight of scientific knowledge, highlighting the risks of climate change and the view that human exploitation of nature is a potential danger (Carvalho, 2007). These findings are perhaps not surprising, given the political affiliations of the newspapers studied. The tabloid newspapers studied by Boykoff and Mansfield (2008), which contested the view of anthropogenic climate change, are considered to be right-wing newspapers, with the exception of *The Mirror* (Smith, 2017). Further, *The Times* is considered to be somewhat right-leaning, whereas *The Guardian* is considered the most leftist paper and *The Independent* is more centrist. Whilst none of the Conservative politicians in the small sub-sample or in the larger sample denied or cast doubts on the human influence on climate change, they might have been slightly reluctant to acknowledge and emphasise the human role, since their voters might be more exposed to so-called contrarian climate change views as presented in tabloid publications such as *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily Express*. In the past 20 years, the number of newspaper articles concerning climate change or global warming has consistently been lower in tabloid

publications (*Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday, Sun, Telegraph*) than in more leftish publications (*The Guardian/Observer* and *The Times/Sunday Times*) (Boykoff et al., 2020).

“We are knocking it out of the park”⁵⁵: Party politicisation of the environment

In the sample of 80 environment-related tweets, I found 13 cases of the politicisation of the environment. Carter (2006) argued that party politicisation of the environment was limited among established parties in the UK. However, since that work was published, citizens have become increasingly concerned about the environment as a global issue, to an extent much greater than ever before (Carrington, 2019). Climate change in particular has emerged as the most prominent contemporary environmental issue (Båtstrand, 2015), and the topic has correspondingly been given greater attention by politicians, with ‘climate change’ being one of the terms most often mentioned, and it seems that such vocabulary is more commonly used by Labour politicians in parliamentary debates than by Conservatives, while more Labour MPs follow at least one climate scientist on Twitter than do Conservative MPs (Gabbatiss and Tandon, 2019). Matt Western (LabM) was one of those who mentioned climate change when commenting, “Very pleased to see climate change an integral part of Labour’s economic strategy. An economic forecast without the risks posed by climate change is no forecast at all <https://t.co/8t5S3eeM4T>” (15 November 2017), this being in response to a BBC News Article on a Labour proposal for the Office for Budget responsibility to model the effects of human-caused climate change on public finance. James Heappey (ConsM), tweeting also of climate change, expressed pride at his Party’s apparently pioneering endeavours to deal with the issue: “More great stuff from Claire Perry [then a Conservative MP]. So proud that we @Conservatives are leading the way at home and internationally on the development of clean tech and tackling climate change. <https://t.co/LDCFP3VsgN?amp=1>” (15 November 2017). Heappey’s tweet included a link to an article written by Perry for *The Times* on Britain’s deemed status as ‘world leader in clean growth’. On another environmental concern, animal welfare, Nadine

⁵⁵ Dorries, N., 8 December 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/NadineDorries/status/939223351737966595>

Dorries (ConsW) boasted, “When it comes to animal welfare, we are knocking it out of the park. Five year sentences for animal abuse, up from six months. Cameras in all slaughter houses [sic]. Ban on neonics to save our  [bee] population. And now, Beavers back in our waterways. Well done Mr Gove” (8 December 2017).⁵⁶ Michael Gove was then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

“For our children & grandchildren”⁵⁷: Preservation of the environment for future generations

In eight tweets, politicians highlighted the importance of preserving the environment for future generations, and all these tweets were sent by Conservative politicians. Mims Davies (ConsW) for example responded to a point made by fellow Conservative MP Rebecca Pow at Prime Minister’s Question Time on the use of environmentally harmful plastic microbeads in cosmetics, personal care products, cleaning solutions etc., the banning of which she had long campaigned for: “Rightly raised at #PMQS by @pow_rebecca @Conservatives An MP who has done so much for securing our environment & is truly committed to the future of our world for our children & grandchildren working alongside @michaelgove” (29 November 2017). A government ban on the sale of products containing microbeads came into effect June 2018. Sam Gyimah (ConsM) too urged the protection of the environment in response to an article in *The Guardian* on the One Planet Summit in Paris written by Theresa May: “Preserving the environment for the next generation is one our most important responsibilities [sic]. #OnePlanet <https://t.co/bY5C7PgCCU>” (12 December 2017). Although it is of course possible that Labour politicians had sent similar tweets which fell outside the small sample used for this analysis, it is interesting that only Conservative politicians in the sample stressed the importance of preserving the environment for future generations, which may have something do with the Conservative Party being the Party of ‘conservation’. Giddens (2011) argues that parties are likely to link issues such as climate change to their existing core issues. Former Prime Minister David Cameron

⁵⁶ ‘Neonics’ refers to neonicotinoids, any of a group of synthetic pesticides based on the chemical structure of nicotine, which are thought harmful to pollinating insects like bees.

⁵⁷ Davies, M., 29 November 2017, derived from <http://twitter.com/mimsdavies/status/935854723709759488>

gave priority to the environment as part of his modernising of the Conservative Party (Carter & Clements, 2015), for which the famous slogan 'Vote Blue, Go Green' was introduced (Connelly, 2011). Cameron and party strategists carefully incorporated the protection of the environment into traditional conservative values (Carter & Clements, 2015). Although past Conservative governments had seemingly made little effort to protect the environment, the issue was rebranded as another aspect of conserving what is valuable for future generations. In his speeches, Cameron repeatedly said that he "think[s] of a cleaner, greener world for our children to enjoy and inherit" (Cameron, 2006, np). The Conservative Party manifesto for the 2017 General Election likewise stated their "pledge to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it" (Conservative Party, 2017, p. 26).

Other environmental themes

Ten tweets carried opinions on animalic environment concerns such as fox-hunting and animal sentience (10 tweets). Some politicians had received related enquiries from the public, among them Tania Mathias (ConsW), who responded: "Several enquiries about fox hunting. I support the current law and would vote against removing the ban if re-elected" (10 May 2017). Surveys of public attitudes have consistently shown that the British public are largely opposed to revoking the ban on fox-hunting, and in line with saliency theory, none of the politicians supported its repealment, despite Theresa May pledging to hold a parliamentary vote on ending the ban, which she later retracted after acknowledging great public opposition to the move (BBC News, 2018b). In nine tweets, politicians related environmental issues to Brexit, among whom was Roger Godsiff (LabM), his tweet referring to the West Midlands Combined Authority's pledge to improve and preserve the natural environment in that area: "#WMPledge4Nature We need to protect natural environment and ensure environmental regulations remain strong after Brexit <https://t.co/ToXSUTb6iX>" (25 May 2017). Caroline Nokes (ConsW) similarly suggested that, post-Brexit, environmental concerns would continue to be given due attention, in response to a twitter user's worry that animal welfare standards would be at risk after leaving the EU: "@[username] please have a look at the WMS [written ministerial statement] from Michael Gove today, leaving the EU does not

suddenly mean we don't consider animals to be sentient beings, it's about getting the legislation right" (23 November 2017). In eight tweets, most of them sent by women politicians remarked, were remarks on environmental matters of interest to their constituencies. They encouraged or praised local initiatives to protect the environment, or spoke of the implications for the local area of wider environmental issues. For example, Helen Hayes (LabW) tweeted, "Delighted to host Cleaner Air for Southwark's Schools in Parliament this evening - inspiring examples of local action on air pollution from @GooseFriends & @DulwichWheels & commitment to work together with new Cabinet Member for Air Quality @Livingstone_RJ to tackle air pollution" (5 June 2018), naming here her fellow Labour MP Richard Livingstone. Finally, in five tweets, Conservative politicians highlighted the technology-driven business opportunities associated with tackling climate change, a finding accordant with some previous research, Båstrand (2015) having suggested that the promotion of technological solutions is a popular approach to climate change among Conservative politicians. There was some thinking from MPs of 'the Party of business' that commercial ventures could make an important contribution to conservation efforts. Mark Field (ConsM) for example notified of a planned meeting with United for Wildlife, an organisation led by the Duke of Cambridge and The Royal Foundation, and responded to an announcement by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on an effort to ally technology companies and conservationists to combat the illegal wildlife trade: "Britain's tech sector has a huge role to play if we're to #endwildlifecrime. Very exciting to discuss ideas for tech driven solutions with leading companies and representatives from @united4wildlife today" (4 June 2018).

§ 6.7 Discussion

Some of the results reported in this chapter partly contradict gender and party issue ownership theories partly. While the results from the quantitative analysis suggested that during the election, Labour and Conservative politicians tweeted in accordance with their 'strength' issues, and after the campaign, women and men politicians tweeted in line with their perceived areas of competence, I also found that that politicians did not always tweet in accordance with their perceived 'strength' issues. Rather, I found that

gender and party differences varied across different contexts, since many striking differences between the parties in issue emphasis seemingly disappeared once the campaign was over, while women and men did not differ much in issue emphasis during the campaign. This contradicts existing literature, which has shown that politicians highlight the issues for which they believe the public view them as more trustworthy or able to deliver (Benoit and Hansen, 2004; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008), which I interpret as follows. During the election campaign, both women and men politicians campaigned on a largely similar set of political issues, largely in line with their party's perceived 'strength' issues. These findings suggests that women politicians are strategic in their campaign messages and adhere to conventional campaign strategies, perhaps to avoid encouraging gender stereotyping and to enhance their electoral success (Devroe, Spáč and Uhlík, 2020), given that research has proposed that citizens tend to draw from gender stereotypes when they are presented with stereotypical information (Bauer, 2015). My findings resound research that has suggested that women politicians are well aware of voter stereotypes and behave in such ways that are intended to forestall negative reactions (Kahn, 1996; Dolan and Kropf, 2004).

My research further challenges party issue ownership theories by its observation that politicians from all groups tried to rectify historical and cultural beliefs about their party's shortcomings. In particular, Labour women tweeted regarding the importance of supporting small business, perhaps in an attempt to change the view that their Party is opposed to business (Valero, 2015), while Conservative women and men tweeted about the importance of workers' rights, possibly to challenge the widespread opinion that their Party is the 'Party for the Rich' (Watts, 2014). Further, Conservative politicians sent significantly more issue tweets regarding the environment than did Labour politicians, which is interesting since the environment is considered a multi-party concern, though care for the natural world is usually more prevalent among left-wing parties and individuals (Neumayer, 2004). Conservative politicians might then have been actively attempting to alter such perceptions. Båtstrand (2015) analysed nine conservative electoral manifestoes worldwide and concluded that, excepting the Republican Party in the U.S., which actively campaigns against implementing environmental measures and

denies anthropogenic climate change,⁵⁸ most conservative parties did lay weight on protecting the environment. However, conservative parties in general are still often portrayed as being neglectful of environmental issues (Fielding *et al.*, 2012). There is accordingly a chance that Conservative politicians were responding to growing anxiety among the public that our natural surroundings are in jeopardy, and by positioning the Conservative Party as a friend to the environment continuing David Cameron's placement of the environment as a major concern in his modernisation agenda for the Conservative Party (Carter and Clements, 2015). The ways in which Conservative politicians associated the environment with traditional Conservative values, notably conserving what is important for future generations, as shown in the thematic analysis, adds further confidence to this conjecture.

Another novel finding is that Conservative politicians framed many issues in terms of party politicisation (economy, the environment, education, and Brexit), whereas Labour politicians only seemed to politicise the issue of education. Party politicisation is the process by which issues are made "subject of party competition" (Carter, 2006, p. 748), which was a recurrent theme across the five political issues explored in the thematic analysis. Conservative politicians asserted their Party's superiority in handling the economy and taxes, Brexit, the environment, education, and gender/sexism. This is perhaps unsurprising in the case of the economy and Brexit, where the Conservative Party has a reputational advantage (Ball, 2014; Dommett, 2015). However, Conservative politicians also contended that their Party was more attentive to the environment, which is a concern that some argue crosses party lines (Carter, 2006) and others that Conservatives are perceived to have a lesser interest in (Båtstrand, 2015). Further, education and gender/sexism are two issues typically associated with the Labour Party and the left (Celis and Erzeel, 2015; Seeberg, 2017). I have two potential explanations for why Conservatives framed these issues in terms of party politicisation. The first one is that Conservative politicians attempted to politicise the environment and

⁵⁸ More recently, this was exemplified by Donald's Trump's Presidential campaign, in which he adopted a highly climate-sceptic narrative and decided to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement (Carter and Little, 2020).

gender/sexism to alter perceptions that their Party is unconcerned with these issues (see for example Fielding *et al.*, 2012). The same reasoning might help explain why Conservative politicians tried to politicise gender and sexism-issues, since feminist campaigners have been highly critical of the Conservative Party, in part because some of its politicians have publicly voiced overtly anti-feminist sentiments (Bryson and Heppell, 2010), among them Dominic Raab, who called feminists 'obnoxious bigots' (Mason, 2019). It is therefore conceivable that Conservative politicians tried to change the perception that their Party is 'anti-feminist'.

A second possible explanation for Conservative politicians seeming politicisation of a wide range of political issues could be their Party's electoral forecasts and position in government during the election period and non-election periods respectively. During the election campaign, the Conservatives were expecting a landslide majority (Tonge, Leston-Bandeira and Wilks-Heeg, 2018), and by emphasising their Party's precedence in a wide variety of issues, not only those with which they are perceived to have a particular interest and competence, could have given them more of a mandate to follow their preferred programme when in government (Budge, 2015). Opposingly, Labour politicians may have expected to be returned to the opposition benches and were therefore more likely to "follow [...] ideological instincts" (Budge, 2015, p. 763), and only politicised issues on which they have perceived competence, such as education (Seeberg, 2017). Robertson (1976) and more recently Budge (2015) have pointed out that parties which expect to lose may also have internal reasons for primarily emphasising their 'owned' issues, because in the case of electoral defeat this would mean that they had lost to their political rivals but without having forsaken their principles. After the election campaign, a similar trend may be visible, due to parties' positions in government, which has been shown to influence which issues politicians are likely to politicise (Thesen, 2013). Incumbent politicians usually boast about their record of accomplishments (Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019), which extends beyond their 'strength' issues. The party in opposition, however, can readily question the declared achievements of the incumbent party, particularly when there is wider dissatisfaction of them, and they relate to a matter traditionally thought of to that opposition.

