

WOMEN IN DIGITAL POLITICS: SOCIAL MEDIA, POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND GENDERED POWER

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has transformed political communication, allowing politicians to connect directly with citizens and shape their public identities beyond traditional media. This change is particularly meaningful for women, who have historically faced barriers to political visibility and representation. This qualitative study examines how women politicians use social media to build political influence in the digital economy, focusing on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States and Mahua Moitra in India. Using a comparative case-study approach, the study draws on publicly available social media content, political speeches, interviews, media reports, and academic literature. Guided by perspectives on

network society, participatory culture, alternative public spheres, platformisation, and feminist media, the study explores their communication strategies, audience engagement, political visibility, and online challenges. The findings suggest that authenticity, direct communication, emotional expression, visual storytelling, and strong rhetorical skills play an important role in building digital political influence. At the same time, greater visibility exposes women politicians to misogyny, trolling, personal attacks, misinformation, and gendered scrutiny. The study concludes that social media offers women new opportunities for political participation and influence, while simultaneously reproducing existing inequalities in new digital forms.

KEYWORDS: women in politics social media political communication digital economy political influence gender digital feminism Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Mahua Moitra qualitative case study

INTRODUCTION

Politics has always depended on communication. Political leaders need to communicate their ideas, explain policies, build relationships with citizens, defend

themselves against criticism, and persuade people to support particular political positions. For a long time, this communication was controlled largely by political parties and traditional media organisations. Newspapers, television

channels, radio, political rallies, and press conferences acted as important gatekeepers between political leaders and ordinary citizens.

The development of social media has changed this relationship. A politician can now publish a message, photograph, short video, livestream, or political explanation and reach thousands or even millions of people without waiting for a television channel or newspaper to provide coverage. Social media has therefore made political communication more immediate, interactive, visual, and personal. The research study similarly identifies Instagram, X, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok as important spaces through which political narratives are created and circulated.

This transformation is particularly significant for women. Women have historically been underrepresented in political institutions and have often faced gendered expectations concerning how political leaders should behave. Research on political media coverage shows that women politicians are more likely than men to receive attention relating to their appearance, personal lives, family roles, and personality, rather than only their political competence or policy positions (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020).

Social media provides women with an opportunity to speak in their own voices. Instead of depending completely on journalists or political institutions to represent them, women politicians can decide what they want to show, which issues they want to discuss, and how they want to present themselves. This ability to control one's own political image can be particularly valuable for women who have historically been represented through gender stereotypes.

At the same time, social media is not a neutral space. Platforms are commercial organisations whose business models depend heavily on data, advertising, user attention, and engagement. Zuboff (2019) argues that contemporary digital capitalism increasingly depends on collecting and analysing human behaviour as a source of economic value. Similarly, Poell et al. (2019) describe *platformisation* as the growing influence of digital platforms over economic, social, cultural, and civic life.

Political communication is therefore taking place within an environment that is simultaneously democratic and commercial. A political message may become influential because it is informative and meaningful, but it may also become visible because it produces strong emotions, controversy, or engagement. This creates an important tension for political actors.

The situation becomes even more complicated for women. Social media can increase women's visibility, but increased visibility can also expose women to misogyny, trolling, threats, sexualised abuse, and attacks relating to appearance and personality. Amnesty International's research found that online abuse can lead women to self-censor, reduce their interaction, change what they post, or leave platforms altogether (Amnesty International, 2018).

The present research is situated within this tension. It does not assume that social media automatically empowers women, nor does it assume that digital platforms simply reproduce existing inequalities. Instead, it asks how women actually use these platforms to build political influence while negotiating the opportunities and pressures created by digital communication.

The study focuses on two cases: **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez**, a prominent American politician, and **Mahua Moitra**, an Indian political figure known for her parliamentary speeches and strong public political communication. The original study deliberately selected these two cases because they represent different national, political, cultural, and communication environments.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, often referred to as AOC, became nationally prominent following her 2018 primary victory in New York. Her public identity combines institutional politics, grassroots activism, personal storytelling, and extensive digital communication. Her official congressional biography also describes her working-class background, community organising experience, and early political activism.

