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Kathryn Gruber will graduate from UW Oshkosh in May 2010 with a degree in communication and political science. She is in the University Honors Program and has been on the Dean's List six consecutive semesters. Because of her interest in both communication and political science, her research is a collaboration of these disciplines. In her senior year, Kathryn looks forward to continuing to pursue her research interests and preparing for graduate school.

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Abstract

Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin played prominent roles in the 2008 presidential primary and general campaigns, inviting a discussion of sexism. The unstoppable growth of the Internet has allowed news consumers to share opinions with ease. In this study, I compared comments left on the comment board following an article on perceived sexism by Clinton supporters to the comments left on the comment board following an article on perceived sexism by Palin supporters. The comments were coded for sexist content using positive/negative versions of subtle, covert, and blatant sexism. The results indicate that 75.9% of the comments about Palin were negatively sexist, while only 67.2% of the comments about Clinton were negatively sexist. Results suggest that factors influencing sexist perceptions may include the candidate's family, the candidate's stage in his or her political career, and pre-existing commenter characteristics.

Introduction

The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign contained all the elements of a dream come true for political junkies. Religion and religious public figures, spouses suffering from severe illnesses, politically powerful spouses, questionable associates, the candidates' newspaper preferences, race, gender, age, excessive amounts of money, endless primaries, polarizing candidates, intelligence and qualifications of candidates, cute children, teenage pregnancy, grabs for power, dark-horse candidates—all of

these were issues present in the campaign, making this campaign equally ripe for and difficult to research.

Of all these issues, I was particularly interested in the discussion of gender and sexism. These two issues were prominently on display as Hillary Clinton emerged as an early favorite in the Democratic Party primaries and as Sarah Palin surprised the political pundits as the Republican vice presidential candidate selection. It was fascinating to watch the discussion of sexism ferment over the summer and into the conventions while focusing on Clinton and then to see the discussion pick up almost immediately when Palin's candidacy was announced. As a younger voter, this focus on gender is not one I had witnessed prior to the campaign; perhaps I had taken for granted that sexism was a diminished—but still real—challenge facing female candidates. It made me think about how sexism is manifested in this time where a certain amount of political correctness is expected. What factors produced this sexism, and how do voters express it?

In this research, I focused on the discussion surrounding the sexism these two candidates faced by using comments focused on sexism left at the end of online articles. Following online news articles, readers have the opportunity to write and post comments in reaction to the article's subject. I conducted a content analysis (the process of coding language to describe what is being said) of the comments made by readers discussing sexism in the campaigns of Clinton and Palin. In order to focus my research, I developed the following research question: How frequently and to what degree is sexism manifested in reader comments?

Literature Review

My research question is based on the assumption that language can influence a person's behavior and actions. Buker (1996) argued that semiotics can help explain the use of political language by examining the communication system that rules citizens and how citizen readers can actively participate in creating meanings in the system. In order to find meanings, one must look at the language of the group rather than that of individual speakers. Meanings are socially constructed within the community of the speakers, and these collective meanings help anchor the community together. This conceptual framework is grounded in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity. Parks and Robertson (2000) found evidence supporting the moderate version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that "holds that culture and language are intertwined such that the meanings people ascribe to language affect their realities, their self-concepts, and their world views" (p. 416). Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) cited language as both socially constructed and conditioned in their use of the critical discourse analysis method.

I researched different ways of looking at individual instances of language in order to develop my research methodology. Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) presented a critical discourse analysis, which focused on relationships between power and inequality in our language and on bringing these relationships to light. To study society, we study the language; therefore, by studying written comments, sexism in society can be explored. By using the micro-level ("concrete instances of talk"), the highly contextualized setting can be captured (p. 460). Likewise, Houser (1998) focused on

the importance of language from individual actors. In order to identify public opinion, there must be a public sphere where people can communicate and reach a common judgment. In my research, the message boards following online articles would serve as the public sphere where people can collectively discuss and attempt to reach a common judgment. Houser emphasized that unofficial members of society participate in these publics and can be influential in shaping public opinion. In order to provide a whole picture of public opinion, we must “widen [political commentary’s] scope to include vernacular exchanges in addition to those of institutional actors” to find the dialogue that reflects a common understanding and collective reasoning process (Houser, p. 86). Because my goal was to examine how the most basic actors of the political process viewed sexism, I followed Houser’s method of examining individuals. The examined individuals were the readers of articles, not institutional actors, and this fulfills Houser’s requirement of including vernacular exchanges to see the true political picture. To code these vernacular exchanges, the three categories (blatant, covert, and subtle sexism) of sexism developed by Swim, Mallett, and Stangor (2004) provide definitions to differentiate and code comments.

