Communication of Female and Male Deputy Candidates on the Social Network *Facebook* During the Pre-Election Period of 14th *Saeima*

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Abstract. The European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 aims to increase women's participation in politics. Although women's participation in politics has grown in recent years, the numbers are still insufficient due to various barriers such as gender stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination and violence. The objectives of the study are to establish whether and how gender stereotypes are manifested in the communication of male and female candidates for the 14th *Saeima* (the parliament of Latvia) on *Facebook* one month before the elections, what persuasive communication techniques have been used by the candidates to attract votes on the aforementioned social network, whether and how gender stereotypes are manifested in the communication of voters with male and female candidates for the *Saeima*. Furthermore, the differences in language use between male and female candidates for the 14th *Saeima* (sociolinguistic gender model) are investigated. The theoretical part of the study describes the differences between the concepts of sex and gender, gender roles, gender stereotypes, as well as gender in political communication. The study considers social media and political communication, persuasive communication and the sociolinguistic gender model. The results of the study indicate the presence of gender stereotypes in politicians' communication with voters, as well as voters' communication with politicians. This is more evident in the communication of men.

Keywords: parliament, politicians, comments, voters, gender stereotypes, persuasion, female candidates, parliamentary candidates

Introduction

The European Committee of the Regions estimates that there are around one million local and regional elected representatives in European countries, but only around 30% of these are women (European Committee of the Regions 2023). The barriers to women's participation in politics are manifold, and one of the most fundamental is gender stereotyping. The European Parliament notes

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that gender stereotypes can have an impact on women's participation in politics from a very early age, in pre-schools and in schools, when children are told about professions. These stereotypes can manifest themselves in messages that women are not cut out for politics or are not strong enough as political actors compared to men (European Parliament 2023).

In Europe, the studies conducted in 2018 found alarming levels of sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians in Europe. Those under 40 are more likely to be subjected to psychological pressure and various prejudices (European Parliament 2023). This was also confirmed by the Latvian Minister for Justice Inese Lībiņa-Egnere, who ran in the 14th *Saeima* elections on the list of the political party "*Jaunā Vienotība*". Lībiņa-Egnere has served as an elected member of the Latvian Parliament for several terms. In a semi-structured interview conducted as part of this research, she revealed that several years ago she experienced prejudiced attitudes from her colleagues in Parliament precisely because of her youth. However, she has had a successful political career and is ready to encourage other women to enter politics, leading by example.

Information on the Latvia Central Election Commission's website shows that over the last 12 years, Latvia has seen an increase in the desire of both women and men to be involved in politics, but there are still fewer women on party candidate lists and in the *Saeima*. A careful observation reveals important nuances that point to possible changes in the Latvian arliament, reducing the male dominance. The 14th *Saeima* is the first in which the number of women and men elected to a party's faction is approaching balance. From "*Stabilitātei!*" – 6 men and 5 women, and from "*Progresīvie*" – 4 women and 6 men. It should also be noted that the electoral lists for "*Stabilitātei!*" were 52% male and 48% female, while for "*Progresīvie*" – 40% female and 60% male (Latvia Central Electoral Commission 2022). These are the only cases where the percentages of women and men are so close to balance.

Recent research shows that "Latvia has the strongest stereotypes of gender roles in the Baltics" (Lejiņa 2022). In the "Novatore Baltic Gender Barometer 2022", more than half of respondents in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia express the belief that most professions are equally suitable for both genders, but there are still unjustified prejudices against female managers in some parts of society, such as "women are less resilient to stress or that they cannot be strong leaders" (TV3.lv 2022).

In order to achieve the European Union's goal of eradicating gender stereotypes, it is important to understand how pervasive is their presence at various political levels in Latvia, starting with pre-election communication, for example, in social networks. To find out if and how gender stereotypes arose in the communication of male and female deputy candidates on *Facebook*, whether and how these stereotypes were manifested in followers' comments with the candidates,

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and what were the language differences in the communication of female and male deputy candidates on *Facebook* a month before the 14th *Saeima* elections in 2022, the master's thesis has the following objectives: to study gender the presence of stereotypes in the communication of male and female MP candidates on *Facebook*, whether these stereotypes are also visible in persuasive communication between male and female politicians, what are the verbal and non-verbal language differences between male and female candidates, whether and how gender stereotypes were manifested in the communication between voters and politicians on *Facebook*. Research period: September 2022.