Mahua Moitra provides a contrasting Indian case. Her political communication has often gained attention through parliamentary speeches, interviews, online circulation, and social media discussion. The research study identifies her as an influential female political voice in Indian politics whose rhetorical style and digital visibility have contributed to public engagement.

The comparison between these two cases is useful because political communication does not happen in exactly the same way everywhere. The United States and India have different political cultures, media environments, social structures, linguistic contexts, and political traditions. Studying both cases allows us to understand which elements of women's digital political influence appear across contexts and which elements are shaped by local circumstances.

The central argument of this study is that social media has changed the conditions under which women can participate in political communication. It has reduced some traditional barriers, particularly barriers related to media gatekeeping and access to audiences. However, it has not removed gender inequality. Instead, many older inequalities have moved into new digital environments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship between women, social media, political communication, and digital influence is too complex to be explained by one theory. This study therefore uses a combined theoretical framework.

The framework brings together five main perspectives:

1. Network society and communication power;
2. Participatory culture;
3. Alternative public spheres;
4. Surveillance capitalism and platformisation;
5. Feminist media theory, authenticity, and gendered digital power.

Together, these perspectives help explain both the opportunities and limitations of women's political influence online.

NETWORK SOCIETY AND COMMUNICATION POWER

Manuel Castells (2009) argues that contemporary society is increasingly organised through communication networks. Power is not exercised only through formal institutions; it is also exercised through the ability to control communication, information, and meaning.

This idea is useful for understanding social media politics. In traditional political communication, a politician needed access to newspapers, television channels, political organisations, or other established institutions. Digital networks reduce some of these barriers. Political actors can now communicate directly with citizens. The research study similarly explains that social media has reduced the distance between political leaders and citizens and has created more decentralised forms of political interaction. For women, this can be particularly important. If traditional institutions are male-dominated or if mainstream media represents women through stereotypes, direct digital communication can provide an alternative route to political visibility. The concept of communication power therefore helps this study examine not simply whether women are visible online, but **how communication itself becomes a source of political power.**

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Henry Jenkins (2006) introduced the concept of participatory culture to describe digital environments in which audiences are not simply passive consumers of information. People can create, remix, comment on, share, and circulate content. This is highly relevant to contemporary political communication. A politician may post a speech, but the political meaning of that speech does not remain entirely under the politician's control. Supporters can create memes, videos, quotations, and discussion threads around it. Opponents can criticise or reinterpret it. A short part of a speech can become more influential than the complete speech. The research study uses participatory culture to explain how

social media has transformed audiences from passive recipients into active participants in political communication.

This perspective is especially useful for understanding youth political participation. Younger citizens may encounter politics through short videos, memes, livestreams, comment sections, and other forms of participatory media rather than through formal political organisations. However, participation does not necessarily mean equality. People participate within platforms whose algorithms determine what becomes visible. Thus, participatory culture needs to be considered alongside platform power.

ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SPHERES

Nancy Fraser's (1990) critique of the traditional public sphere is also important. Fraser argues that a single public sphere does not necessarily provide equal participation for everyone. Marginalised groups may need alternative spaces where they can develop their own political discussions and challenge dominant narratives. Social media can function as one such alternative space. Women politicians can use digital platforms to discuss issues that may receive limited attention in mainstream political communication. Citizens can also create communities around feminist issues, social justice, gender equality, and political rights.

The research study applies this idea to digital feminism and argues that social media can function as an alternative public sphere where women express concerns and challenge dominant political narratives. However, social media should not automatically be described as a perfect democratic public sphere. The same platform that gives marginalised voices

visibility can also expose them to harassment, misinformation, and algorithmic exclusion.

SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM AND THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism helps explain the economic structure behind digital platforms. Social media users produce enormous amounts of behavioural data through their everyday actions: clicking, watching, commenting, sharing, searching, and scrolling.

Political communication therefore takes place inside a commercial environment. Attention itself becomes valuable. This is important because social media platforms tend to reward content that generates engagement. Emotional, controversial, visual, and highly personal content may attract greater attention than complicated policy discussions. The research study describes this process through the concepts of behavioural surplus and the attention economy.