Through my literature review, I researched articles to find factors that would potentially influence my research. Kahn (1994) conducted a content analysis of gubernatorial and senatorial campaign media coverage and used these results to examine reader reactions to the coverage of men versus women. The study showed that there is a media difference in the way that women and men are covered. It also demonstrated that viewers are influenced by their own sex stereotypes. Because of this, female senatorial candidates face more critical media and stereotypes than male candidates face. Gubernatorial candidates could use the stereotypes to their advantage because gubernatorial issues are domestic, while senatorial candidates must respond to foreign issues. This research could reveal some confounding or intervening variables in my research. Because of Clinton’s background as a senator, she faced more critical media coverage prior to her presidential bid than had she not come from that background. Conversely, before being selected as the Republican vice-presidential candidate, Palin had not faced many of the questions and issues that female candidates must face nationally. Because of this disparity in prior experience with campaign coverage, expectations, and stereotypes, Clinton may have been more prepared to face sexism than Palin (Kahn, 1994). Additional research by Mezey (1978) found that a female politician’s family and gender have an effect on campaigning and serving in public offices. She found that women entered political office an average of 5 years later than their male colleagues and that males had a higher number of children and were more likely to be married than women upon entering office. Mezey also found that voters much more frequently asked women about how they would manage their family responsibilities while in office. While Clinton conforms to Mezey’s findings, as she entered into a political office at a later age after her child was grown, Palin does not.

Research Design

Data Description and Source

I gathered data from the comment sections of two different online articles written concerning sexism in the 2008 presidential campaign and conducted a comparison of the comments made after the September 2, 2008, article “Cindy McCain:

Sarah Palin Coverage is Sexist” and the reader comments about the May 20, 2008, “For Some Clinton Supporters, Sexism is the Only Explanation” to examine how the candidates were discussed (Goldman, 2008; Sawyer, 2008). Because the purpose of this study was to see what the reaction of readers was to the possible sexism, I selected these non-editorial news articles in order to avoid biases and opinions that the original author of the article could have inserted and provoked. Both articles were from the ABC.com news section so that the variables of access and readership were held as constant as possible. In addition, ABC.com is not perceived as particularly slanted ideologically, so data were gathered from a representative population of politically active citizens with Internet access. While the nature of the comments may have introduced a self-selection bias, this was not a major problem because these were the individuals who were the most politically motivated and therefore most likely to vote. The self-selection bias is a benefit to the research design because it is a way to concentrate on the members of society who are in the best position to influence political campaigns.

Variables

Each comment was coded into three categories: blatant, covert, and subtle sexism, as Swim, Mallett, and Stangor (2004) suggested in their research. For each category, there are two subcategories that may be identified: positive sexism (e.g., she is the better candidate simply because she is a woman) and negative sexism (e.g., she cannot be president because she is a woman). Each comment had the potential to be coded in one of seven ways. Using categories and definitions used in previous research contributed to the credibility of the measurement technique in this study. In addition, reading of all the comments prior to coding and identifying common words and phrases allowed context-specific definitions of the categories to be developed, as shown in Table 1.

Method

The comments were coded individually and then recorded in an SPSS datasheet. After all data were coded and entered, I analyzed the data to see how the commenters as a whole reacted to sexism concerning Clinton and Palin. To analyze the data, I conducted a cross tabulation between the variables *comment found after article concerning Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin* and *level of sexism found in the comment*. For simplicity of viewing, the variables and data were recoded in order to remove the comments coded 0, or *no sexism detected*.

Results

As shown in Table 2, Palin received the most negative and blatant sexism overall. On the positive side of the sexism scale, Palin also received far more blatantly sexist comments. The Clinton commenters demonstrate little sexism on the negative side, with only a strong representation in negative subtle comments, while comments were found to be more resolutely in the positive categories of covert and blatant. Meanwhile, Palin commenters produced more strongly negative comments, and Palin also received fewer positive sexist comments.