In order to achieve the goals, the following tasks have been set:
- To establish the theoretical basis for the study;
- To establish the research design;
- To conduct a content analysis of the *Facebook* accounts of the 7 male and 7 female members of the 14th *Saeima* who received the most pluses from their political party (01.09.2022–30.09.2022). If a candidate did not have an active *Facebook* account, the next most plus-ranked MP was included in the study;
- To conduct a discourse analysis of the feedback or comments;
- To conduct semi-structured interviews with male and female MPs;
- To formulate conclusions.
- Research questions: How did gender stereotypes and differences in language use manifest themselves in the communication of male/female politicians on *Facebook*? How did gender stereotypes manifest themselves in the comments of the politician's followers on *Facebook*? What content was posted on *Facebook* by male and female research participants in the month before 14th *Saeima* elections?

The theoretical basis of the study consists of a description of gender, gender roles, gender stereotypes, gender in political communication. It also includes a theoretical overview of social media and political communication, persuasive communication and the sociolinguistic model of gender.

The relevance of the study is linked to the European Commission's commitment to tackle the negative impact of gender stereotypes on women's willingness to engage in politics, as "women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, should be free to express their ideas and emotions and to choose their education and careers without the constraints of stereotypical gender norms" (European Commission 2020). The results of the study on gender stereotypes and differences in language use between men and women in the 14th *Saeima's* pre-election communication on *Facebook* will provide insights into the current situation in Latvia in these areas. Additionally, the results will help to put forward proposals for further action including new research, to tackle various prejudices and entrenched beliefs about gender roles.

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Methodology

US political scientist Kathleen Dolan argues that the so-called masculine traits such as self-confidence and aggressiveness make men better qualified to tackle tough issues such as the economy, foreign affairs, defence or the military. In contrast, feminine traits such as compassion, warmth and sensitivity are associated with women's competence in health, education, combating poverty and protecting the environment (Dolan 2005). Decades of research on gender situation in politics have shown that gender stereotypes play an important role in how political actors communicate with voters, how voters perceive female and male politicians' communication, and what the public expects from female and male politicians (Winfrey *et al.* 2019). Stereotypes of women as politicians can adversely affect their chances of being elected to parliament or appointed to positions of political responsibility. Stereotypes characterise women as sensitive, emotional and weak, and these are qualities that "voters do not traditionally associate with political leadership. Voters are more likely to associate their political representation with masculine traits such as toughness, aggressiveness self-confidence" (Bauer 2019).

Four methods were used to investigate the presence of gender stereotypes in the communication, persuasive communication and language use of female and male deputy candidates and their followers:
1) qualitative content analysis;
2) discourse analysis;
3) semi-structured interview;
4) chi-square criterion.

Qualitative content analysis was used to examine the context of the *Facebook* posts posted by the study participants, male and female parliamentary candidates in September 2022, to identify possible hidden meanings based on gender stereotypes and differences in language use. The discourse analysis provided an opportunity to explore social media comments, their substance, the content that is not explicitly stated in the text. The semi-structured interview allowed to interpret the data, while chi-square calculations helped to identify statistically significant differences in the results.

For the purposes of this study, qualitative content analysis codebooks, including categories and subcategories, were created with the aim of understanding the gender stereotypes of the subjects *Facebook* posts and the differences in language use between men and women. One of the tasks to be completed by sociolinguistic analysis was to investigate the differences between male and female parliamentary candidates in the use of different coloured punctuation offered by *Facebook*. Some of the categories and subcategories included in the qualitative content analysis are adapted from a similar study in Greece,

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which also explained the impact of gender stereotypes on the communication of parliamentary candidates ahead of the 2019 elections (Tsichla *et al.* 2021). Two main variables have been identified for the analysis: women are coded M1, men – M2. The data analysis will also explain whether there are statistically significant differences between the selected variables in the female and male groups using the chi-square criterion. A difference will be considered statistically significant if the p-value is less than 0.005. The calculations were carried out in the open access web tool https://www.socscistatistics.com/. The members of the 14th *Saeima* were interviewed for the purposes of the current study, using the semi-structured interview method. Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach was used to analyse the followers' comments on male and female deputy candidates *Facebook* posts. Categories and subcategories were drawn up for the discourse analysis of the comments, some of them – based on similar studies (Tsichla *et al.* 2019; Diekman 2000). The aim of this analysis: to search the comment discourses for overt or covert signs of gender stereotypes in the attitudes of commentators towards a particular deputy candidate or politicians in general.