Another interesting finding was that in the main Conservative politicians mentioned their party leader, whereas Labour politicians largely refrained from this practice. In an increasingly personalised political landscape (McAllister, 2007), Labour's reluctance to name-check their Party leader contrasts with the Conservatives, who very frequently mentioned their leader, particularly when discussing the economy and taxes and Brexit. There are at least three possible explanations for this disparity. The first is simply that May was better-supported by the public and her own MPs than was Corbyn. As noted earlier in this chapter, May had received widespread support from her Party, in addition to which she gained high favourability ratings from the public, while Corbyn was much criticised by his MPs and the public, particularly over his apparently lukewarm support for the EU, and their likeability ratings were related to their perceived willingness and capabilities to deal with Brexit (Gamble, 2018; Harmer and Southern, 2018). A second potential explanation is that Conservatives mentioned May as a kind of symbolic strategy to remind voters of the power and authority associated with the Prime Ministerial post. Denton and colleagues (2019) suggest as much of the presidency in the United States: "The presidency stands for legitimacy, and therefore the person who holds the office is perceived as the natural and logical leader" (p. 65). Transposing this observation to the British setting, where the prime ministership likewise stands for legitimacy and leadership, Conservatives may have wished to stir such thoughts by mentioning May's name or office, which as a strategy was of course was available only to them as incumbents. Finally, I would suggest that Conservatives were keen to name-check their party leader to give an impression of party unity.

The results of the two analyses in this chapter have furthermore provided three important methodological insights which might assist considerations of political communication. The first one, as noted in Chapter 5, is the need to analyse party and gender in tandem. The results in this chapter again demonstrated the importance of analysing gender and party separately and together, because some of the results obtained in the first iteration of the analysis indicated gender- or party-specific differences, whilst the second iteration showed that certain differences in tweet content

could be attributed to the associated effects of gender *and* party. For example, the two-way analysis indicated that Conservative politicians tweeted significantly more regarding the environment than did Labour politicians. However, in the four-way analysis, it was observable that this difference can be attributed to Conservative women tweeting significantly more regarding the environment than did the other three groups of politicians. The second methodological insight, again mentioned in Chapter 5, is the need for research to account for contextuality. The vast majority of research concerning politicians' political issue discourse on Twitter has been performed during election campaigns (for example, Evans, Brown and Wimberly, 2018; Stier *et al.*, 2018; Ross, Jansen and Van de Wijngaert, 2019; Bürger, Jansen and Ross, 2020), but the results in this chapter have shown that gender and party differences are dependent upon circumstances, with some variances in the kinds of political issues under discussion emerging solely in the campaign period, and others only in the two periods outside the election campaign.

The third methodological insight the effectiveness of employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to study politicians' Twitter communication. The results in this chapter could not have been obtained through a quantitative- or qualitative-only approach. On the subject of Brexit, for example, the quantitative analysis showed some significant differences in the *frequencies* at which politicians tweeted related to Brexit, and the qualitative analysis suggested that Labour politicians propounded the deficiencies of the Leave campaign, whereas Conservatives laid weight on the will of the British people and the need for the referendum outcome to be respected. Conservative politicians as before mentioned were also likely to name-check their leader than were Labour politicians, especially when referring to Brexit. In terms of politicians' talk of gender and sexism, the quantitative analysis showed that Labour women were avid tweeters regarding this issue in every period, while Conservative women discussed this theme when the issue of abortion was salient (as in summer 2018). The qualitative analysis further displayed some insights into the ways by which politicians discussed such issues. For example, Conservative politicians were keen to tweet in relation to the representation of women in the upper levels of industry, while

Labour politicians drew attention to the need for a comprehensive gender equality impact assessment of the Budget. In respect of environment-related issues, the quantitative analysis showed that Conservative women and men tweeted significantly more than Labour women and men during the winter period 2017. However, the qualitative analysis revealed some interesting findings, among which was that Labour politicians particularly tweeted about the human role in climate change, and Conservative politicians were likely to emphasise the importance of preserving the environment for future generations and point to the potential of business-led solutions to climate change. It could also be observed that while politicians from all groups seemed to politicise the environment in some way, women politicians had a particular interest in promoting local initiatives to combat climate change. Thus, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods yielded clearer insights into politicians' discussion of political issues than would have been obtained through a quantitative- or qualitative-only approach.

Of course, the current chapter is not without limitations. The first limitation follows from the decision to focus only on politicians in the UK, and therefore, the current findings may not be generalisable to other countries. More particularly, if similar studies were to be conducted in other countries, one might find politicians focusing on different issues, especially because politicians' discussion of issues is often heavily influenced by whichever concerns dominate the current national political agenda. A second limitation is my focusing on MPs from only the Labour and Conservative parties. Had I included politicians from smaller parties, it is likely that the results would have been different to some extent, because research has shown that smaller parties behave differently than established parties, with the former being more responsive to the preferences of their supporters, and the latter are more inclined to cater to 'the median' voter (Adams, et al., 2006). Further, as with most research on politicians' Twitter behaviour, the current study focused on national politics, which enhances the comparability with previous research, but does not contribute to our understanding of local politics. It is likely that an examination of regional or local politicians would have yielded different results, seeing that local politicians would most probably have tweeted more about local issues.

Besides, as with the previous empirical chapter, the analysis in the current chapter relied on observational data only. This means that it remains unclear precisely *why* politicians tweeted regarding certain political issues, and more importantly, it must be noticed that the current study was not able to demonstrate causal relationships with much certainty, because of possible selection biases that one cannot account for. The current study controlled for some confounding variables by design, such as incumbency status, but not control for other possible confounding variables, for example, seat competitiveness, qualification bias, age, class, and personality. Still, with the study of gender, politics, and Twitter being in its infancy, especially in contexts other than the U.S., the current approach yielded interesting insights into politicians' Twitter communication beyond the U.S. paradigm. Finally, this chapter has used a quantitative research method preceding a qualitative method, so that the former could identify gender and party differences in politicians' discussion of political issues, whereas the qualitative component was used to gain a fuller understanding with regards to *how* politicians discussed some of these issues. The current study did not, however, use approaches such as sentiment analysis, since time and space did not allow for such an undertaking; but this might provide an interesting opportunity for further research.

§ 6.8 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to answer the second research question, 'To what extent were gender and party associated with politicians' discussion of political issues on Twitter during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?' The results have demonstrated that gender and party, separately and together, were related to the ways in which politicians discuss political issues, both in terms of frequencies *and* in the tone, focus, and orientation of the tweets that they sent in respect of political issues. Importantly, the chapter has made some novel contributions to existing literature, in particular by complementing the quantitative content analysis with a qualitative thematic analysis, which allowed for a more nuanced account of politicians' discussion of political issues on Twitter. Previous research investigating political issues in politicians' tweets is invariably quantitative in method and although these studies have provided the scholarly community with invaluable insights into politicians' political issue emphasis on Twitter, such approaches are not concerned with the nature of these tweets, because they are

generally confined to estimating how often specified groups of politicians tweet on certain issues. By moving beyond numbers and statistics, I was better able to offer some suggestions for why gender and party differences occurred, while being better placed to explore the complexities of politicians' discussion of political issues. The following chapter will also use a qualitative method to consider another common characteristic of politicians' tweets – personalisation.

Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation

This chapter sets out to answer the third research question: ‘To what extent were gender and party associated with the ways in which British politicians personalised their tweets during and after the 2017 General Election campaign?’ I begin by contextualising the two thematic analyses, and then present the first analysis at § 7.2 *First analysis: politicising the personal*. The aim of this analysis was to explore if and how gender and party were associated with the content and tone of personal tweets. This analysis explored all tweets coded as personal tweets in the manual content analysis that was conducted in *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*. The manual content analysis coded 12,000 tweets for tweet type, and one of the categories was ‘personal’, and 479 were coded as personal tweets. These were tweets that did not pertain to politics, which included, for example, remarks on television shows and hobbies. The subsequent section, § 7.3 *Second analysis: personalising the political*, presents the second analysis, which studied a random sub-sample of 400 tweets, stratified along gender and party lines, drawn from the complete dataset of original tweets ($n = 82,456$). The analysis intended to discover whether gender and party were associated with the ways in which politicians included personal information in *any* of their tweets. Whereas the first analysis looked at the content and tone of *personal* tweets, the second analysis surveyed a random selection of *all* tweets and investigated the presence of personal commentary. Together, these analyses shed light on the ways in which, I propose, politicians used personal information to construct an ‘authentic’ identity intended for public approbation. In their personal tweets, politicians tweeted about things such as sports events to show their ‘ordinariness’, and in their political tweets, they used various tactics to appear relatable, and blended the personal with the political. I suggest that politicians might use these personalisation tactics to convey a sense of ‘authenticity’ to voters. I position the findings of the chapter within the larger field of research at § 7.4 *Discussion*, and briefly summarise the main findings of this chapter at § 7.5 *Conclusion*.

§ 7.1 Context

The first analysis focused on tweets coded as personal tweets in the manual content analyses carried out in *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*. The manual content analysis coded three datasets and each dataset comprised 4,000 tweets (1,000 from each group: LabW, ConsW, LabM, and ConsM). All tweets were coded for ‘tweet type’, one of these types being ‘personal’, that is, a tweet whose content was unconcerned with politics. The results showed that the number of personal tweets was slight: across the three samples, which constituted 12,000 tweets, a total of 479 tweets (3%) were coded as ‘personal’. The low number of personal tweets found in my study accords with other research conducted in the UK, including that of Graham *et al.* (2013), who analysed Conservative and Labour candidates’ tweets during the 2010 UK General Election and found that only 6% of tweets in their sample were unrelated to politics. However, the small percentages of personal tweets recorded in both Graham *et al.* (2013) and this thesis are much lower than those reported in North American studies. Evans *et al.* (2014), for example, report that personal tweets comprised 29% of candidates’ tweets in the two months preceding the 2012 House of Representatives election, and in Chapter 5, I proposed two explanations for these contrasting research findings. First, in the UK, the vote choice is still largely guided by affinity to political parties and not individual candidates, whereas in the U.S., the significance of party identities has declined (Norris, 2000; Stanyer, 2008), and second, there might be a difference in the coding decisions of the researchers. For example, Evans *et al.* (2014) considered tweets referencing the September 11 attacks as personal, while I deemed tweets in which politicians reflected on two recent terrorist attacks in the UK as political tweets.

Although the number of personal tweets in my research is minor in comparison with other kinds, such as user interaction and issue-related tweets, an exploration of such tweets is arguably still justified because of the prominent place that personalisation holds in political communication literature (McAllister, 2007; Graham, Jackson and Broersma, 2018). As observed in the theoretical framework (Chapter 3), personalisation marks a shift from the political to the personal sphere, with an increased focus upon the

personal lives and personal qualities of politicians (Langer, 2010). Further, personalisation is a key aspect of social media research in relation to political communication (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; McGregor, Lawrence and Cardona, 2017), particularly because social media allow for more personalised communications that bypass possible interference from traditional media (Aalberts and Kreijveld, 2011). Moreover, *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content* reported that outside the election period, women politicians, particularly Labour women, sent more personal tweets than did men politicians. However, simple enumeration can only reveal certain aspects of Twitter behaviour; it cannot tell us anything regarding the substance, tone, or orientation of personal tweets. During the coding process of the manual content analysis, I encountered tweets that were potentially relevant to my research questions, but the coding alone was unable to capture the potential complexity of such tweets. I therefore concluded it necessary to more closely examine the content of politicians' personal tweets. This is especially important because research on news coverage suggests that gender and personalisation interact in important ways, as when a disproportionate focus is placed upon the personalities and personal aspects when reporting on female politicians (Heldman, Carroll and Olson, 2005; Ross, 2010; Van Der Pas and Aaldering, 2020). Further exploration of the ways that politicians personalised their messages is therefore warranted, and accordingly, the first analysis considered the form and apparent meaning of the 479 personal tweets to identify the potential bearing of gender or party on their content.

The second analysis, contrastingly, intended to explore whether, and if so how, politicians included personalised elements in *any* of their tweets, for which end I employed a thematic analysis of 400 tweets. As expounded in the theoretical framework, this thesis adopted Kruikemeier's (2014) straightforward definition of personalisation on Twitter as the "focus on candidates' private life, emotions and activities" (p. 133). I randomly selected 100 tweets from each group of politicians (LabW, ConsW, LabM and ConsM) from the complete dataset of original tweets (82,456 tweets in total: 38,255 in the first dataset, 28,649 in the second dataset, and 15,552 in the third dataset); see *Chapter 4: Epistemology, Methodology, and Methods*. I decided

to draw a sample from the complete dataset, rather than the manually coded 12,000 tweets, to make greater use of the larger dataset. Besides, drawing a new sample which excluded the coded tweets allowed me a ‘fresh’ perspective on personalisation tactics. It should be noted that the decision to look for personalisation practices in all tweets, rather than just within personal tweets, arose when coding the 12,000-tweet sample, at which time I noticed that although politicians rarely sent wholly personal tweets, they did relate aspects of their personal lives when discussing political matters. There were many instances of politicians attaching personal details to political issues and in such cases, I coded the tweet as an ‘issue’ tweet rather than a personal tweet. Consequently, the content analysis alone would be insufficient to draw out the subtleties in the ways that politicians personalised their tweets. I therefore decided to carry out a more sophisticated, twofold analysis to better consider how politicians personalise their political tweets and seek potential reasons for their doing so. The co-operative analyses that follow discuss how politicians politicise the personal (first analysis) and personalise the political (second analysis).

§ 7.2 First analysis: politicising the personal

I identified three self-presentational strategies in the 479 personal tweets. In 324 tweets (68%), it seems that politicians attempted to portray themselves as relatable, by sharing their personal interests and tastes (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016). In 38 tweets (8%), politicians offered glimpses into their personal lives, perhaps wishing to humanise themselves to their audience, with whom they seek to develop a closer connection (Bentivegna, 2015). Finally, in 2 tweets (<1%), I suggest that politicians attempted to present themselves as genuine public servants, by emphasising that they entered politics for the ‘right’ reasons (Fawcett and Corbett, 2018). I deemed a discussion of only two tweets justifiable because in qualitative research, rare phenomena should receive the same attention as more commonplace occurrences (Atieno, 2009), and within thematic analysis, there is no minimum number of times a theme must be present for it to be considered a theme (Hawkins, 2017).

These three differing self-presentational strategies will now be discussed in turn.