Political actors consequently have an incentive to communicate in ways that capture attention. This does not mean that political communication is necessarily false or superficial. It means that political ideas have to compete within an attention-based environment.

PLATFORMISATION

Poell et al. (2019) use the term *platformisation* to describe the penetration of digital platforms into different areas of economic and social life. Platforms do not simply provide a neutral place for communication; they influence how communication is produced, distributed, and governed.

For political actors, this means that visibility increasingly depends on platform architecture. A politician may have an important political message, but its reach can be affected by recommendation systems, platform rules, engagement patterns, and audience behaviour.

The research study argues that political content increasingly becomes personalised, visual, emotional, and adapted to platform formats. This concept is particularly important when studying women because gendered inequalities can interact with platform structures.

FEMINIST MEDIA THEORY

Feminist media theory provides the gender dimension of the study. Women politicians have historically been expected to balance political authority with culturally defined expectations of femininity. Rosalind Gill's (2007) work on postfeminist media culture is particularly useful because it highlights the contradiction between messages of female empowerment and continuing pressure on women to monitor their appearance, behaviour, sexuality, and emotional presentation. This contradiction can be clearly observed in digital politics. A woman politician may be expected to appear strong and competent, but not too aggressive; emotional, but not too emotional; approachable, but still authoritative.

The research study refers to this as a gendered double bind.

Digital platforms can therefore provide women with greater freedom to construct their political identities, while simultaneously increasing the pressure to perform those identities continuously.

AUTHENTICITY AND DIGITAL POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Authenticity has become particularly important in social media communication. Audiences often respond positively to politicians who appear accessible, ordinary, emotionally open, and relatable.

Recent research on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Instagram communication shows how she uses combinations of public and private, formal and informal settings to create a more relatable political persona (De Fina, 2025).

This supports the argument in the research study that authenticity has become a form of political capital.

However, authenticity should not be understood as simply "being natural." On social media, authenticity itself can become strategic. Politicians select which aspects of their lives to show and which to keep private.

Therefore, this study treats authenticity as both a communication strategy and a perceived relationship between politicians and audiences.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The literature on social media and political communication shows that digital platforms have changed the relationship between political actors and citizens. Traditional communication was largely one-directional. Political leaders delivered speeches, journalists interpreted them, and audiences received them.

Social media has made communication more interactive. Citizens can immediately respond, comment, share, criticise, and reinterpret political messages.

This transformation has increased the importance of visibility and direct engagement. Political leaders increasingly need to communicate continuously rather than only during elections.

The research study identifies this transition from formal and institutional communication towards interactive, personal, visual, and audience-centred communication.

However, scholars caution against assuming that social media automatically produces greater democracy. Cardo (2021), for example, argues that digital optimism must be treated carefully because gender inequalities continue to influence political participation online. Her comparative study of women politicians in the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand demonstrates that digital communication does not eliminate gendered political norms.

WOMEN AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Women have historically faced structural barriers to political participation. These barriers include unequal access to political networks, financial resources, media visibility, and leadership positions.

Media representation is another important issue. Van der Pas and Aaldering's (2020) meta-analysis examined decades of research and found that women politicians are more likely to receive coverage focused on

appearance and personal life and may face stereotypical treatment in political reporting.

Social media provides a potential alternative. Women can present themselves without relying completely on journalists to decide which parts of their political identity deserve attention.

However, this alternative representation comes with its own pressures. Women must often manage both their political identity and their personal image.

WOMEN, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is one of the most important themes in contemporary digital political communication. Social media rewards communication that appears personal and immediate.

A politician who speaks casually from a home environment may appear more approachable than one speaking only from a formal political setting.

De Fina's (2025) analysis of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Instagram stories demonstrates how movement between formal political settings and everyday personal environments can reduce the perceived distance between a politician and followers.

The original study identifies a similar pattern in Ocasio-Cortez's communication, particularly her use of informal language, everyday situations, humour, and personal storytelling.

This is important because audiences may increasingly expect politicians to appear like real people rather than distant institutional figures.

DIGITAL FEMINISM

Digital feminism has created new possibilities for feminist political communication. Hashtags, online campaigns, short videos, personal narratives, and networked communities can allow women to discuss experiences that were previously treated as private.