Results

During the study period, male and female candidates for the 14th *Saeima* made a total of 603 *Facebook* posts (printed text, photos, videos, etc.). 310 (51%) posts for men and 293 (49%) for women. After analysing the data, it emerged that during the period under study, men posted more *Facebook* posts in printed text than female deputy candidates – 244 posts for men and 205 posts for women.

Meanwhile, women shared more content posted by others than men. Men were more likely than women to mention other persons or institutions in their posts and to post hashtags. The differences observed are statistically significant. Comparing the topics of the posts, men and women posted almost equally on *Facebook* about election campaign activities, but men were slightly more active (153 times men, 132 times women) and communicated statistically significantly more than women about the issues of foreign affairs.

Women, on the other hand, focused more on heating and electricity prices, as well as economic development issues – a statistically significant difference. Women were slightly more likely than men to report on education issues, although there was no statistically significant difference. Men communicated statistically significantly more than women on migration issues (see Figure 1).

During the study period from 1 September 2022 to 30 September 2022, 7 367 comments were added on *Facebook* to the posts of the study participants. An analysis of the textual form of the comments reveals that, overall, the authors have expressed themselves most often in terms of recounting, suggesting and
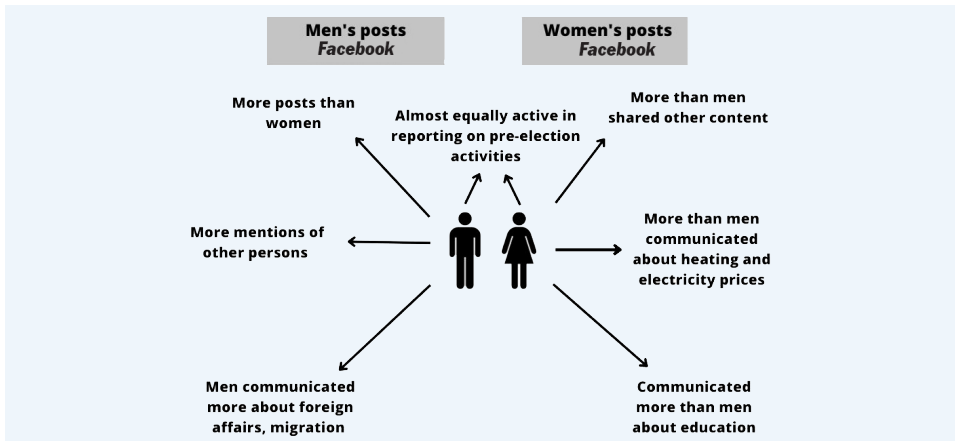
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Figure 1. Facebook posts of male and female parliamentary candidates based on gender stereotype in September 2022
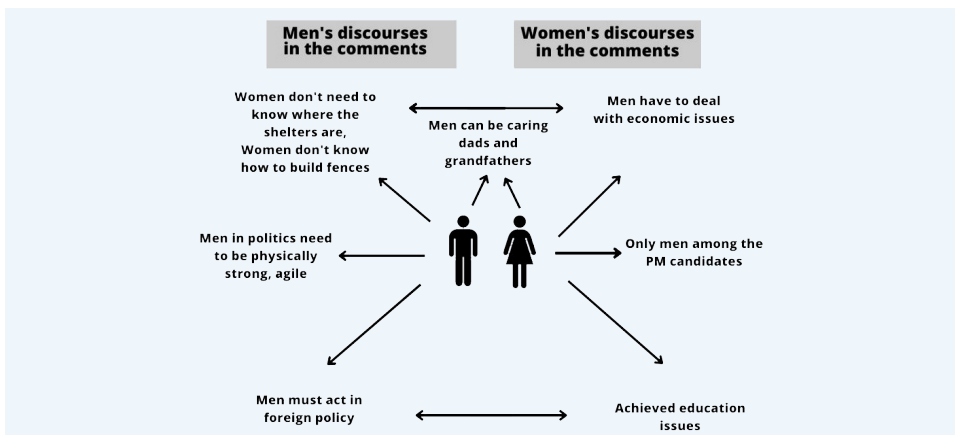

Figure 2. Gender stereotyped discourses between male and female commentators in September 2022

wishing, and least often – in terms of commanding. The content or discursive type of the comments is mostly expressed in a challenging and justifying style. Apologies were the least frequent type of comment (see Figure 2).