The Relatable Politician

Out of the 479 personal tweets in the sample, 324 tweets concerned politicians' personal tastes and interests (68%), generally in the form of comments on sports events and television shows. Out of the 324 personal tweets in this category, 134 related to sports events. The most widely discussed sport by far was football (84 out of 134 sports tweets), followed by rugby (12/134 tweets) and cricket (12/134 tweets). Other sports (22/134) mentioned included athletics (7), boxing (2), tennis (3) and horseracing (2). In this sample, Labour men and Conservative women were the most avid sports tweeters, and a closer look reveals that most such tweets that they sent were about football. Sporting events are often hyper-masculinised (Messner, Dunbar and Hunt, 2000), in particular football (Meân, 2010), which is reflected within the Labour Party, of whom mainly men politicians tweeted about football and sport generally, and thus seem to have been more willing to try to exploit the widespread popularity of sport. However, within the Conservative Party the opposite habit could be observed, with mostly Conservative women tweeting on football and other sports. Examples are provided by Jonathan Reynolds (LabM), who tweeted about Sunderland FC, and Tracey Crouch (ConsW), who, being a fan of a rival London football team, offered light-heartedly reluctant congratulations to Chelsea FC for their victorious 2016-17 Premier League campaign (see Figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1 Examples of 'personal interest' tweets (sports)

Note. Left tweet sent by Jonathan Reynolds, Labour man (left) and right tweet sent by Tracey Crouch, Conservative woman (right)

After sports, politicians most commonly opined on various television shows, with 111 of the 324 personal tweets containing such remarks. The most frequently mentioned television shows were the finals of the Eurovision Song Contests of 2017 and 2018, which took place during the first and third time periods,⁵⁹ and are part of one of the most widely watched non-sporting events worldwide (Stockemer *et al.*, 2018). A total of 60 tweets concerned the Eurovision Song Contest, and it can be observed that tweets on this event were more or less equally popular among three of the four groups of politicians, the exception being Conservative men, who seem to have tweeted less on this topic. For example, Caroline Flint (LabW) commented on the presenters of the Eurovision Song Contest (see Figure 2, left), whereas Nicky Morgan (ConsW) wrote: “Thank you Australia - 12 points for @luciejones1 #Eurovision” (14 May 2017), Lucie Jones being the UK’s representative that year. Further, Julian Knight (ConsM), perhaps keen to display his knowledge of popular culture, tweeted, “Err...isnt [sic] Germany's entry basically Titanium? #Eurovision2017” (13 May 2017), ‘Titanium’ being the name of a successful pop song produced by David Guetta and featuring the vocals of Sia, which had been released in 2011. Another television programme discussed was the BBC’s *Strictly Come Dancing*⁶⁰ (9 tweets), but only by women politicians of those sampled, which is perhaps because the series is generally more popular among women viewers (National Audit Office, 2017). For example, Mims Davies (ConsW) tweeted in defence of one of the show’s contestants (see Figure 2, right). Television shows with fewer mentions include *Britain’s Got Talent*, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Awards, and TV-broadcasted films.

⁵⁹ The first data collection period ran from 8 May – 8 June 2017, and the third from 8 May – 8 June 2018, exactly one year later. The *Eurovision Song Contest 2017* final took place on 13 May 2017, and the *Eurovision Song Contest 2018* final took place on 12 May 2018.

⁶⁰ *Strictly Come Dancing* is a British televised dance contest, broadcast on BBC One. In the show, British celebrities pair up with professional dancers to compete against each other.



Figure 7.2 Examples of ‘personal interest’ tweets (television)

Note. Tweets sent by Caroline Flint, Labour woman (left) and Mims Davies, Conservative woman (right)

Other personal interests shared by politicians included comments about their favourite music ($n = 33$), photographs of dogs and cats ($n = 19$, of which 16 were of dogs and 3 were of cats), nature photographs that they had taken ($n = 18$), and remarks about food ($n = 9$). Tweets about music (33 tweets) generally comprised comments on album releases from artists they admire, festivals or concerts that they had attended, or remarks on songs or artists of which they were fond. For instance, Ian Lucas (LabM) tweeted, “Magical <https://t.co/phw3Nftgz8>” (20 November 2017) with an embedded audio file from Spotify, playing a sample of the song ‘Love is Blue’ by Paul Mauriat. The shared photographs of dogs and cats were mostly taken during campaigning activities or at polling stations (14/19 tweets), the others were of their own pets (5/19). Anne-Marie Trevelyan (ConsW) tweeted a picture of her hugging a golden retriever (Figure 7.3, left), which I surmise to be from a household at which she was canvassing as part of her campaigning activities. Another example is provided by Kevan Jones (LabM) (Figure 7.3, right), who sent a picture of what is presumably one of his own dogs and its ‘pal’. Similarly, Albert Owen (LabM) sent a tweet in which he refers familiarly to his dog: “Wakey-wakey ! First thing this morning and Pippa wants a Bank Holiday lie-in <https://t.co/VM9K4K85Nu>” (29 May 2017). This tweet contained a photo of Owen’s dog sleeping upside-down in a dog basket. Interestingly, almost all tweets regarding dogs and cats in the sample were sent by Conservative politicians, most of them women.



Figure 7.3 Examples of ‘personal interests’ tweets (pets)

Note. Tweets sent by Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Conservative woman (left) and Kevan Jones, Labour man (right)

Tweets concerning nature (18 tweets) mostly featured scenic photographs which were presumably taken by the politician. For example, George Freeman (ConsM) tweeted, “Autumn. #NoFilter <https://t.co/sxM8ILti3i>” (19 November 2017), and included a link to his personal Instagram page, where he shared a photograph of golden-leaved tree branches. Tweets on food (9 tweets) mainly contained remarks about restaurants where the politician had lately eaten. Among them was a tweet by Michael Dugher (LabM), who described having “Salmon, prawn, bacon, asparagus, tomatoes, chilli, garlic, lemon, basil. Salsa verde & potatoes. @jamieoliver genius <https://t.co/URo3JWG1W8>” (3 June 2017), accompanying this list with a photograph of said meal taken in a restaurant.

Politicians are often advised to ‘humanise’ themselves (Hermans and Vergeer, 2013; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020), and research has shown an increasing desire among politicians to be seen as “personable”, particularly on social media (Colliander *et al.*, 2017, p. 277), since it enables politicians to quickly and widely share personal insights (Aalberts and Kreijveld, 2011). A common way politicians attempt to present

themselves as likeable is by sharing an affinity for the same popular interests of citizens (Stanyer and Wring, 2004), among which are sports (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011) and television shows (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016). Stanyer and Wring (2004) argue that politicians sharing interests similar to those of the electorate is a common feature of personality-based campaigning, which has steadily become a key aspect of politics across the globe, both during and outside of election campaigns. Aalberts and Kreijveld (2011) questioned personality-based campaigning by arguing that politicians' personalities play too prominent a role at the cost of political substance, while Coleman (2006) argues that there is a great need for politicians to appear relatable. After surveying *Big Brother*⁶¹ viewers with open-ended questions on the 2005 UK general election, Coleman (2006) found that respondents preferred politicians who appear approachable, and judged their qualities in a manner alike they would when forming personal friendships.

The motivation for politicians discussing sports and television shows could be sought through Benedict Andersons' concept of imagined communities. In his influential work *Imagined Communities* (2006), Anderson propounds that the nation is an imagined political community, the members of which are too numerous for us to know personally, and so our bond with them is instead mentally conceived. The people who use social media platforms are equally unknowable, and consequently, social media users create and attend to an imagined audience (Litt, 2012). Politicians have obvious incentives for amassing large numbers of followers: they want to broadcast to and interact with as wide an audience as possible, and they "depend on wide social networks to advance their status" (Chambers, 2013, p. 13). The politicians under study also had a large base of followers: Conservative politicians had 26,527 followers on average, and Labour politicians 42,205 followers on average (Brownlie, 2019). Politicians cannot be acquainted with most of their followers, and they are therefore tweeting to an 'imagined community'. In doing so, they might modify their self-presentations to match their

⁶¹ *Big Brother* is a reality television show based on a Dutch TV series of the same name, which was created by television producer and media tycoon John de Mol. The series follows the daily lives of a diverse group of contestants, who live together under constant surveillance in isolation from the outside world.

understanding of the nature of this community (Chambers, 2013). This could explain why politicians were keen to discuss football and the Eurovision Song Contest: they abstracted that these entertainments were popular among their followers. Anderson did not consider gender differences in his idea of 'imagined communities', but some of the gender difference that I report here might hint at the existence of variances in the manner in which women and men politicians interact with their imagined communities. Perhaps women and men politicians felt constrained by their gender and associated notions of femininity and masculinity. Men politicians might have felt less inclined than women politicians to tweet on televised shows like *Strictly Come Dancing*, lest they be thought by some of their imagined community as insufficiently masculine or serious and in turn less competent for the rigours of politics. But again, this qualitative investigation made use of a small sample size, and therefore one should be particularly cautious when drawing conclusions regarding gender and party differences.

I further suggest that one motivation for politicians in the sample to share their personal interests on Twitter is to humanise their images in the eyes of the public, and therethrough achieve a bond with voters (Bentivegna, 2015; López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017). Football and television shows such as the Eurovision Song Contest and *Strictly Come Dancing* being consistently very popular with the general public (Granger, 2018; Kelly, 2018), it is possible that while they might well have genuinely enjoyed these entertainments, politicians tweeted about them to appear 'relatable' and thereby give an impression to citizens that they are "ordinary human being[s]" (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011, p. 90). Politicians' focus on commonality might have been an attempt to dispel the negative connotations of 'professional politician' (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016), which will be more fully explored in § 7.3 *Second analysis: personalising the political*. Politicians' enjoyment of popular television programmes and sports might have been wholly or partly affected, but it could be that the coincidence of genuine shared interests between politicians the public produced the concomitant benefit of relatability.

The Familiar Politician and their Private Lives

Out of the 479-personal tweets sample, a small proportion ($n = 38$) included information about a politician's private life, such as their family, hobbies or domestic tasks. Johnny Mercer, for example, in one of his tweets shared a link to his Instagram account, where he had posted a photo of his daughter in a lake, and in the other tweet he posted a photo of himself holding one of his children. In a total of 23 tweets, politicians made reference to their family members, such as their children, parents, spouses, or wider family members.. One of them, Paula Sherriff (LabW) tweeted: "Lovely long overdue catch up with youngest niece today. Oddly enough my purse seems a bit lighter this evening 🎉 worth every penny!" (28 May 2018). Another example is provided by Pat McFadden (LabM): "Hard to believe my beautiful boy is 8 years old today.

<https://t.co/PiZhArGfwF>, (26 November 2017) with a web link to a YouTube video of Bruce Springsteen's song 'My Hometown'.

Further, Holly Lynch (Lab) announced her pregnancy and Darren Jones (Lab) informed his audience that he was not at work because he was awaiting the birth of his first child (see Figure 7.4). It could be that Lynch and Jones made these announcements publicly because they were naturally very excited and wished to share their news, and in part might have wished to familiarise themselves to the public by disclosing what traditionally would be privately communicated (Graham, Broersma and Hazelhoff, 2013 b). Another possible reasoning for Lynch and Jones's announcements is that they wanted to notify and justify their absence from work-related activity. This is further suggested by the link Lynch included in her tweet – a news article about her maternity leave – while Jones stressed that the birth of his child was the reason for his absence from the House of Commons.



Figure 7.4 Examples of ‘private lives’ tweets (babies)

Note. Tweets sent by Holly Lynch, Labour woman (left) and Darren Jones, Labour man (right)

There were very few examples of politicians sending tweets relating to caregiving and domestic tasks, such as cleaning, helping their children with homework, and gardening. It is noteworthy that such tweets were only sent by women politicians, though it is of course possible there were similar tweets from men politicians which fell outside the sample 479 personal tweets and out of the larger 12,000-tweet sample.⁶² An example is provided by Mims Davies (ConsW): “It’s @HouseofCommons recess so today briefly reminded myself, I actually still do have a hoover, I can easily work it & that my flat’s carpets do just occasionally need just a tiny amount of care and attention 🧹 #WednesdayWisdom <https://t.co/Jx9FKcvPIr>” (30 May 2018). This distinction is in line with the research of McGregor *et al.* (2017), who found in their qualitative analysis of social media posts by gubernatorial candidates in the U.S. that while both women and men politicians portrayed themselves as loving, dedicated family members, only women politicians shared images of themselves cooking, cleaning, and assisting their children with homework. Although the aim of qualitative studies is usually not to infer causality, and the variance is too high because of the small sample size, it is interesting that this gender difference accords with previous research, such as the findings of McGregor *et al.* (2017). This might be explainable by, firstly, the persistence of a long-standing gender divide in the expected roles of women and men, with women still having more

⁶² I refer to the 12,000-tweet sample here, because all these 12,000 tweets were scrutinised for ‘personal’ content, and so the number of caregiving and domestic tasks in the personal tweet category represents the number of such tweets in the larger sample.

household and childcare duties than have men, and though this gap has narrowed greatly, partly through the increase of women in full-time careers, research shows that it remains firmly in place (Cerrato and Cifre, 2018). It is therefore possible that the men politicians were simply less involved with domestic duties and therefore had no reason to tweet about them. Secondly, and relatedly, since women carrying out household chores like cooking and cleaning accords with long-held cultural understandings of the gendered order (Julier and Lindenfeld, 2005), men politicians in the sample who did engage in household activities to the same extent as women politicians might still have felt less inclined to tweet about it because it is contrary to deeply ingrained assumptions of their masculine responsibilities. Interestingly, one of the tweets sent by Jess Phillips, clearly goes against the normative assumption that women are associated with household chores: Love that someone wanted to insult me by saying my clothes needed ironing, it's true they do being as I don't own an iron it will remain the case. #lifestoshort" (3 December 2017).

It is interesting to note that politicians in the sample scarcely drew upon their personal lives to humanise themselves, while self-disclosure, whereby politicians choose to reveal aspects of their personal lives such as familial information, is an important aspect of personalised politics (Stanyer, 2007), which can be used as useful resources for politicians' identity-building (Corner, 2003) which could 'humanise' politicians in the eyes of their audience (Bentivegna, 2015). There could be numerous reasons for politicians' reluctance to divulge information about their private lives. Perhaps wishing to appear businesslike at all times, they saw no merit in promulgating politically irrelevant matter, or felt that by doing so they could share knowledge, possibly inadvertently, that posed a risk to their mental/physical wellbeing and privacy or that of their family. This would agree with the research of Driessens, Raeymaeckers, Verstraeten, and Vandenbussche (2010), whose in-depth interviews with Flemish politicians revealed a reluctance among these politicians to share information about their private lives, for they believed that such disclosures are not politically worthwhile and could lead to diminished privacy. The Flemish politicians also mentioned their unwillingness to share information about their family members, who have not chosen to

live in the public gaze (Driessens *et al.*, 2010). British politicians might have had similar motivations for avoiding personal revelations. Another potential reason is the belief that the sharing of personal information will have undesired consequences that outweigh any potential benefits. Research has produced mixed results as pertains to the repercussions of politicians disclosing personal information (see § 3.4 *Theoretical framework*), but some evidence suggests that it may have negative consequences. Parmelee and Bichard (2012), for example, conclude that unsuccessful candidates in the 2010 U.S. senate and gubernatorial elections had while campaigning sent more tweets of a personal nature than had winning candidates. Politicians might be reluctant to tweet on personal rather than political topics as they may be thought of as unduly preoccupied with their private rather than professional concerns (Kruikemeier, 2014). It could also be that British politicians might have wanted to minimise discussions of their private lives for fear that the public would think them overeager to look 'ordinary' to the point that it seems a contrivance, and so actually makes them appear more out of touch (Langer, 2010). Another potential drawback for politicians sharing personal information is that it can lead to public ridicule. One such historic example in British politics is the widespread derision of former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, who, having repeatedly emphasised the importance of 'the family' and 'family values' (Stacey, 1998) and being known to use his family to support this ethos, was embarrassed when in 2000 his 16-year-old son was arrested for being drunk and incapable (BBC News, 2000). The sharing of personal information may also lead to privacy conflicts, especially in the UK, where the press is seen as more intrusive than in other countries and where politicians' personal lives are seen as fair game for journalists (Deacon, 2004).⁶³ If politicians open their private lives to public view, it makes it harder for them to criticise invasions of privacy by the press (Stanyer, 2007). Finally, when politicians use social media such as Twitter to project what they imagine is an appealing representation of themselves, they have full control over what they share, but Twitter feeds are often used as news sources (Brands, Graham and Broersma, 2018), and tweets can be used by news media without full context and in such a way contrary to the politician's intent.