The #MeToo movement is one of the most significant examples of this process. Digital platforms helped individual experiences become part of a wider public conversation about gender-based violence and power.

Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, however, that popular feminism exists alongside popular misogyny. Digital spaces can make feminist messages highly visible while also creating new forms of backlash and hostility.

This contradiction is central to the present study.

POLITICAL INFLUENCERS

The idea of the political influencer has emerged from broader research on influencer culture. Influencers traditionally became important in areas such as fashion, entertainment, lifestyle, and consumer culture. Increasingly, similar communication practices have entered politics.

Political figures now use personal branding, visual communication, storytelling, livestreaming, and audience interaction.

This creates a new type of political authority. A politician's influence is no longer based only on formal office. It may also depend on their ability to build an audience.

Recent research directly comparing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez with a major social media influencer suggests that authenticity,

competence, and perceived ordinariness can work together in building contemporary influence (Ceccobelli & Colombo, 2025).

This supports the broader argument that political leadership and influencer culture are increasingly overlapping.

ONLINE HARASSMENT AND DIGITAL MISOGYNY

One of the strongest themes in the literature is online harassment.

Amnesty International's research found that women experience forms of online abuse including threats, targeted harassment, identity-based abuse, and privacy violations. The research also found that abuse can affect women's freedom of expression by encouraging self-censorship and limiting participation.

Research on politicians also shows that online harassment has a gendered character. Wagner (2022) found that women politicians are particularly aware of online harassment and that it contributes to a hostile political environment.

Sobieraj (2022) similarly argues that digital technologies have expanded opportunities for political voice while also exposing women to identity-based hate and sexual intimidation.

The important point is that online misogyny is not simply an unpleasant side effect of social media. It can influence who feels comfortable speaking publicly, what they say, and how long they remain visible.

GLOBAL SOUTH AND INDIAN CONTEXTS

Much of the early academic literature on digital political communication focused on North American and European cases. This

creates a limitation because digital politics develops differently across cultural and political contexts.

The Indian context is especially important because political communication takes place within a multilingual, highly diverse, and strongly contested political environment.

The research study identifies the limited comparative research between Western and non-Western women political influencers as a significant gap. It specifically argues that issues such as language, regional identity, caste, religion, patriarchy, and political polarisation shape women's digital political experiences in India.

Research on women politicians in other Global South contexts also suggests that visual platforms such as Instagram can play an important role in women's political communication, while digital participation remains shaped by local political and cultural realities.

Mahua Moitra is therefore useful as a case because her communication takes place within a political environment very different from that of the United States.

RESEARCH GAPS

Although a growing body of research examines women, social media, and political communication, several specific gaps remain.

GAP 1: LIMITED COMPARATIVE RESEARCH BETWEEN WESTERN AND INDIAN WOMEN POLITICIANS

Existing scholarship has extensively examined American and European political communication, but comparatively fewer

studies examine women's digital political influence across Western and Indian contexts.

GAP 2: INSUFFICIENT FOCUS ON WOMEN AS DIGITAL POLITICAL ACTORS

Much of the literature studies politicians, parties, journalists, activists, or social movements. Less attention has been given to women politicians as hybrid actors who combine institutional political authority with influencer-style communication.

GAP 3: LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF AUTHENTICITY AS A GENDERED STRATEGY

Research recognises the importance of authenticity online, but there is still a need to understand how women balance being relatable with maintaining political authority.

GAP 4: MORE ATTENTION IS NEEDED ON EVERYDAY POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Existing research often concentrates on elections, protests, or political crises. Everyday political communication—including livestreams, personal posts, explanations, comments, and ordinary interactions—also contributes to political influence.

GAP 5: INSUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO WOMEN'S STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH HARASSMENT

Research documents online misogyny effectively, but less attention has been given to how women respond to harassment, maintain visibility, and transform attacks into political communication.

GAP 6: LIMITED QUALITATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Follower counts and engagement statistics can show visibility but cannot fully explain how political meaning, trust, identity, and authority are constructed.