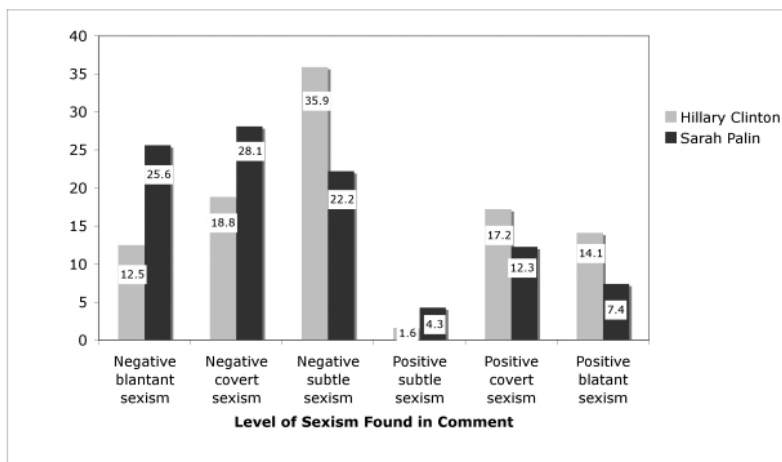
Table 1
Comment Code Definitions and Examples

Code	Label	Definition	Actual example (unedited)
-3	Negative blatant	Only qualification for being chosen/got this far is that she is a woman; name calling; telling woman speaker to not speak; concern over candidate's family (children or spouse)	"Hillary has tried every gimmick to play on peoples emotion in this election. She tried crying in New Hampshire, her husband tried the race card in SC, she also tried the race card in "white hard working Americans" speech, she pretended to choke in a cnn interview. Now she says it's sexism. Hillary should be ashamed and just get the hell out of here."
-2	Negative covert	Expectation of women all voting the same	"I personally do not trust Senator Hillary Clinton, I do not believe her, and I do not like her. I am also speaking for my close female friend. I am not against any female being President of our country but I am against a phony."
-1	Negative subtle	Blaming of candidate for losing; blaming of vetting for poor pick	"Hillary will look for any excuse to cover up the fact that she ran a poor campaign. Why can't the Clintons simply accept the truth?"
0	No sexism detected	No sexism perceivable; off topic comments	Comments about other candidates, off - topic arguments between commenters
1	Positive subtle	Candidate not to blame for losing or poor press	"I can't help but laugh as I read through these posts and watching folks trying every possible angle to discredit the choice of Palin for VP. It seems quite apparent to me that they are doing this because they see that their candidates are fraught with inadequacy so much so that they are separate to make the Republican contenders look more inferior. Good luck with that."
2	Positive covert	Expectation of women all voting the same	"51% of the population are women. For all those media outlets who spent your time tearing down Palin and her family. It will all come out in the voting booth. How lucky do you feel?"
3	Positive blatant	Very fact that she is a woman is a qualification; motherhood as a qualification	"Anyone who doesn't see how the male media has turned on her is brain dead. I am also disappointed that young women don't get it. Being a housewife in the fifties and doting on your man wasn't a whole lot better than living under a burka. Obama may get the nomination but if she isn't at least on the ticket – then the Democratic party has lost me and my contributions."

Table 2
Cross Tabulation of Variables Comment Found After Article Concerning Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin * Level of Sexism Found in Comment

	Level of sexism found in comment						Total
	Negative blatant sexism	Negative covert sexism	Negative subtle sexism	Positive subtle sexism	Positive covert sexism	Positive blatant sexism	
Hillary Clinton	8	12	23	1	11	9	64
	8.8%	11.7%	24.2%	6.7%	21.6%	27.3%	16.5%
Sarah Palin	83	91	72	14	40	24	324
	91.2%	88.3%	75.8%	93.3%	78.4%	72.7%	83.5%
Total	91	103	95	15	51	33	388
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 1
Levels of Sexism Found in Comments Specific to Candidate



The trend that each candidate's commenters exhibited as a group can be seen in Figure 1. For Clinton, the highest group was the negative subtle sexism, as opposed to Palin's highest categories of negative blatant sexism and negative covert sexism. Negative sexism presented much more strongly than positive sexism. Clinton's results were nearly a bell curve, with the exception of positive subtle sexism, meaning that there were nearly equal amounts of positive and negative blatant sexism and positive and negative amounts of covert sexism. Palin's results are heavily focused on the negative side. Overall, I found that 75.9% of the comments about Palin were negatively sexist, while only 67.2% of the comments about Clinton were negatively sexist.

Discussion

Because of media coverage emphasizing sexist attitudes toward Clinton, these results are surprising. Overall, in a comparison of Clinton and Palin, Clinton received less negative sexism and more positive sexism. If these results are consistent across the voting block, Clinton benefits from the sexist attitudes toward her. Several factors could have contributed to this result. First, the timing of the articles selected may have influenced the data. Cindy McCain was strongly associated with the article about Palin, and the comments and coding were influenced by that additional variable.