⁶³ Deacon (2004) also mentions that a fascination with politicians' private lives is not uniformly evident across all sectors of the British media.

The Genuine Politician

I identified two noteworthy and untypical tweets in the sample of personal tweets, which were sent by Labour politicians Cat Smith and Chris Bryant during the election campaign, and which concerned their motivation for becoming involved in politics. Smith's text, together with an image of worn-out shoes, suggests that her involvement in politics was inspired by the fight against poverty and inequality. Bryant uploaded a video⁶⁴ in which he relates his difficult past, including the loss of his mother to alcohol addiction when he was a teenager. Bryant expressed gratitude for the strong support he received from his schoolteachers, members of his church, and people in the wider community. Bryant's desire to pursue a political career, he further explained in the video, was to give something back to society. In his own words, "in the end when you can go to Parliament, pass a law, which for instance means no one will ever drop cluster munitions again, you know you saved lives, that's what politics is all about for me: changing the world so you can save people's lives, so you can give them a decent chance in life". Although Bryant's tweet was much more personal and detailed than Smith's, it appears that they both displayed their humanity and their genuineness are alike, which are important qualities citizens look for in politicians (Coleman, 2006). Smith and Bryant might have wanted voters to be clear that they went into politics for the 'right' reasons, namely out of a sense of public good and a passion for positive change, rather than for self-gain (Fawcett and Corbett, 2018).

⁶⁴ It is worth noting that the use of short videos by candidates to introduce themselves has become an increasing trend in online political communication in recent years (Enli, 2015b), and Twitter themselves in their guidance for political campaigning say that '[i]ncorporating video into your content strategy makes your message memorable and increases engagement. In fact, Tweets with video attracted 10X more engagements than Tweets without video' (Twitter, 2019). Enli (2015b) thinks that social media and online campaign videos enable politicians to construct an 'authentic' image.



Figure 7.5 Examples of 'genuine' tweets

Note. Tweets sent Cat Smith, Labour woman (left) Chris Bryant, Labour man (right), link to Bryant's tweet: <https://twitter.com/RhonddaBryant/status/871453643186327552>

Bryant perhaps wished also to stress his ordinariness, having entered politics without a particularly privileged background (Atkins and Finlayson, 2013). By mentioning his upbringing, he positioned himself with 'ordinary people', and distanced himself from the perception common among voters that many politicians are of advantaged status and have little knowledge of the people whom they wish to represent (Cameron and Shaw, 2016). It is perhaps not surprising that both tweets were sent by Labour politicians, since their electoral base have historically been working-class (Lawton, 2005). Bryant may have referred to his past in the hope that he would be seen as down-to-earth and more attentive to the problems facing ordinary citizens (Carnes and Sadin, 2015). By talking about the loss of his mother to alcohol addiction, he may have tried to emphasise that he has faced the kind of hardships familiar to many. Stanyer and Wring (2004) have argued that politicians typically construct a suitable autobiography by relating stories of overcoming adversity. Talking of personal difficulties requires politicians to show their vulnerability, as Bryant did in his video. This might be an effective strategy, since politicians are often seen as brave or even heroic for making their vulnerability public (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016). Importantly, Bryant in his

video made a clear connection between the personal and the political, a concept that is further explored in the second analysis. However, the personal tweets of Smith and particularly Bryant were in a way extraordinary, as hardly any other politicians in the sample afforded citizens such personal accounts and instead confined themselves to relatively trivial remarks on football matches or television shows.

§ 7.3 Second analysis: personalising the political

Whereas the previous analysis was tweets coded as ‘personal’ tweets, this analysis was of a random selection of 400 tweets from *all* tweets gathered ($n = 18,456$). In this 400-tweet sample, I identified a total of 61 tweets (15%) in which politicians included something of a personal nature. Specifically, 9 tweets contained an element of personalisation by the politician disclosing an aspect of their own identity; 8 by mentioning non-political occupations; 23 by emphasising their own political contribution; 9 by recalling constituents’ experiences; and 11 by sharing personal experiences.

These personalisings will now be discussed in turn.

Personalisation through own identity

One way in which politicians personalised their political tweets was to link a political issue to their own identity, for example by revealing how they were personally affected by that issue. This personalisation was found in nine tweets in the sample. An illustrative example is provided by Labour politician Rupa Huq (see Figure 7.1, left), who shared a video in which she related her own experience of being frequently stopped and searched by the police, the reason for which, she believed, was because “my face does not fit” and her having “the wrong pigmentation”. She asserted that these stop-and-searches happened too at Parliament, and although she does not clarify who carried them out, she was likely referring to Parliamentary security staff. During her speech, as can be seen in the video, Huq pointed towards her party colleague Dianne Abbott⁶⁵ (then Shadow Home Secretary), whom she referred to as her “Rt Hon friend who’s been here for many, many years, I’m sure this is not a completely alien scenario to her to be reporting”. Huq’s distressing personal experiences helped her make a forceful point

⁶⁵ In 1987, Diane Abbott became the UK’s first black Member of Parliament (Turner, 2018) and is known to be a frequent target of misogynistic and racial abuse, often by way of Twitter (Dhrodia, 2017).

about a phenomenon that affects many others across the UK: the unjust practice of racial profiling by what she termed 'authorities', presumably meaning law enforcement authorities.



Figure 7.6 Examples of 'personal identity' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Rupa Huq, Labour woman (left) and Rachel Maclean, Conservative woman (right)

A different example is provided by Conservative politician Rachel Maclean (see Figure 7.6, right), who recounted how she supported her children through the 'stressful period' of examinations. Maclean's experience as a mother of four was put to use to assert the importance of mental health support for secondary school pupils and to offer a sense of empathy with the many parents in similar situations. Whilst Huq and Maclean both seemed to be using their identities to personalise a political point, there are critical distinctions. Huq spoke of the prejudices that her appearance has stirred to confront the practice of racial profiling, and thus urge that action be taken, whereas Maclean seems to have used her motherhood partly to promote the apparently beneficent action already planned by her party. In general though, by using this personalisation tactic, politicians such as Huq and Maclean may have wished to show their human side: they are not only legislators, but also members of the public and are affected likewise by the laws that they help to create, and can therethrough find some sense of shared identity with the

public (Bentivegna, 2015).

Politicians invariably personalise the fears and difficulties faced by wider society, and in cases like Huq's, this kind of personalisation is almost unavoidable – she could hardly omit her own mistreatment when endeavouring to illustrate the scale of the problem to others. There is no need to feign sincerity in such matters, because the politician is speaking from a position of direct and recent experience, and their determination to find solutions can scarcely be questioned. Maclean, too, can point to her undergoing exam-related stress, though on this occasion she is speaking on behalf of her children and their peers throughout the country. The personalisation techniques by which politicians linked the political to the personal, might make them look more sincere in their determination to solve the issue at hand, and less like 'career politicians'. This ties in with the research of Fawcett and Corbett (2018), who organised 12 focus groups and conducted 15 interviews with civil servants from the Australian Public Service on political professionalisation and its impacts. They found that civil servants hold the most negative views about so-called career politicians, who they suggest are driven by self-interest and lack authenticity. Politicians often make every effort to appear as women or men of the people (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016), though attempting so on Twitter has its hazards. There are examples in British politics where politicians received public mockery for *trying* to display authenticity on Twitter, but rather looking contrived and out-of-touch. For instance, George Osborne – Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time – tweeted in 2014 a photo of himself working late on a spending review while eating a takeaway that turned out to be a fairly posh Byron burger (Cresci, 2014). Nonetheless, most politicians are not dissuaded, and Lee and Oh's (2012) research suggests that personalised messages might stimulate greater interest in the message and the politician in a more positive way. Thus, politicians often politicise certain aspects of their private lives to uphold their political values and particularly in the example of Huq, to fight against an injustice.

A rather different form of self-identification was based on localism. A total of three politicians referred to their geographical roots, among them Andy Slaughter (Lab), who

observed, “I see I am the only Party candidate for Hammersmith who lives in the constituency (though the Tory [Charlie Dewhirst] seems shy to admit he doesn't) <https://t.co/nVZW8mYEqn>” (13 May 2017) and Jeff Smith (LabM), who tweeted, “I've lived in this area all my life & I've seen how it has become harder to get a council house or a secure rental home. Labour's plan ↓ <https://t.co/fEAsscsO5q>” (7 June 2017), here including a short video of himself explaining this plan. Politicians also emphasised their localness in a more implicit manner by, for example, showing their support for local sports clubs (Milazzo and Townsley, 2020), which could also be observed in the sample. In a response to the official Leeds United Football Club Twitter account, which asked its followers which of three classic goals scored by their ex-striker Tony Yeboah in three different matches in 1995 was their favourite, John Mann (LabM) tweeted that he had attended all three matches, but had another performance in mind: “I was at all three, but none beats Eddie Gray v Burnley. <https://t.co/7GPym45GXR>”. Eddie Gray scored two goals – the second of which is particularly considered among the club's very best – against Burnley in a 1970 league match, and so Mann seemingly made a point of his loyal and longstanding support of his local team, perhaps intending to appear more relatable to some of his followers. UK elections are becoming increasingly localised, with the importance of the regional identity of candidates growing correspondingly (Campbell and Cowley, 2014), and research has shown that voters prefer politicians with firm local roots (Campbell and Cowley, 2014; Campbell *et al.*, 2019; Horiuchi, Smith and Yamamoto, 2020). Campbell and Cowley (2014) carried out an experimental study and showed that, even when controlling for political party, the candidate's place of residence has the greatest positive influence on how voters appraise them, more so than education, occupation, religion, gender and age. Candidates not local to the area in which they are running were been penalised by voters (Campbell and Cowley, 2014), which could explain why some of the sampled politicians pointed out their local roots.

By being the only 'Party candidate' (one candidate was an Independent) to live in the Hammersmith constituency, Slaughter had a ready-made jibe to direct the other party candidates, from whom he picked out Conservative MP Charlie Dewhirst, who gave a street address with a postcode on the 'Statement of Persons Nominated and

Notice of Poll', rather than declaring an 'address in the x constituency', and his home was actually located in the constituency of Chelsea and Fulham. The politician's residency may therefore be used as an electoral asset, by reassuring potential voters that not only is the politician working for the community, but is also part of the community (Stanyer, 2008), enabling them to say that they have, or it is implicitly assumed that they have, a better idea of the needs and wishes of local residents (Collignon and Sajuria, 2018) than candidates living outside the constituency. This is evident in Smith's tweets, where he directly links his 'localness' to a political issue by stating that because he has "lived in this area all [his] life", this contributes to his informed understanding of the housing crisis.

Personalisation through occupation

Another strategy that politicians seemed to employ to personalise political tweets was by mentioning their expertise in a particular field. Of the 400 tweets in the sub-sample, 9 included a reference to the politician's previous occupation. Research has shown that a candidate's occupational background can serve as a powerful heuristic for voters (Campbell & Cowley, 2014; Milazzo & Townsley, 2018), and one obvious explanation for politicians' drawing upon their past experience is to inform of specialisms in politics or which are in other ways politically expedient, and thereby offer a stronger impression of competence. Examples of politicians mentioning their previous political experience include Andy Slaughter (LabM), who wrote "As a former Shadow Housing Minister I am proud of our New Deal on Housing which will tackle the housing crisis

<https://t.co/s2BNcebHYz>" (6 June 2017), and Greg Hands (ConsM), who tweeted, "As a former Treasury Minister, I miss many aspects of Budget Day, but not necessarily the box work. This from the 2015 Spending Review! <https://t.co/VkILkWeTe0>" (22 November 2017). It could be that politicians pointed out their former employments in Westminster to let voters know that they are working in areas for which they have knowledge gained by experience, or to remind them of an important political office they formerly held, and perhaps even to show they possess the power and influence to shape national policies (Gulati, 2004), which in every case would require voters to accept at face value that the politician was or is actually as good at their role as they

wish to appear.

Other politicians made a point of their previous experience outside politics, such as Holly Lynch (LabW), who remarked that she used to work in a pharmacy (see Figure 7.7, left) when saying that she appreciates the importance of communities having local access to pharmacies, and a like observation was made by Helen Grant (ConsW), who mentioned her previous employment as a solicitor (see Figure 7.7, right) when commenting that she has an informed appreciation of the work done by a law society in and around her constituency. It happens that Lynch's noted occupational background is ostensibly humbler than Grant's, which might appear in a way fitting, given the traditions of their respective parties (though Grant was first a member of Labour), and there could be a sense that their intended audience would think more highly of one of these employments than the other, depending upon their ideas of what constitutes a worthy vocation.



Figure 7.7 Examples of 'previous working experience' tweets.

Note. Tweets sent by Holly Lynch, Labour woman (left) and Helen Grant, Conservative woman (right)

A straightforward reason for politicians to cite their previous occupations or experiences is to give evidence of their fitness for upholding constituents' interests in a particular area (Milazzo and Townsley, 2020). For those who mention occupational experience *outside* politics, there is a chance that they seek to reassure people that they are not careerist politicians who have lost touch with the everyday concerns of the general population (Stanyer and Wring, 2004). Politicians as a group have of course never been universally popular (Fawcett and Corbett, 2018), but public opinion surveys show that cynicism and disaffection towards politicians are actually on the rise (Stoker *et al.*, 2017; Clarke *et al.*, 2018), one sign of which has been a marked decline in deference towards political elites (Stanyer and Wring, 2004; Graham and Schwanholz, 2020). One prevailing explanation for this trend is the 'professionalisation' of politicians (Fawcett and Corbett, 2018), with an increasing number of politicians belonging to a rather small group whose professional experience is bound to politics (Allen, 2018; Fawcett and Corbett, 2018). Indeed, research has shown that MPs who have prior political or parliamentary experience tend to dominate the top positions in the House of Commons, rather than those who have worked in other professions (Allen, 2013). However, these 'professional politicians' are sometimes considered to be less sensible of the beliefs and needs of 'ordinary' citizens (Beckman, 2007), and some research indicates that the public prefers politicians with whom they can relate in some way (Philpot and Walton, 2010).

