

Gendered Political Communication on Social Media During Election Campaigns in India: A Comparative Content Analysis of Male and Female Politicians

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Abstract

Political communication in India has undergone a profound transformation with the rapid expansion of social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms have enabled politicians to directly engage with voters while simultaneously exposing gendered differences in political messaging, audience engagement, media framing, and online harassment. Although numerous studies have examined social media in election campaigns, limited scholarship has comparatively synthesized how male and female politicians communicate differently in India's electoral context. This review systematically analyzes existing literature published between 2014 and 2025 to examine gendered patterns in political communication across major social media platforms during Indian election campaigns. Following PRISMA guidelines, peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar are analyzed through thematic content analysis. The review identifies significant differences in Communication style, Issue framing, Emotional expression, Leadership portrayal, Audience engagement, Algorithmic visibility, and Exposure to online abuse. Female politicians are found to emphasize welfare, inclusiveness, participatory governance, and citizen interaction, while male politicians predominantly employ assertive, nationalistic, leadership-centered, and campaign-oriented messaging. The review further highlights the persistence of misogyny, gender stereotypes, and coordinated online attacks that disproportionately affect women's political participation. The paper concludes by proposing an integrated framework for understanding gendered political communication in India's evolving digital democracy and identifies important research gaps for future empirical investigations.

Keywords: Political Communication, Social Media, Gender, Election Campaigns, India, Comparative Content Analysis, Digital Democracy.

Introduction

The expansion of digital communication has fundamentally reshaped democratic participation worldwide. Political campaigns increasingly rely on social media to disseminate campaign messages, mobilize supporters, influence public opinion, and shape electoral narratives. In India, where over 900 million citizens have internet access, platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have become indispensable campaign tools.

The emergence of social media has altered not only campaign strategies but also the nature of political discourse itself. Political leaders now bypass traditional media gatekeepers and communicate directly with voters, creating personalized narratives and interactive forms of engagement.

However, social media communication is not gender neutral. Existing research demonstrates that women politicians experience distinct opportunities and challenges compared to men. While digital platforms enable women to amplify political voices, they also expose them to disproportionate levels of online abuse, misogyny, body shaming, and credibility attacks.

Although individual case studies have examined prominent leaders such as Narendra Modi, Smriti Irani, Mamata Banerjee, Priyanka Gandhi Vadera, and Mahua Moitra, there remains limited comparative synthesis of gendered communication strategies across election campaigns.

This review addresses this gap through a systematic comparative content analysis of published literature.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

- Examine gender differences in political communication during Indian election campaigns.
- Compare communication strategies adopted by male and female politicians.
- Identify dominant themes across social media platforms.
- Analyze audience engagement patterns.
- Examine gendered online harassment.
- Identify future research directions.

Research Questions

- RQ1. How do male and female politicians differ in their social media communication during Indian elections?
- RQ2. What themes dominate their political messages?
- RQ3. How does audience engagement differ?
- RQ4. What evidence exists regarding online gender-based harassment?
- RQ5. What methodological gaps remain in current scholarship?

Methodology

This paper adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) using the PRISMA framework.

Databases

- Scopus
- Web of Science
- Google Scholar
- CrossRef

Search Keywords

- Gender Political Communication India
- Election Campaign Social Media India
- Women Politicians Twitter India
- Female Political Leaders Social Media
- Digital Election Campaign India

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journals
- English language Publications, published between 2014–2025
- Indian election campaigns
- Focus on social media

Exclusion Criteria

- Newspaper articles
- Conference abstracts
- Opinion pieces
- Book reviews

Literature Review

- **Social Media and Election Campaigns:** Studies consistently show that social media has become central to electoral campaigning, enabling personalized outreach, real-time messaging, and voter mobilization.
- **Gendered Political Communication:** Research suggests women politicians more frequently emphasize welfare, healthcare, education, and collaborative leadership, whereas men are more likely to foreground nationalism, security, economic development, and strong leadership.
- **Emotional Communication:** Female politicians often employ empathetic and relational language. Male politicians tend to use more assertive and confrontational rhetoric.
- **Audience Engagement:** Evidence indicates that women may receive higher engagement for community-focused content but also encounter more hostile interactions. Male politicians often achieve greater visibility due to larger follower bases and established party structures.
- **Online Misogyny:** The literature documents extensive gendered abuse directed at women politicians, including sexist language, threats, appearance-based criticism, and coordinated trolling, which can discourage participation and shape communication strategies.