Although there are many similarities, there are also differences in the language use (sociolinguistic gender pattern) between male and female candidates in *Facebook* posts. The most significant differences are the following: women were more likely to express support, men were more likely to post more aggressive messages, expressing strong opinions or opposing. Both men and women were equally likely to use bright red punctuation in their texts to reinforce the meaning of the text. Women were more likely to use metaphors in their texts (see Figure 3).
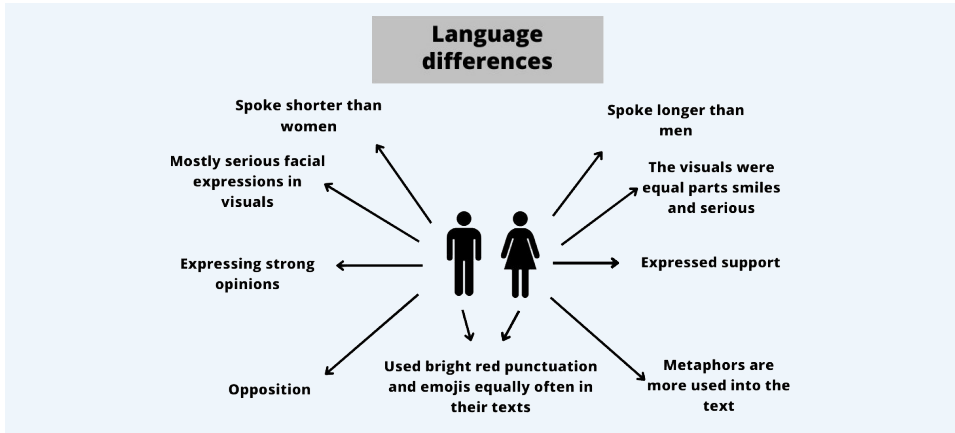
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Figure 3. Differences in language use between male and female parliamentary candidates on *Facebook* in September 2022

Conclusions

Male and female parliamentary candidates and their followers on *Facebook* used gender-stereotyped communication – men more often than women. This shows that gender stereotypes are a problem for Latvian society as a whole. Gender equality issues are not only not a priority in Latvian politics, but a topic that politicians avoid. The problem has been left to its own devices, or time will put everything in its place. It is an uncomfortable topic, because if a discussion were to be started on this issue, it could have wide repercussions in society. Communication of persuasion is about breaking gender stereotypes, because women communicate about the economy, while men demonstrate that they are good fathers, grandfathers – not just money earners. Women's participation and involvement in politics should be encouraged. Minister for Justice Inese Lībiņa-Egnere, who has been a member of the *Saeima* in several previous parliamentary terms, admitted that during her time in the *Saeima* she has faced prejudices and stereotypical views from men concerning her youth and lack of experience. In a semi-structured interview conducted as part of this research, Lībiņa-Egnere stated:

> I have been in politics for 12 years now, so I know my colleagues and my colleagues know me, so maybe these stereotypes of not knowing people are no longer relevant. You have to ask new colleagues how they feel, but yes, I remember that in some ways you have to work hard to be taken seriously when you are still relatively young and a woman.

The current study expands knowledge about the under-researched presence of gender stereotypes in Latvian politics, providing evidence that gender stereotypes

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and various gender biases are present in Latvian politics and society at large. Further research is needed to expand the relevant knowledge and to develop recommendations for reducing and eradicating gender stereotypes. For example, greater involvement of politicians in research would be welcome. It would also be beneficial to employ the method of observation. The possibility of one or more of the politicians becoming a researcher and observer could be considered. During the research, out of 8 politicians approached on several occasions, only the Minister for Justice, Lībiņa-Egnere, responded. This shows that politicians, both men and women, do not sufficiently appreciate the danger that gender stereotypes represent for development of the country.

Author's note: This article is based on the master's thesis developed and defended in the master's study programme "Communication Science" at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Latvia. The scientific supervisor of the master's thesis is Associate Professor Marita Zitmane.

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