I think that politicians to share their occupational experience outside politics to assure an increasingly mistrusting public that they are still in touch with the everyday concerns of the general population. Being reliant on public support, politicians naturally wish to persuade the public that they are not essentially any different to the people whom they (seek to) represent. Politicians such as Lynch and Grant may have wished to signal that they are not so removed from non-political life to have lost a meaningful connection with their constituents (Gulati, 2004), and remain keenly aware of the challenges presented by everyday life (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016). This may be an effective strategy, as experimental research suggests that previous experience outside politics improves politicians' standings in the eyes of the public (Campbell and

Cowley, 2014). It is particularly interesting that women in the sample tended to bring up their experience outside politics, with men doing the opposite. Of course, this finding might be ascribable to the small sample size, but this gender difference could also be understood in historic terms, since traditionally women have been widely believed ill-equipped for the demands of politics (Connell, 2005), a presupposition that has been exacerbated by the news media (Ross, 2010). In the light of negative perceptions of political elites (Stanyer and Wring, 2004), who are often political careerists and thus generally have little if any occupational experience outside politics (Fawcett and Corbett, 2018), women politicians might benefit from using Twitter to distinguish themselves as being less remote from common life and thereby become less prone to such perceptions.

Personalisation through credit-claiming

Politicians also personalised political tweets by giving prominence to their own contribution to a party pledge or achievement, for example the implementation of a new policy, which I refer to as ‘credit-claiming’, a long-standing habit studied by Mayhew (1974), who argued that a politician’s activities all revolve around one primary goal, that is, seeking (re-)election, and one common technique to achieve this is through ‘credit-claiming’, which Mayhew defined as giving the impression to voters that the politician was chiefly responsible for making the government do something desirable or beneficial for those voters. I identified in the sample of 400 tweets 23 cases of politicians apparently ‘credit-claiming’. Conservative politician Byron Davies, for example, shared an official party campaign image informing the reader of Theresa May’s pledge to abolish tolls on the Severn Crossings, two motorway bridges connecting Wales and England (see Figure 7.8, left). Whilst Davies made strategic use of Twitter’s wide viewership to promote party politics, he also added a personal layer to the message by pointing out that the abolition of the Severn Crossings is a cause that he has “lobbied for continuously for a number of years”, and is thus an apparent success for which he might feel entitled to claim some distinguishing credit. Although Davies remarked his promotion of a party pledge of wider interest, most tweets in this category gave notice of a constituency-level contribution. For example, Will Quince (ConsM)

announced that the Park and Ride operating hours for the train station in his constituency were to be extended (see Figure 7.8, right). Quince, by naming the endeavour 'my successful campaign', seems to take all the credit for a measure that, he says, is "great news for rail users and those working in Colchester". Similarly, Ben Gummer (ConsM) tweeted, "There were no plans for #trees in the station forecourt until I intervened. I will keep fighting for more planting in #Ipswich <https://t.co/ntl67SVwus>" (27 May 2017). The photograph that Gummer included in his tweet showed the newly planted trees to which he refers.



Figure 7.8 Examples of 'credit-claiming' tweets

Note. Tweets sent by Byron Davies, Conservative man (left) and Will Quince, Conservative man (right)

It is understandable that more politicians claimed credit for constituency-specific achievements rather than national successes, because it is much harder for an MP to suggest that they were largely responsible for an effort that requires extensive collaboration and which people might be inclined to attribute to more senior politicians (Mayhew, 1974). Many politicians can though have a significant bearing on constituency-related policies (Lilleker and Jackson, 2014), which can often be more pressing than broader party or policy issues because of the immediacy of local concerns (Heitshusen, Young and Wood, 2005). Research has suggested that voters appreciate and trust MPs who devote greater effort to constituency service (McKay,

2020) than to those who appear predisposed to national policy work (Vivyan and Wagner, 2015).

Jackson and Lilleker (2011) have argued that MPs use Twitter as a tool of 'impression management', the terms of which they take from Jones and Pittman (1982), who proposed five main behaviours of people seeking influence: *integration, self-promotion, supplication, exemplification, and intimidation*. Jackson and Lilleker (2011) concluded that British MPs are most likely to use Twitter for self-promotion, and to a limited extent integration. Self-promotion focuses on the actor's abilities and accomplishments, whereas integration is aimed at generating a favourable impression through flattery, granting favours, and being in agreement with the opinions of the audience (Jones and Pittman, 1982). It seems that politicians lay weight on their personal contribution to a policy, be it at the party or constituency level, in part as a means to justify their role as an MP. Trust in British politics continues to decline (Sugue, 2020), the UK government's perceived mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic being a recent example of this doubtfulness (Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos and Nielsen, 2020). This could make politicians feel increasingly pressured to justify their role, and they perhaps consider Twitter as a useful platform for doing so (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). They might draw attention to their work for the local community rather than their accomplishments at the national level, because constituents often appreciate improvements to their neighbourhood more than wider measures, the effects of which are often less immediately noticeable (Heitshusen, Young and Wood, 2005), and Fawcett and Corbett's (2018) focus groups suggest that serving the community is a way for politicians to appear less self-serving in the eyes of the public.

Personalisation through constituents' experiences

Another way in which politicians personalised their political messages was to relate an issue to the stories of constituents. There were several examples of politicians sharing anecdotes from constituents who had approached them, be it in a surgery or through email. In 9 of the sampled tweets, politicians associated a constituent's experience with a political policy. An illustrative example is provided by Labour politician Karen Buck,

who shared a story retold during a surgery by a constituent who was facing excessive housing costs (see Figure 7.9, left). The tweet presupposes that the reader has some knowledge of the government's 'Right to Buy' scheme, which had left Buck's constituent with inordinate rent rates for a property which was furthermore intended only to be 'temporary'. This scheme allows secure council house tenants to buy the property in which they are living at a reduced price.⁶⁶ Consequently, fewer council houses are available for low-income households to rent and some ex-council houses and flats are now owned by private landlords, who profit from letting their properties to tenants. Buck thus at once criticised excessive rent, the temporary accommodation trap, and the exploitation of the Right to Buy scheme by landlords. By using the plight of a young mother, Buck illustrated how a government policy can have an adverse effect, something with which many voters can relate. Another example is provided by Clive Efford (LabM), who tweeted, "Had someone in my surgery this morning who told me that she could not get legal aid and therefor [sic] cannot afford access to the law. <https://t.co/UJHTmtCYIk>" (5 June 2018). Efford's tweet was somewhat more straightforward in its phrasing than Buck's tweet, which might in fact understate the gravity of the problem, though he sent it mindful of cuts made to the legal aid system by the government (Bowcott, 2019). Thus, Buck and Clifford both used the experiences of their constituents to demonstrate the consequences of policies imposed by their political opposition.

⁶⁶ The Right to Buy scheme was initially proposed by the Labour Party in 1959, but was eventually implemented by the Conservative government in 1980, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

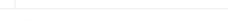
Karen Buck (@KarenPBuckMP)  

Today, young mum at my surgery- 11 years in temporary accommodation in an ex-council flat. Rent is £500 a week.

Benjamin Kentish (@BenKentish)  

More than 40 per cent of homes sold under Right to Buy are now in the hands of private landlords, highlighting how billions of pounds of taxpayers money is being used to make tens of thousands of homes much more expensive. Tomorrow's front:



4:00 AM - 8 Dec 2017  21 Retweets 11 Likes 

Kristene Hair MP (@KristeneAngus)  

Cross party consensus today whilst debating the mistreatment of SME's by financial institutions. For 15 years a constituent of mine has been fighting RBS GRG and he, like the many others, deserve justice for the devastation that has been caused by the banks.



9:41 AM - 10 May 2018  2 Retweets 6 Likes 

 5  21  11 

Figure 7.9 Examples of ‘constituents’ experience’ tweets.

Note. Tweets sent by Labour woman Karen Buck (left) and Conservative woman Kristene Hair (right)

However, the use of constituents’ stories was not exclusive to opposition politicians. Kristene Hair (ConsW), for example, wrote about a constituent who, she says, had been fighting ‘RBS GRG’ (see Figure 7.9, right). As with Buck’s tweet, Hair presumed the reader has certain knowledge to fully comprehend the substance of her tweet. In 2017, a report was leaked that accused The Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) of mistreating businesses (Lynam, 2017). This concerned RBS’s Global Restructuring Group (GRG), which was set up to help companies in trouble, but allegedly mistreated many of its clients by putting RBS’s interests first, with some firms saying that they were being pushed into bankruptcy (BBC News, 2018c). An investigation into the case by the Financial Conduct Authority resulted in a decision that no action would be taken against the bank or its senior managers (BBC News, 2018c), leading a cross-party group of MPs to call for the law to be changed to give small companies greater protection (Hurley, 2018). Hair cited the 15-year struggle of one of her constituents against RBS to exemplify a problem on which, as she notes, there is ‘cross-part consensus’ and which has affected ‘many others’, on whose behalf she is affirming her willingness to take on powerful financial institutions. A difference in tone can be observed in the way that these politicians related constituents’ anecdotes. Buck, by referring to her constituent as a ‘young mum’, imaged a perhaps more human and sympathetic figure, whereas Efford and Hair wrote of ‘someone’ and ‘a constituent’ respectively.

Whether referring to constituents more specifically (as for example ‘young mum’)

or more generally, the underlying motive for doing so might be to exhibit *authenticity* and *ordinariness*. Dumitrica (2014) suggests that one straightforward way for politicians to appear authentic is by expressing concern for citizens and their individual or collective problems. Another way for ‘non-ordinary’ persons such as politicians to give the impression that they are still of the people is by retelling the thoughts of those people and discussing them openly with their fellow politicians, thereby avoiding any need to make themselves appear innately ordinary, a discursive practice which Fretzer and Weizman (2018) refer to as ‘brought-in-ordinariness’. The goal of this practice is to appear ever aware of the general public’s needs and that the politician is taking action to meet them. The connection of a personal story to a political issue furthermore allows the politician to make that issue more immediate and comprehensible, since traditionally, politics and political participation have been criticised for being remote from daily experience, overly complicated, excessively solemn, and unlikely to result in tangible benefit (Coleman, 2006). Lippmann (1922) was among those who observed long ago that politics is too abstract and complex to be fully understood by a majority of people. Anecdotalism can make abstruse policies more graspable, as it provides examples of how a government policy practically affects individuals. Finally, by relating a personal story, the politician might aim to strengthen their argument by providing evidence that the policy to which they are opposed has a direct, detrimental impact on individuals’ lives. Voters are more likely to be influenced by a persuasive message if they can readily imagine themselves in a particular situation (McLaughlin and Velez, 2019). Three motivations then seem to lie at the heart of why the politicians in the sample posted about constituents’ experiences: (1) to leave their audience with an impression of authenticity by professing that they genuinely care about the well-being of their constituents; (2) to demonstrate how abstract policies may result in tangible consequences; and (3) to augment their contention that certain policies are flawed.

Personalisation through personal experiences and emotions

Politicians also personalised their tweets by sharing their often unhappy personal experiences. Two Conservative politicians pointed to cases of their party materials being vandalised. Conor Burns tweeted, “First time in my political life I've experienced organised vandalism and destruction of our posters #kindergentlerpolitics” (6 June

2017), and Jason McCartney wrote, ““Why would someone do that?” My 11 year old daughter on seeing my posters have been defaced overnight #MoreInCommon Gentler Kinder politics!” (21 May 2017). Both politicians included the phrase *kinder gentler politics*, Burns in a hashtag and McCartney in a sentence, which was presumably a reference to Jeremy Corbyn’s first speech at the Labour Party Conference as leader, in which he said he wished to introduce a ‘kinder politics’, calling for an end to personal abuse and urging delegates to treat opponents with respect (BBC News, 2015). There is an implication in the accusatory tone of the tweets that Labour supporters are responsible for the vandalism. Interestingly, McCartney also used the hashtag *MoreInCommon*, which is derived from Jo Cox’s maiden speech in Parliament. Cox, a Labour MP, was murdered on 16 June 2016 by a local man just before she was to hold a constituency surgery, and is often remembered for her first Parliamentary speech, in which she remarked that “we have more in common than that which divides us” (Jones, 2019, p. 1). Alluding to the murder of Cox in such circumstances – the defacement of some campaign posters – might in fact appear immoderate. McCartney further personalised his tweet by mentioning his “11-year-old daughter”, who apparently shared his disbelief at the act of vandalism, though more cynically might be thought to have been adduced as a way to elicit more sympathy for his grievance.

Politicians also described cases of suffering online abuse, all of which were found in tweets by women. This is unsurprising, since women politicians seem to be the most frequent victims of such abuse (Dhrodia, 2017; Macfarlane, 2018; Beltran *et al.*, 2020). Other research has noted women politicians sending tweets related to their own experience of online harassment, in which they often publicly urge their tormenters to stop and perhaps cause them to feel some shame and remorse (Fountaine, Ross and Comrie, 2019). Labour politicians Stella Creasy and Jess Phillips have appeared in the news media as subjects of sustained abuse on Twitter (Jones, 2013; Rawlinson, 2018). In 2013, Creasy openly supported feminist activist and journalist Caroline Criado-Perez, who successfully campaigned to have an image of Jane Austen depicted on the new £10 bank note, thus ensuring that Bank of England currency featured a woman other than the Queen (Criado-Perez, 2015). Creasy was bombarded with rape threats via

Twitter, which she entreated to review its procedures (Jones, 2013). One of Creasy's harassers was arrested and later jailed (Press Association, 2014). Similarly, Jess Phillips, who also often tweets with a feminist perspective (Pidd, 2015), made news headlines after having received more than 600 rape threats in a single night, following which she called for 'online trolls' to no longer be granted anonymity (Rawlinson, 2018). Research has shown that women who identify as feminist are at high risk of online abuse (Eckert, 2018). Stella Creasy (LabW) reported that she has blocked a user (see Figure 7.10). Although the original tweet has been deleted, it can be surmised that it included abusive content, since Creasy mentioned that the response to her original tweet "escalated quickly" and attracted responses from people who "really can't handle" what she had to say. Her disdain is evidenced by the use of 'noshittakingmp' as a hashtag, which seems to serve as a caution to others who would target her. Another example of a woman politician exposing online abuse was Conservative Maria Cauffield, who shared a screenshot of a tweet in which she was called a 'speccy slag'. Whereas Creasy included the original tweet of the abuser, by screenshotting her insulter's tweet, Cauffield prevented its poster from having any control over its reuse. Cauffield anticipated the user deleting his tweet – "though[t] he might delete it", she wrote – which indicates that this is by no means her first experience of personal insults on Twitter.



Figure 7.10 Examples of tweets exposing online abuse.

Note. Tweets sent by Stella Creasy, Labour woman (left) and Maria Caulfield, Conservative woman (right).