Next, Palin was new to the national political stage at the time the article was published and comments were posted. Just a few weeks prior to this article being written, many of the commenters had likely never heard of Palin. According to Kahn (1994), gubernatorial candidates face different expectations and sexism challenges than senatorial candidates. Because of their backgrounds, Clinton had experience in responding to situations and comments that Palin may not have had. In addition, Kahn found that female gubernatorial candidates use many sex stereotypes to their advantage. Palin may have tried to use the techniques that had worked for her in her gubernatorial politics (strong emphasis on family, “hottest governor” buttons, etc.) at a national level where Kahn showed that these tactics do not work to the candidate’s advantage.

As found by Mezey (1978), women with families and family responsibilities have a much more difficult time entering politics. Palin’s children were a major factor in the negative sexist comments—many of the commenters had a hard time accepting her ability to adequately deal with pending vice-presidential responsibilities, particularly with her newborn child and her pregnant teenage daughter. Conversely, Clinton did not face such circumstances.

Limitations

My study was limited by several factors. There was inequity between coded comments about Palin (large number of comments) and coded comments about Clinton (small number of comments). This may be a consequence of the newness of Palin or some other confounding variable. Additionally, it must be noted that Cindy McCain may be a confounding variable in the research because the news article about Palin included comments made by McCain. This led many of the commenters to make extremely sexist remarks about McCain. While conducting my research, I made a decision rule early in the study to include sexist remarks in the coding whether they were specific to the candidate or merely involving the people surrounding the candidate. For example, sexist comments about female voters were coded as sexist and not ignored because they were not about the candidate specifically. Because of this decision rule, all comments were included that were made about McCain in the coding of sexism studying Palin. One product of this research is that questions about political spouses and the special kinds of sexism they face may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Further Research and Questions

This study reveals many avenues for future research. First, I plan to collect data from more comments following similar articles to see if these results are further substantiated. An expansion beyond these articles to include a discussion of perceived

sexism facing Clinton earlier in the primary campaign and a discussion of perceived sexism facing Palin later in the campaign would provide a larger context for the total discussion of sexism. Building on the results found here, future research questions might include: Are political spouses (i.e., Cindy McCain, Michelle Obama) subject to sexism that affects the election of their spouses? Do candidates who are appointed face different kinds of sexism than candidates who run independently? Was there a novelty factor that contributed to the heightened level of sexism facing Palin? If so, female candidates might prepare for an early onslaught of sexism, knowing that such attacks may dissipate so that issues can become the focus as the campaign continues.

There are also questions about methodology of using comments as data: What is the best research design involving comment boards and forums? What prompts readers to leave comments? Are these readers representative of the population? How are commenters influenced by previous comments? How do commenters create a public opinion in this specific public sphere (see Houser, 1998)? Do comments create communication conflict spirals in comment boards? When and how do commenters react to other commenters?

Significance

Because a woman has not yet reached the highest U.S. political office, these results hold significance for the future of female candidates. On an individual level, the results hold importance for the future of Clinton's and Palin's political careers. Despite their defeats in the 2008 election, they have shown that they will not quietly leave the political stage. They continue to be the two most visible women in their respective parties as they move on to new goals. To be viable at a national stage, Palin needs to find a way to address the strong negative sexist attitudes toward her. Clinton faces a unique challenge, where it may be politically profitable to quietly nurture the positive sexist attitudes that may help her. However, she must not make this obvious in order to avoid a backlash.

Moving past the individual futures of Palin and Clinton, any woman hoping to enter politics must be aware of the special challenges surrounding the issue of sexism. Children, spouses, political offices, appearance, abilities, and their own personal communication about sexism all factor heavily into the results. The politically ambitious woman will have to consider these potential stumbling blocks when making life decisions. Many (including myself) cringe at the thought that women today continue to have to make decisions of whether getting married or having children or supporting a politically ambitious husband will eventually interfere with their political ambitions. Unfortunately, I find no contrary evidence.

However, there is reason to be optimistic. The defeated Palin and Clinton did not shrink from the political spotlight after their losses but remain a central part of politics 1 year later. Many speculate of a 2012 presidential bid by Palin, and Secretary of State Clinton should not be forgotten. The lessons learned from the 2008 campaign will not be lost on them and should not be lost on younger women who plan on becoming politically involved. Sexism exists, but it applies differently to women depending on their situations or circumstances. A vacuum exists for a candidate to come and stir up sexism once again. Political junkies will not need to wait long.

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