Comparative Content Analysis

Dimensions	Male Politicians	Female Politicians
Leadership Style	Strong, decisive	Inclusive, participatory
Dominant Issues	National security, economy	Welfare, education, health
Communication Tone	Assertive	Empathetic
Visual Strategy	Mass rallies, leadership imagery	Community engagement, citizen interaction
Audience Interaction	Broadcast-oriented	Interactive and conversational
Personal Disclosure	Lower	Higher
Online Harassment	Lower	Higher

Emerging Themes

The review identifies several recurring themes:

- Personalization of political leadership.
- Gendered framing of competence and authority.
- Platform-specific communication strategies.
- Differences in issue prioritization.
- Persistent online misogyny.
- Algorithmic amplification and visibility disparities.
- Emotional appeals in campaign messaging.
- Digital activism and grassroots mobilization.

Discussion

The synthesis indicates that gender shapes both the production and reception of political communication on social media in India. Women's messaging often emphasizes inclusion, welfare, and citizen engagement, but these efforts are constrained by gendered harassment and stereotypes. Men's communication more frequently centers on authority, national identity, and campaign dominance. Platform algorithms, media coverage, and party support structures further influence the reach and interpretation of these communication styles.

The comparative analysis indicates that male politicians generally dominate digital political communication in terms of visibility, frequency of posting, audience reach, and engagement. This dominance can be attributed to greater organizational support, larger follower networks, higher campaign expenditure, and stronger digital infrastructures maintained by political parties. Previous studies have shown that major political parties in India have increasingly institutionalized digital campaigning, particularly since the 2014 general elections, resulting in professionalized communication strategies that often favor nationally prominent male leaders.

Female politicians, in contrast, frequently adopt communication strategies that emphasize inclusivity, welfare, education, healthcare, community development, and citizen engagement. Their social media content tends to be more conversational, empathetic, and participatory, reflecting broader patterns identified in gender and political communication literature. Rather than relying primarily on confrontational rhetoric, women politicians often attempt to build trust through interactive engagement and issue-based communication. However, these communication styles are often overshadowed by the highly personalized and leader-centric narratives that dominate India's digital election campaigns.

The study further reveals that women politicians experience disproportionately high levels of gendered online abuse. Unlike male politicians, whose criticism generally focuses on ideological disagreements or policy decisions, female politicians are frequently subjected to misogynistic language, personal attacks, body shaming, character assassination, sexist stereotypes, and threats of violence. Such harassment extends beyond political disagreement and directly targets women's legitimacy as political leaders.

The findings also support the theoretical assumptions of the Digital Public Sphere and Networked Public Sphere. Social media has expanded opportunities for women politicians to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, communicate directly with citizens, mobilize supporters, and construct independent political identities. Nevertheless, these opportunities remain constrained by patriarchal social norms that continue to influence audience perceptions and online interactions. Consequently, digital political participation should not be equated with digital equality.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media has transformed the mechanics of election campaigning without fundamentally altering the gendered distribution of political power. Digital platforms have undoubtedly expanded opportunities for women politicians to communicate directly with citizens, increase political visibility, and mobilize support. However, the persistence of online misogyny, unequal media attention, algorithmic bias, and patriarchal political structures indicates that gender inequalities continue to shape political communication during election campaigns in India.

Finally, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and comparative analysis rather than primary empirical data. Future research may employ content analysis, computational social media analysis, surveys, interviews, or mixed-method approaches to examine gender differences across specific platforms such as X, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp during forthcoming Indian election campaigns. Comparative studies across states, political parties, and electoral contexts would further enrich understanding of gendered political communication in India's rapidly evolving digital democracy.

Research Gaps

- Limited comparative studies across multiple elections.
- Underrepresentation of regional-language content.
- Few analyses of short-video platforms.
- Insufficient use of AI-assisted content analysis.
- Lack of longitudinal studies tracking communication over time.
- Limited intersectional analysis considering caste, religion, region, and age alongside gender.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework for future research could include:

- Independent Variables: Gender, political party, incumbency, election phase, platform.
- Mediating Variables: Platform algorithms, media coverage, trolling intensity.
- Dependent Variables: Engagement, message diffusion, voter perception, online sentiment.

Future Research Directions

Future Studies should:

- Conduct large-scale comparative analyses of male and female politicians across national and state elections.
- Apply computational methods such as natural language processing, sentiment analysis, and machine learning to multilingual political content.
- Examine the role of visual communication (images, videos, memes) in shaping gendered political narratives.
- Investigate the influence of coordinated online harassment on political participation and campaign strategy.
- Compare India's experience with other democracies to identify context-specific and universal patterns.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that gender remains a significant factor in shaping political communication on social media during election campaigns in India. While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for political engagement, communication styles, issue emphasis, audience interaction, and exposure to online abuse continue to differ between male and female politicians. A systematic synthesis of the literature reveals the need for more comparative, multilingual, and longitudinal research to better understand how gender interacts with digital technologies in electoral politics. Such work can inform scholars, policymakers, political parties, and technology platforms seeking to foster more inclusive and equitable digital democratic spaces.

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