An example of insulting behaviour affecting a family member of the politician is retold by Jonathan Reynolds (LabM) who tweets, "Had to leave the switch-on [of the Hyde Christmas lights] early tonight after a woman was so rude to me about my autistic son. Still astounds me how little understanding some people show the parents of disabled children" (18 November 2017). Jess Phillips (LabW) mentioned her son in a contrasting situation when tweeting, "Crying in my garden. My son looks over, "Is it the Irish again mom?" Yes it is bab #repealThe8th" (26 May 2018). The use of the hashtag *repealthe8th* tells that Phillip's tweet concerned the Irish Abortion Referendum, which was decided the day that Phillips sent her tweet. This was a poignant occasion for Phillips, who used emotive language and further personalised her tweet by mentioning her son. The Irish Abortion Referendum stirred impassioned debate in Westminster and across the UK, with several MPs sharing their own experiences with abortion, such as Conservative MP Heidi Allen (Kinchen, 2018) and Jess Phillips herself (Brown and Connolly, 2018), whose tears perhaps flowed from the realisation that her efforts, along with those of others, had finally seen the beginning of the Act's repealment, and all of the emotions that this stirred. Phillips's son assuming why she was crying 'again' implies that it she has done so before for the same reason. Both politicians used passioned language – Reynolds's "so rude" and "astounds", and Phillips's "crying" and "bab" – and they both mentioned their sons, who though their situations were very different, humanised important social concerns. Thus, Reynolds and Phillips each made a connection between the personal and the political. Reynolds may have shared the incident with his autistic son to vividly exemplify the ignorance that persists of autism and assure others in similar positions that in him they have a political representative. Phillips's tweet also signified a matter of wide interest, being sent the day that the Irish public voted to repeal the 8th Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland, thereby allowing the legislation of abortion across the country (McDonald, Graham-Harrison and Baker, 2018). Phillips's first-hand experience of abortion lent weight to her support of the vote, as well as to her continuing effort to secure abortion rights for women elsewhere.

I suggest three central and associable reasons for politicians' willingness to

share a diversity of often negative experiences. Firstly, by sharing their negative experiences, politicians may have attempted to garner a degree of sympathy from their audience. Wood *et al.* (2016) suggest that politicians who make their vulnerability public are often perceived as courageous for doing so. Secondly, research has documented an increasing need for politicians to be seen as “personable”, especially on social media (Colliander *et al.*, 2017, p. 277). By sharing their negative experiences, politicians can bring about some sense of kinship in part by stressing that they are prone to the same difficulties as their fellow humans. Thirdly, as in the cases of Reynolds and Phillips, politicians may share their personal experiences to strengthen their support of an important matter: for Reynolds, increasing awareness of autism, and for Phillips, greater abortion rights for women.

§ 7.4 Discussion

The present study contributes to the existing literature by providing further insight into the personalisation strategies used by politicians on Twitter. Scholars have noted that the boundaries between the private and public lives of politicians are blurring (Hernández-Santaolalla, 2020), and that we have witnessed an increased tendency among the media to focus upon politicians’ private lives (Gulyás, 2004). The current analyses have identified several ways in which politicians *themselves* reveal personal information, principally, I would say, to represent themselves as ‘ordinary citizens’. Research records that politicians wish to use this ordinariness to form a bond with citizens (Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017), and the current analyses have shown that one means of attempting this is to use Twitter. In particular, the two analyses have suggested that politicians do wish at times to appear unquestionably genuine and relatable, both in their personal and political tweets. Personal tweets largely consisted of relatively trivial remarks about sports events or televised shows that harmonise with the public’s interests. One possible motivation of these tweets is to image a common humanity which appeals to the general population (Bentivegna, 2015; López-Meri, Marcos-García and Casero-Ripollés, 2017), which is ‘authentic’ and ‘ordinary’ (Wood, Corbett and Flinders, 2016).

Authenticity, or the appearance of authenticity, seems to be a requisite in politics nowadays. Conservative politicians received social media training in which they were advised to look like ‘real people’ on platforms such as Instagram (Belam, 2018; D’Urso, 2018). Indeed, Blumler (2017) argues that we are currently in an “age of authenticity” (p. 11), while Wahl-Jorgensen (2017) says that “to win the battle for [voters’] hearts and minds, you must win the battle for authenticity” (2017, p. 69). Langer (2011) proposes that the personalisation of politics, with an increased focus on the non-political lives and characters of politicians, invites citizens to judge them by way of their ‘authenticity’. Twitter offers the politician a way to quickly build an ‘authentic’ persona, though the judging of this authenticity is not always favourable. But when politicians do successfully display authenticity, it can enhance support for the party and even intention to vote (Stiers *et al.*, 2019).

The first analysis further suggests that politicians seldom discuss their private lives in much depth. When they do, for example announcing a pregnancy or the birth of a child, it seems to have some political relevance, if only because it informs the public of their temporary absence from political duties. Politicians generally set certain limits for what they do and do not wish to disclose to the public (Hermans and Vergeer, 2013), which is understandable, since self-revelation is not without risks (Stanyer and Wring, 2004). For example, tweets containing personal information might be used by the news media in an out-of-context manner, and talking much of personal issues could be perceived as neglectful of political concerns and result in campaign failure (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012). In the current study, I found that politicians are eager to talk about their personal interests, particularly those that align with public interests, such as football and television shows, but they avoid talking about their families. Another reason, apart from the obvious risks to their wider family members, for politicians being selective in what they share might be that if they try too hard to be too ‘ordinary, such a strategy may simply look cynical and contrived. Politicians are often advised to humanise themselves (Ward and McLoughlin, 2020), but if they appear to be overtrying, this may be taken as calculating and out of touch (Langer, 2010). In addition, if politicians overplay their ordinariness, they risk losing the sense of uniqueness that

makes them suitable for the role of politician (McKernan, 2011). It seems then, that politicians take great care to divulge those parts of their lives that they think will meet with general public approval and refrain from sharing parts of their identities that distance them in any way or are likely to attract derision. Politicians have to tread a fine line if they wish to appear as someone who, as Coleman puts it, "is extraordinary enough to represent others, but ordinary enough to be representative of others" (2006, p. 468).

The second analysis illustrated that politicians used various strategies to personalise their political tweets, thereby blending the personal with the political. Some studies suggest that such a self-presentational strategy – mixing aspects of their professional and personal personas – can be highly beneficial. For example, Colliander *et al.* (2017) conducted a longitudinal experiment among 265 Twitter users and found that this kind of balancing strategy increased public interest in the politician's party and motivated an intention to vote for that party, compared to interest in and support for politicians whose tweets were strictly professional. The current analysis contributes to the literature by having identified several self-presentational balancing strategies: drawing on their self-identity, their previous occupation, and their own contributions, and referring to both constituents' experiences and their own, or otherwise expressing emotion. One distinct personalisation strategy identified in the analysis was the use of anecdotes from constituents as a means to personalise a political message, without the politician needing to disclose personal information. This personalisation strategy seems to be more commonly applied by Labour women politicians, which accords with Campbell's (1973) theory of *feminine style*, a proposition that women's verbal communication makes greater use than does men's of examples and anecdotes (see § 2.4 *Gender stereotypes in politics*). However, the small sample size means that this is a tentative conclusion and importantly, although the current study has shown some gender and party differences, it should be noted that individual characteristics play an important role: some politicians by nature seemed more eager than others to share information knowledge of their private selves. Taken together, the two analyses have shown that politicians used various aspects of their personal lives for political ends, and

that in Twitter they have the tools to craft an image of ordinariness that resonates with citizens.

Some of the limitations discussed in the previous empirical chapters also apply to the current one, such as the reliance on observational data to draw conclusions - which inhibits making inferences about causality - and the sole focus on politicians in one specific nation. It is likely that a similar study into politicians' personalisation tactics in another situation, such as North America, would have unravelled different tactics, since the U.S. political arena is known to be much more personalised than that of the UK (Stanyer, 2008). In contrast with the other empirical chapters, an additional limitation of the current chapter is its use of qualitative data only, focusing on a small number of tweets. The obvious advantage is that I was able to conduct an in-depth analysis of politicians' tweets, but the disadvantage is that the small number of cases made drawing broad conclusions rather difficult. However, the mixed-method approach means that the disadvantages of one are compensated by the advantages of the other. Future studies might draw from the current research and apply methods such as sentiment analysis, to consider the extent to which the personalisation tactics identified in the current study apply to a larger corpus of tweets, thereby seeking to discern if and how gender and party differences occur.

§ 7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which British politicians disclosed personal information in their tweets. By way of the thematic analyses, I was able to discern several personalisation strategies employed by politicians, such as tweeting about popular television programmes, including the *Eurovision Song Contest* and *Strictly Come Dancing*, and performing household chores. One function of this personalisation appears to be the self-representation of ordinariness. Politicians from all groups seemed to endeavour after a sense of commonality with the public, both in their personal and in their political tweets.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

This final chapter first summarises how the thesis has responded to the research objectives and questions by restating the most important findings from the three empirical chapters. The subsequent section evaluates the suitability and usefulness of the theoretical framework that was developed to explain and interpret the findings presented in these empirical chapters. Next, the chapter considers the limitations of the current research and lays out suggestions for further research. The chapter concludes with a description of the most important and original contributions that the research has made to the existing body of knowledge.

§ 8.1 Most important findings and answers to research questions

The aim of the thesis was to explore the salience of gender and party in relation to politicians' Twitter communication, both during and after the 2017 UK General Election campaign. Using a mixed-methods design, which combined content and thematic analyses, I suggest that gender and party, separately *and* together, are associated with politicians' Twitter communication in terms of tweet content, political issues, and personalisation tactics, to a greater or lesser extent.

Firstly, as expounded in *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*, I propose that as separate entities, party and gender were associated with politicians' tweet content, but both party and gender differences were context-dependent. The only gender and party differences that remained constant throughout the three time periods could be observed in user interaction tweets (women+ and Lab+) and attack tweets (Lab+ and in particular LabM+), but other party differences varied across the periods. For example, during the winter period (8 November – 8 December 2017) a party difference emerged in political issue tweets (Cons+) and personal tweets (Lab+). Some gender differences arose solely during the election campaign, such as those in the sending of attack tweets (men+) and endorsement tweets (women+), whereas other gender differences occurred only during the two non-election periods, such as those in the sending of personal tweets (women+). Notably, the analysis of gender and party in

union has further suggested that gender and party also work *together* in shaping politicians' tweets, because, for example, the difference in volume of user interaction tweets between women and men resulted from Labour women sending more such tweets than Conservative men.

Secondly, as discussed in *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*, my findings suggest the individual association of gender and party with politicians' discourse on political issues, since Labour and Conservative politicians largely tweeted in accordance with their so-called 'strength' issues during the election campaign, and women and men tweeted somewhat in line with their relative 'strength' issues outside the election campaign. It appears also that gender and party have a joint bearing on politicians' discussion of political issues. For example, Labour women sent more tweets related to gender and sexism than did Conservative men. As with tweet content, I proposed that party and gender differences in politicians' issue discussions were contingent upon context. By way of example, Conservatives tweeted more on Brexit-related issues during the election campaign than did Labour politicians, but in the two non-election periods, there was no significant party difference in the number of Brexit-concerned tweets. I further noted that during the election campaign, women and men politicians did not differ much in the political issues to which they attended, whereas after the campaign, some gender differences did appear. During the election campaign period, the only gender difference observable was that in gender and sexism-related issues (women+), which can be attributed to Labour women's tweets, and tweets related to foreign policy (men+), which were ascribable to Conservative men. After the campaign, however, women and men politicians highlighted their perceived strength issues slightly more, with women confronting issues such as sexism and gender and health and care, and men giving priority to foreign policy and Brexit concerns.

Apart from such instances where gender and/or party were associated with politicians' Twitter behaviour, I found several communication patterns and strategies applied by politicians from all four groups. Firstly, in the empirical chapters I suggested that all politicians deal with issues and interests that they *imagine* resonate with the

public. I proposed that electoral imperatives steer politicians to produce content which they think will appeal to as broad an audience as possible. Since politicians often have a relatively large number of followers, they cannot know the political views and interests of them all, and therefore broadcast to an 'imagined' community. According to Anderson (2006), an 'imagined' community is a conceptualisation of the individuals with whom we wish to communicate, and Marwick and boyd (2011) found that Twitter users with a high number of followers conceptualised a broad audience with disparate tastes. Since it is impracticable to acquire knowledge of this great variety of dispositions, politicians might well take a populist approach. Such was the case in this study, where politicians from all groups often tweeted about well-followed sports and other entertainments including football and the Eurovision Song Contest (see *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*), a proclivity for which, I suggested, they reasonably imagined would be common among their followers. By referring to such activities, whether unaffectedly or deliberately, the politician might increase their own public approval.

Further, *saliency theory* (Budge, 1982; Budge and Farlie, 1983) assumes that parties will generally avoid taking sharply contrasting pro- or anti- positions on 'valence issues', or those for which broad public agreement exists about the desired outcome. I think that imagined communities, coupled with saliency theory, could explain why politicians from all groups avoided tweeting controversial opinions of particular valence issues such as the environment and fox-hunting (see *Chapter 6: Gender, Party, and Political Issues*). For example, in every sampled tweet related to fox-hunting, politicians spoke out against this 'sport', even though Theresa May had publicly announced that she favoured it (BBC News, 2017c). Similarly, in tweets concerning abortion, no sampled politicians tweeted support for more restrictive legislation. Politicians, it seems, were either using Twitter to express their genuine feelings on these matters and nothing more, or were attempting to gain some approbation by offering opinions on an emotive issue that are widely shared by voters, since public attitude surveys show that a sizeable majority are opposed to repealing the fox-hunting ban (Cowburn, 2017) and to stricter abortion legislation (Amnesty International UK, 2018). By way of contrast, Brexit, being a divisive subject for citizens and politicians alike, cannot be considered a

‘valence issue’ and politicians exhibited differentiable attitudes to this subject by adopting a much more clearly ‘pro-’ or ‘anti-’ position, broadly in line with their party’s stance, often through predicting the positive or negative consequences of (a hard) exit from the EU.

§ 8.2 Evaluation of the suitability of the theoretical framework

As the body of research at the crossroads of gender, party, and politicians’ Twitter use is still evolving, an established theoretical framework for analysing and interpreting the interplay between the three is ongoing. I therefore developed my own framework by drawing from several concepts and theories, such as ideas of gendered and political communication styles, political issue ownership theory, and personalisation theory. This framework enabled me to offer certain interpretations which could account for differences in politicians’ tweet content. My results show that politicians’ tweets did not always conform to gender and party expectations, and instead draw a many-coloured picture of how gender and party – their effects often sharpened by the context in which they come to bear – work together to influence politicians’ Twitter communication. Concerning the suitability of the theoretical framework to analyse and interpret politicians’ communication patterns on Twitter in terms of tweet content, political issues, and personalisation, I suggest the following.

Firstly, the concepts of gender stereotypes and gendered communication styles (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1988) alongside political advertising theory (Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019) allowed me to propound explanations for the patterns I observed in politicians’ tweet content (*Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*). For example, the findings that women politicians sent more personal and user interaction tweets than did their male counterparts seems to reveal the presence of gendered communication styles, the idea that women’s modes of communication are generally more interactive and personal (Campbell, 1973; Cross and Madson, 1997; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2017; Jones, 2017). Furthermore, the finding that Labour politicians sent consistently more attack tweets than did Conservative politicians is in agreement with political advertising theory, which proposes that challengers may be more likely to attack the record of the incumbents (Denton, Trent and Friedenberg,

2019).

Secondly, issue ownership theories (Petrocik, 1996; Herrnson, Lay and Stokes, 2003) were useful for the explication of some of my findings which related to politicians' discussion of political issues, but not others. I observed that Labour and Conservative politicians more often than not tweeted in accordance with their so-called 'strength' issues during the election campaign, but after the campaign, made little attempt to exploit their perceived 'strength' issues, which diverges from other research findings that politicians generally highlight those issues for which they believe the public thinks them more trustworthy or effective (Benoit and Hansen, 2004; Bélanger and Meguid, 2008). Political context therefore appears to influence the extent to which politicians rely on their perceived 'ownership' of certain issues. My findings also question issue ownership theories in the sense that politicians from both parties deviated from the historical 'issue' reputations of their parties. For example, Conservative politicians, and in particular Conservative women, tweeted the most about environmental concerns, despite them being not traditionally considered a 'Conservative issue'. I have suggested that Conservative politicians might have been reacting to the circumstance that both domestically and globally, anxieties over the health of the natural world are growing (Carrington, 2019), while attempting to redraw the portrayed image of right-wing parties being neglectful of such issues (Fielding *et al.*, 2012; Båtstrand, 2015). Finally, in terms of politicians' personalisation tactics (*Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*), I found that the suitability of the theoretical framework to explaining and interpreting my findings was less efficacious. Personalisation literature, which mostly focuses on the private and personal elements of a politician's character (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007), tends to define 'personalisation' in a way too limited for successful application to digital media formats such as Twitter. In particular, such literature often dichotomises 'personal' and 'political' news content. However, as noted in *Chapter 7: Gender, Party, and Personalisation*, such distinctions are frequently undefined in politicians' tweet content, and I found very few cases of personalisation of the kind that typically preoccupy other scholars, namely family lives and hobbies. Even in those cases where politicians plainly communicated such personal details, it seems that they were ever

political, if only because the very account from which they tweeted bears their status as an MP, and they are seldom fully detached from their occupation by their audience.

§ 8.3 Further research suggestions and limitations

No theoretical framework can adequately account for all social phenomena, and those inevitable limitations in the framework of my devising provide opportunities for future scholarship to improve upon them. While I believe that this study makes some important contributions to our understanding of how politics, gender, and Twitter are related, there is always more that can be done, and the upsurge in politicians' adoption of Twitter enables the scholarly community to ponder for example the interconnectedness of various social media platforms and the social media styles of politicians in different countries, especially those outside the Anglophone West. The wide availability of large volumes of Twitter data is a temptation for scholars to undertake quantitative research, and this method has indeed been prevalent thus far (Adi, Erickson and Lilleker, 2014; Evans, Ovalle and Green, 2016; Stier *et al.*, 2018; Meeks, 2019), but my research shows that greater knowledge can be obtained by combining quantitative *and* qualitative methods, the former unable on its own to discover *how* or *what* politicians communicate, or to build sufficiently robust frameworks for comprehensive analyses.

Further research could look beyond straightforward categorisations of 'personal' and 'political' tweets, as the analytical framework that I have developed shows that the personal and the political are often intertwined and difficult to separate. In particular, my analysis finds cases of politicians in a single tweet sharing personal information amid thoughts on a political issue. This means that, in addition to looking at non-political tweets, researchers might search for ways in which politicians blend the personal with the political. The analysis of personalisation undertaken in this thesis was exploratory and concentrated on a small sample of tweets, yet revealed some interesting ways of personalising. However, it is very likely that politicians use a plethora of other means to personalise their political messages. The current research has identified but a few of them, and other researchers will undoubtedly find a good number more. Further, it might be interesting to investigate how politicians mix personal and political elements within

and between different social media platforms, in order to avoid making sweeping generalisations about ‘social media’ as if they are one and the same thing (Kreiss, Lawrence and McGregor, 2018). Indeed, one study has demonstrated that politicians tailor their messages according to the differing nature of the social media platforms they use and the audiences of those media, and so their manners of communicating on Twitter were very different to those on Facebook and Instagram (Stier *et al.*, 2018). It could therefore be worthwhile studying personalisation strategies on, for example, Facebook and Instagram, especially since these platforms are considered more personal than Twitter, and so a sense might be gained of how this is reflected, if at all, in politicians’ communication on these platforms. Cross-platform comparative inquiries might then be particularly useful for exploring politicians’ personalisation tactics, and therethrough achieve a better understanding of the ways in which politicians use these platforms differently for personalisation purposes, one of which could be to appear more relatable to the wider public by moving with the current of public opinion.

Furthermore, while the current research has suggested that gender and party are bound together in important ways, another fruitful avenue for future research is to further explore the ways in which gender and party intersect with other candidate characteristics, such as race, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, educational background, and social status, in terms of politicians’ communication strategies. As pointed out by Bauer (2019), “[f]emale candidates have complex political identities, and considering how these identities affect the strategies employed by candidates and how voters respond to such strategies is a critical next step for future research” (n.p.). An intersectional approach to study politicians’ online communication patterns would undoubtedly further our understanding on the interplay between these and other characteristics. It must be observed however that beside the efforts required to gain comprehensive knowledge of these characteristics, there would be a small group of politicians to study at such intersections. For example, while the UK Parliament is more diverse than ever, as of November 2020 just 10% of UK MPs were from minority ethnic backgrounds (about 14.4% of the general UK population are from minority ethnic backgrounds) (Uberoi and Lees, 2020), and though the UK Parliament has one of the

highest numbers of openly LGBT MPs in the world – 55 at the time of writing – this represents 8.5% of the total number of 650 MPs (Peart, 2020). Consequently, a study of, say, black and/or Asian LGBT MPs in the UK would be significantly restricted.

The present study is not without limitations. Firstly, research into politicians' social media uses, the present thesis included, has predominantly focused on high-visibility contests and national politics (Green and Gerber, 2019; Ross, Jansen and Van de Wijngaert, 2019; Southern and Lee, 2019; Bright *et al.*, 2020), with the study of social media usage by regional politicians being thus far subordinate (Larsson, 2018; Larsson and Skogerbø, 2018; but see Beltran *et al.*, 2020). Our knowledge could accordingly be enlarged by greater attention to online communication at the regional and local political levels (Larsson and Svensson, 2014). Secondly, I chose to include only Labour and Conservative politicians in the sample, because these two parties are the most influential and dominate the public debate and are most influential in shaping public opinion, and further so because other studies have identified problems when stratifying along gender lines only, including few women in smaller political parties and the imbalance of having a low number of politicians posting a disproportionately high amount of content on social media platforms (see, for example, Ross, Bürger and Jansen, 2018). While such an approach facilitates direct comparisons along gender and party lines, it does not provide a complete picture of gender and party differences in politicians' tweets, since it overpasses politicians from smaller parties, including Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru, and Green Party, who seem particularly eager to use social media (Southern and Lee, 2019), perhaps because it is generally more difficult for them to gain media coverage. This means that the findings obtained may not be generalizable to politicians from other, smaller, political parties in the UK. However, it is to be hoped that the slow but steady rise in women holding political office will smooth the way for researchers to make useful gender and party comparisons of politicians' Twitter use in the future.

Another limiting factor is my considering only British politicians, which means that the findings obtained may only hold for one country – the research community would

benefit from further studies of other political systems and cross-national comparisons, especially so because the present thesis has suggested that results from one political setting cannot be simply transposed to another, and some of my results directly challenge findings from North America. For example, North American studies have found that women politicians were more likely to engage in ‘attacks’ on Twitter, though my findings indicate the opposite, with men sending more attack tweets during the election campaign period. These differing findings signal the importance of carrying out transnational comparisons and a more diverse range of country-specific studies. Other limitations of the current research design follow from its reliance on observational data, namely tweets sent by politicians included in the sample. While observational data hold the advantage that they enable to directly observing actual politicians’ behaviour, but one disadvantage is that the researcher can only study what can be viewed directly, meaning that “what *cannot* be viewed directly or otherwise recorded lies beyond the application of observational methods” (Schubert, 1988, p. 307, emphasis added). For the current research this means that there is no certainty whether the tweets posted from politicians’ public accounts of were actually sent by the account-holders, or by, for example, political aides. Further, the research attempted to make causal inferences to explore the extent to which gender and party influenced politicians’ communication practices on Twitter. However, it is difficult to make causal inferences, since observational methods are prone to confounding variables. It is therefore uncertain the extent to which the results reported in this thesis can *solely* be attributed to the independent variables, gender and party. I have controlled for some confounding variables by design, such as incumbency status, but not others, such as competitiveness and age, which could have led to an overestimation or underestimation of the reported effects.

§ 8.4 Contribution to existing knowledge

This study has enhanced our understanding of politicians’ Twitter communication in three significant ways: it has, by focusing on the British situation, extended the body of knowledge on the relationship between gender, politics, and Twitter, which in other researchings has largely concerned North American politicians; it has explored

politicians' Twitter communication both within and outside election campaign periods; and finally, it has demonstrated the importance of analysing party and gender both separately and together. My findings have shown that results from a North American setting are not to be applied to a British or indeed any other national context. One of the most striking differences between the present study and those from North America is seen in the gendered sending of attack tweets. Where North American research has repeatedly reported women politicians as being more inclined to impugn their political opponents, my findings have shown that in the main men sent more attack tweets than women, though this effect was only significant during the election campaign period. (see *Chapter 5: Gender, Party, and Tweet Content*). I have proposed several explanations for this incongruence, among them that in a climate where voters are generally less accepting of hostile rhetoric than in the United States, British women politicians might think that they will be disproportionately punished for perceived aggressiveness, since this is contrary to the gender stereotype women are milder and timider than are men.

Further, while there are notable exceptions (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014; Oelsner and Heimrich, 2015), the vast majority of research on politicians' Twitter behaviour has been sampled amid election times (Wagner, Gainous and Holman, 2017; Stier *et al.*, 2018; Fountaine, Ross and Comrie, 2019; Meeks, 2019; Ross, Jansen and Van de Wijngaert, 2019; Beltran *et al.*, 2020). While the study of politicians' Twitter behaviour during election periods is important, its confinedness leaves an incomplete picture of how politicians behave on Twitter in general. Some scholars have suggested that exploring politicians' day-to-day communication practices on Twitter could provide an important supplement to our existing knowledge of their election behaviour (Larsson and Svensson, 2014). My research has done this by sampling tweets from one election campaign period as well as two non-election periods, which has enabled me to suggest that gender and party differences are highly contextual, with some significant differences visible between tweets sampled during the campaign sample and others from the two non-election periods. This approach allowed me to conclude that women and men politicians tweeted similarly during the election campaign, but slightly more

dissimilarly in the two non-election periods, particularly in regards to their attention to political issues. Finally, much research has focused on the singular influence of gender or party (for example Niven and Zilber, 2001; Graham, Broersma and Hazelhoff, 2013 b; Theiner, Schwanholz and Busch, 2018; Denton, Trent and Friedenberg, 2019; Beltran *et al.*, 2020) but a central concern of my research has been to investigate whether and if so how gender and party work *together* in shaping politicians' tweets. While some research *has* focused on gender and party, it has done so in North American conditions, and my findings have shown that in a British setting, party and gender influences operate very differently. By giving attention to hitherto unexplored research avenues, the present thesis has attempted to unravel the complex relationship between gender, party, and politics on Twitter. It is my hope that a degree of the knowledge gained herein might benefit other projects concerned with this relationship, because the better our understanding of these dynamics, the closer we will be to identifying the obstacles to the elusive goal of gender equality in the realm of politics.

Appendices

Appendix A: ‘Coding scheme’

This Appendix provides a detailed description of the variables that were used for the manual content analyses of the three datasets, which each comprised of stratified samples of 4,000 tweets. All these 12,000 tweets were coded for the variable ‘Tweet Content’, which is described in the first part of the coding scheme, and the variable ‘Political Issue’, which is described in the second part of the coding scheme. For each variable, I explain how I carried out the coding process, and provide examples of tweets that are illustrative of the tweet types to which they are ascribed.

Part 1: Tweet Content

Determine for each tweet in which category it falls: Issues; Personal; Attack; Mobilisation; Campaigning; or Media. Every tweet should be coded, and each tweet can only be attached to one category.

1) Issues

A tweet should be categorised as ‘issues’ when the tweet concerns a political issue, such Brexit, economy, immigration, housing, etc. (for other examples of issues, please refer to the second part of the coding scheme, ‘Political Issues’). If a tweet is about issues, then also code ‘Part 2 Political Issues’, to indicate to which specific topic the tweet refers. See Part 2 for keywords for political issues.

Example: “We need to tackle the housing crisis and ensure housing is about homes for the many, not investment opportunities for the few” – Rosie Cooper (Labour woman), 3 June 2017.

2) Personal

A tweet will be coded as ‘personal’, when the tweet does not pertain directly to politics and is, for example, about the politicians’ personal life. This category includes family photos, mentions of spouses/partners, and posts about (sports) events attended (e.g. the London Marathon) (based on Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014).

Keywords: family, parents, son, daughter, wife, husband, spouse, niece, nephew, cousin, sports, running, football, tennis, television, Eurovision Song Contest, films, cooking, baking, restaurant, café, bar, friends.

Example: “Went for a run in the park with some friends. #runforthe96 ❤️ ❤️ ❤️ ❤️ @ Stanley Park, Liverpool <https://instagram.com/p/BUEUyICjD4A/>” – Alison McGovern (Labour woman), 14 May 2017.

3) Attack

A tweet will be categorised as ‘attack’ when the politician attacks or otherwise criticises an opponent, another political party, or a leader of another party (based on Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014).

Keywords: Jeremy, Corbyn, Theresa, May, Labour, Conservatives, Tories, Tory Party, Jezza [a nickname for Jeremy Corbyn], Iron Lady [a nickname for Theresa May and before her Margaret Thatcher], Coalition of Chaos, Nasty Party, Weak and Wobbly

Example: “The Tories want to abandon winter fuel allowances, the triple lock, & a cap on the cost of care. Only I'll stand up for retirement incomes.” – Mary Creagh (Labour woman), 18 May 2017.

3) Mobilisation

A tweet will be categorised as ‘mobilisation’ when the politician attempts to involve citizens in the campaign or the political process, for instance by asking them to register to vote or to cast their vote (Russmann, Svensson and Larsson, 2019; Russmann and Svensson, 2020).

Keywords: vote, voting, register to vote, join us, polling station, polls, polling day, postal vote, #VoteLabour, #VoteConservative

Example: “JOIN my campaign this week - in the day or evening, on the doors or phones

- more info here:... <https://t.co/dbkROISmB6>” – Richard Burgon (Labour man), 26 May 2017.

5) Campaigning

A tweet will be coded as ‘campaigning’ when the politician reports where or how they have campaigning, makes reference to campaign speeches, or shares campaign videos (based on Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014).

Keywords: campaigning, campaign trail, knocking doors, canvassing, canvass teams, meeting residents, doorstep.

Example: “Great to be out canvassing in Burnham yesterday afternoon and evening. Campaigning for the #GE2017 but also for... <https://t.co/7T3IeJGzpO>” – James Heappey (Conservative man), 3 June 2017.

6) Media

A tweet will be coded as ‘media’ when the politician posts about any media content in which they or their party features. For example, these tweets can include references to (newspaper) articles, the BBC Leaders’ Debate, or BBC *Question Time* Leaders’ Special, videos, or blog posts (based on Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014).

Keywords: interview, article, radio, please read, please watch, tune in, broadcast.

Example: “If anyone is awake 😊 I'm about to go on #BBC radio Northampton with the other candidates for South Northants- do tune in!” – Andrea Leadsom (Conservative woman), 28 May 2017.

7) News story

This differs from the previous category ‘Media’ in that the politician or their party need not feature in the news story.

8) Reflection on terrorist attacks

A tweet should be categorised as 'Reflection on terrorist attacks' when the politician remarks on an act of terrorism.

Keywords: Manchester Arena bombing, London Bridge Attack, victims, terror attack, terrorist attack, explosion, Manchester Arena, #ILoveMCR, #PrayForManchester, #WeStandTogether, #StandWithLondon, incidents in London, incidents in Manchester, thoughts and prayers.

Example: ":('Van hits pedestrians' on London Bridge in 'major incident'

<https://t.co/hLOvz6A5hG> <https://t.co/RKkX61xk40>" – Naz Shah (Labour woman), 3 June 2017.

9) User interaction

A tweet should be coded as 'User Interaction' when the politician responds to a fellow Twitter user. These tweets therefore often include the @-sign indicating the user's Twitter name (Evans, Cordova and Sipole, 2014).

Example: "@[username] So sweet! Thank you!" – Peter Kyle (Labour man), 8 June 2017.

10) Miscellaneous

A tweet should be categorised as 'Miscellaneous' when it does not fit in any of the other categories.

Example: "Well done! Good luck to all Swindon students taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme this summer. <https://t.co/xzPQvg9NSp>" – George Freeman (Conservative man), 5/26/2017.

Part 2: Political Issues

Determine for each tweet if it concerns a political/campaign issue, even if the tweet is not categorised as an ‘issue’ tweet, as indicated by the ‘category’ variable. For example, a tweet can be categorised as an ‘attack’ tweet, and concern a political issue. If the tweet mentions an issue, indicate to which category that issue belongs: Brexit; Economy and Taxes; Immigration; Education; Housing; Welfare, poverty, and pensions; Foreign Policy, Military, and Defence; Environment; Transport; Women’s rights/LGBTI’s rights; Miscellaneous. Each tweet can only be assigned to one category. Not every tweet has to be coded, so if there is no political issue present, do not code the tweet for political issue.

1) Brexit. This issue includes the impact of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, Brexit negotiations, and future relations with countries of the EU.

Keywords: Brexit, Brexit negotiations, EU, referendum, EU membership, single market, customs union, withdrawal from EU, Great Repeal Bill, divorce bill, bargaining chips, leave campaign, remain campaign.

Example: “The country requires #strongleadership to deliver #brexit” – Sheryll Murray (Conservative woman), 23 April 2017.

2) Economy and taxes. This issue includes the wider economy, (un)employment, and taxes, such as income tax, VAT, and business taxes.

Keywords: economy, taxes, employment, unemployment, balanced budget, national debt, GDP, income tax, VAT, tax allowances, corporation tax, capital gains tax, wealth tax, Robin Hood tax, inheritance tax, National Insurance, tax rate, minimum wages, zero-hours contracts, Living Wage, workers’ rights.

Example: “We will transform Britain - with an economy upgraded for the many, not the few’ #ForTheMany #VoteLabour” – Richard Burgon (Labour man), 3 June 2017.

3) Immigration. This issue includes EU and worldwide migration, and border controls.

Keywords: immigration, high-skilled immigration, immigrants, refugees, asylum, Immigration Skills Charge, visa, border guards, border protection, rights of EU citizens/nationals in UK, freedom of movement

Example: “I’m proud to have signed the #refugeepledge on the importance of refugee protection #ge2017 <https://t.co/nTRmgtmnsE> #refugeeswelcome” – Emma Lewell-Buck (Labour woman), 24 May 2017.

4) Health and care. This issue includes NHS funding, A&E delays, waiting times for medical procedures, and social care.

Keywords: NHS, NHS budget, NHS staff, doctors, nurses, medical staff, social care, care at home, care bills, NHS funding, privatisation of NHS, health care, health services, A&E, National Care service, nursing care, mental health, depression, disorders

Example: “I have consistently fought for our #NHS & will continue to do so if re-elected. <https://t.co/BUJoefA6jV>” – Rupa Huq

5) Education. This issue includes funding for schools, the status of grammar schools, and university tuition fees.

Keywords: education, schools, primary schools, grammar schools, selective schools, universities, university tuition fees, maintenance grants, school budget, school budget cuts, T-Levels, SAT, Education Maintenance Allowance, pay cap for teachers, teachers, free school meals

Example: “@UKLabour will invest in education & training for everyone, everywhere. Because we know the UK is full of talent waiting to be unleashed.” - Dan Jarvis (Labour man), 10 May 2017.

6) Housing. This issue includes housebuilding, home ownership, and social housing.

Keywords: housing, house building, home ownership, Right to Buy, social housing, council houses, Homelessness Reduction Act, rough sleepers, rent rises, housing association homes, Rural Housing Fund, garden cities, letting fees, house price stability

Example: “We need to tackle the housing crisis & build affordable homes to rent & buy and improve tenants' rights & conditions” – Andy Slaughter (Labour man), 10 May 2017.

7) Welfare/poverty/pensions. This issue includes benefits, poverty, pensions, and social inequality.

Keywords: welfare, poverty, pensions, Living Pension, pensions triple lock, Winter Fuel Payments, benefits, pensioner benefits, free bus passes and TV licenses, Pensions Regulator, housing benefits, employment and support allowance, Carers' Allowance, Job Seeker's Allowance, working age benefits, Bedroom tax, increase in pension age, universal basic income, homelessness, homeless, austerity, universal credit

Example: “The triple lock on pensions has been broken & retired people's incomes will steadily decline! @BBCNews” – Barry Sheerman (Labour man), 18 May 2017.

8) Foreign policy, Military, and Defence. This issue includes foreign policy and defence.

Keywords: foreign policy, defence, military, UN, NATO, Commonwealth, G20, G7, WTO, free trade, trade deals, export, international aid, foreign aid, UK aid spending, overseas aid budget, Trident, Trident nuclear system, nuclear deterrent, first strike, strategic defence and security review, Homes for Heroes, military action in Syria, arms sales to Saudi Arabia, demilitarisation, armed forces, involvement in foreign wars

Example: “The most effective use of nuclear weapons is not to use them. Our enemies must be opened mouthed in incredulity #BBCQt” – Eric Pickles (Conservative man), 2 June 2017.

9) Environment. This issue includes climate change, air and water quality/pollution, animal welfare, and animal rights.

Keywords: environment, climate change, animal welfare, fox hunting, fox hunting ban, clean air act, Climate Change Act, diesel scrappage scheme, fracking, environmental rules, Environment Protection Act, carbon emissions, emission, ultra-low emission zones, greenhouse gas emissions, tidal lagoons, Red Meat Levy, plastic waste, Paris Climate Agreement, renewable energy, flooding, floods

Example: “In our Manifesto 5: "we will cont[inue] action to improve animal welfare... re pet sales/licensing, CCTV mandatory in slaughterhouses..." #teammay” – Andrea Leadsome (Conservative woman), 18 May 2017.

10) Transport. This issue includes the development of transportation and infrastructure, including the running of railways, bus services, and airports.

Keywords: transport, infrastructure, infrastructure investment, High Speed Rail, Rail (re-)nationalisation, rails, railways, public ownership of railways, privatization of railways, airport, airports, Heathrow, Heathrow expansion, tolls, Severn tolls, port, harbour, buses, passengers, road numbers (e.g., A1, A2 etc.).

Example: “A good time to review transport policy in the round is #hs2 really the best use of resources?” – Cheryl Gillan (Conservative woman), 23 April 2017.

11) Women's rights/LGBTI rights. This issue includes women's rights, with concerns such as domestic violence and the gender pay gap, and rights specific to the LGBTI community.

Keywords: women's rights, equal pay, gender pay gap, domestic violence, violence against women and girls, rape, rape clause, rape crisis centres, sexual abuse, abusive behaviour against women, gendered violence, sexual harassment policies, sexual consent, gender equality, Equality Act, anti-discrimination against women, equal representation, diversity in leadership positions, maternity leave, maternity discrimination, shared parental leave, free sanitary products, period poverty, reproductive rights, abortion rights, education of women and girls abroad, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, LBGT, LBGTI, WASPI campaign, WASPI women, WASPI

Example: "Tories still ignoring 2.5 million women born in 1950s who lose out due to state pension age changes. Betrayed by May #Waspi #torymanifesto" – Jim McMahon (Labour man), 18 May 2017.

2) Crime, Justice, and Security. This issue includes public safety, crime, law and order, drugs, and prisons.

Keywords: crime, police, police cuts, policing, police services, neighbourhood policing, Moped Crime Prevention, moped gangs, security, safety, prisons, shoplifting, offenders, violence, violent, druggies, theft, weapons, child molestation, Royal Navy, human trafficking, modern slavery, forced labour, terrorism, terrorist threat, cyber defence, cyber terror

Example: "More 1st class work from @Bordesley_WMP: fighting drugs is our community's no1 priority - and our police are determined to act. Great work!" – Liam Byrne (Labour man), 22 May 2017.

13) Miscellaneous. A tweet should be coded as 'Miscellaneous' when it concerns a political topic not defined in the coding scheme.

Example: “Mobile phone coverage in #Morley & #Outwood has improved but more needs to be done. @MhancockUK & I discuss it here:

<https://www.andreajenkyns.co.uk/news/minister> – Andrea Jenkyns (Conservative woman), 26 May 2017.

Appendix B: Frequencies and percentages of political issue tweets

Political issue	Election n (%)	Winter 2017 n (%)	Summer 2018 n (%)	Total n (%)
Brexit	57 (12.5)	256 (19.9)	138 (12.9)	451 (16)
Economy and taxes	56 (12.3)	198 (15.4)	116 (10.8)	370 (13.2)
Health and care	72 (15.8)	129 (10)	124 (11.6)	325 (11.6)
Environment	59 (13)	131 (10.2)	92 (8.6)	282 (10)
Transport	34 (7.5)	80 (6.2)	154 (14.4)	268 (9.5)
Sexism/gender	24 (5.3)	79 (6.2)	104 (9.7)	207 (7.4)
Crime, Justice and Security	28 (6.2)	60 (4.7)	68 (6.3)	156 (5.5)
Foreign policy, Military, and Defence	18 (4)	84 (6.5)	53 (4.9)	155 (5.5)
Education	42 (9.2)	50 (3.9)	49 (4.6)	141 (5)
Miscellaneous	17 (3.1)	48 (3.7)	51 (4.8)	116 (4.1)
Welfare/poverty	22 (4.8)	69 (5.4)	23 (2.1)	114 (4.1)
Housing	10 (2.2)	51 (4)	40 (3.7)	101 (3.6)
Local	14 (3.1)	30 (2.3)	43 (4)	87 (3.1)
Immigration	2 (.4)	19 (1.5)	17 (1.6)	38 (1.4)
Total (%)	455 (100)	1284 (100)	1072 (100)	2811 (100)

Note. Political issues are listed in descending order by the total number of tweets, as shown in the final column. Only includes tweets which were coded as issue tweets in the content analysis.

Appendix C: 'Statistical results Kruskal-Wallis Omnibus test for tweet content'

Tweet type	Election period 2017			Winter period 2017			Summer period 2018		
	K	df	p	K	df	p	K	df	p
User Interaction	8.684	3	.034	12.595	3	.006	14.077	3	.003
Political issues	3.634	3	.304	28.597	3	< .001	6.855	3	.077
Attack	25.276	3	< .001	83.397	3	<.001	48.955	3	<.001
Campaigning	4.06	3	.255	7.122	3	.068	5.411	3	.144
Visits	9.867	3	.020	20.906	3	<.001	27.844	3	<.001
Personal	2.461	3	.482	13.138	3	.004	10.358	3	.016
Const. promotion	10.404	3	.015	2.831	3	.419	17.231	3	<.001
Mobilisation	7.701	3	.053	.763	3	.858	2.470	3	.481
Charity	1.439	3	.697	4.322	3	.229	7.044	3	.071
News	1.539	3	.673	.628	3	.890	.081	3	.994
Media	1.422	3	.700	1.565	3	.667	4.270	3	.234
Reflection	4.467	3	.215	x	x	x	1.693	3	.634
Memorial service	x	x	x	1.420	3	.701	.879	3	.831
Endorsement	37.969	3	< .001	1.930	3	.587	2.337	3	.505
Update	2.934	3	.402	6.596	3	.086	1.851	3	.604

Appendix D: 'Statistical results Kruskal-Wallis Omnibus test for political issues'

Political issue	Election period 2017			Winter period 2017			Summer period 2018		
	<i>K</i>	df	<i>P</i>	<i>K</i>	df	<i>p</i>	<i>K</i>	df	<i>p</i>
Brexit	22.464	3	<.001	3.048	3	.384	12.145	3	.007
Economy and taxes	8.150	3	.043	1.242	3	.743	3.344	3	.342
Health and care	8.373	3	.039	8.901	3	.031	6.542	3	.088
Environment	6.321	3	.097	38.459	3	<.001	8.498	3	.037
Transport	2.478	3	.479	3.711	3	.295	.537	3	.911
Sexism/gender	23.346	3	<.001	21.695	3	<.001	19.623	3	<.001
Crime	1.394	3	.707	6.617	3	.085	.594	3	.898
Foreign	14.960	3	.002	6.496	3	.090	22.355	3	<.001
Education	4.423	3	.219	.882	3	.830	4.362	3	.225
Welfare/poverty	6.897	3	.075	21.029	3	<.001	5.604	3	.133
Housing	6.957	3	.073	1.822	3	.610	3.319	3	.345
Local	4.149	3	.246	2.418	3	.490	1.576	3	.665
Immigration	.361	3	.948	4.977	3	.174	2.654	3	.448

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