The research study identifies this methodological gap and argues that qualitative research is particularly useful for examining political identity, communication strategies, symbolic representation, and gendered experiences.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative comparative case study of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Mahua Moitra.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study has the following specific objectives:

1. **To examine how social media is used by women politicians to build political influence.**
2. **To identify the major communication strategies used by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Mahua Moitra on digital platforms.**
3. **To analyse how authenticity, emotional communication, personal storytelling, and visual content contribute to political engagement.**
4. **To examine how social media enables women politicians to bypass or reduce dependence on traditional media gatekeepers.**
5. **To compare the digital political communication styles of an American and an Indian woman politician.**

6. To examine the role of social media in political education and youth engagement.
7. To analyse the gendered challenges, including online harassment, misogyny, trolling, and personal scrutiny, experienced by women politicians.
8. To understand whether social media creates genuinely new forms of political influence or simply reproduces existing political inequalities in a new environment.

These objectives retain the central direction of the original study while making them more concise and researchable. The source document similarly identifies women's political influence, digital communication, youth participation, gendered challenges, and comparative political communication as major objectives.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses four focused research questions:

RQ1

How do Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Mahua Moitra use social media to construct and exercise political influence?

RQ2

What communication strategies do the two women politicians use to engage audiences and communicate political ideas?

RQ3

How does social media simultaneously empower women politicians and expose them to gendered digital challenges?

RQ4

What similarities and differences can be identified between the digital political communication of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the United States and Mahua Moitra in India?

These questions develop the three central questions contained in the original study while making the comparative and gender dimensions more explicit.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH APPROACH

This research uses a **qualitative approach**.

A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study is concerned with meaning rather than simply measurement. The research does not primarily ask how many followers a politician has. Instead, it asks how political influence is constructed, how women present themselves, how they communicate with audiences, and how gender shapes their digital experiences.

The original study also identifies the research as qualitative, exploratory, interpretive, descriptive, analytical, and comparative.

RESEARCH DESIGN: COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

The research uses a **comparative case-study design**.

The two cases are:

- **Case 1: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — United States**
- **Case 2: Mahua Moitra — India**

Case-study research is suitable when a researcher wants to understand a contemporary phenomenon in depth and

within its real-world context.

The two cases were selected purposively rather than randomly. They provide meaningful contrast in terms of national political context, communication style, political culture, and digital presentation.

The source study similarly states that purposive sampling was used to select two prominent female political figures representing different ideological and stylistic contexts.

NATURE OF THE STUDY

The study is:

Descriptive — because it describes the digital communication practices of the selected political figures.

Analytical — because it examines the meaning and political implications of those communication practices.

Comparative — because it identifies similarities and differences between the two cases.

Interpretive — because it seeks to understand how political identities, authority, authenticity, and gender are constructed through digital communication.

DATA SOURCES

The research is based primarily on secondary and publicly available data.

The sources include:

- Publicly available social media posts;
- Instagram content;
- YouTube videos;
- X/Twitter communication;
- Public speeches;
- Parliamentary speeches;
- Interviews;

- News reports;
- Academic journal articles;
- Books and scholarly works;
- Public political statements;
- Existing research on women, gender, social media, and political communication.

This approach is consistent with the source dissertation, which identifies social media posts, speeches, interviews, articles, and other secondary material as important sources of data.

SAMPLING

The study uses **purposive case selection**.

Purposive sampling is appropriate because the purpose is not to represent all women politicians statistically. Instead, the objective is to select information-rich cases that can help answer the research questions.

Ocasio-Cortez and Moitra were selected because both demonstrate significant public visibility and political communication through digital media, while operating within very different national contexts.

DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION

The study incorporates elements of digital ethnography.

Digital ethnography treats online environments as meaningful social spaces. Researchers observe how people communicate, present themselves, respond to others, and build communities online.

The source study proposes observation of digital activity over an extended period, including regular posts, temporary stories, livestreams, and comment interactions.

For the present study, digital ethnography is understood primarily as a structured approach to observing publicly available online communication rather than as a claim of direct participant observation or interviews.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as a supporting analytical method.

Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse should be understood in relation to social structures and power. Political language is therefore not simply a collection of words; it can reinforce or challenge existing relations of power.

CDA is useful here because political communication can contain meanings beyond the literal text. The tone, visual presentation, choice of examples, emotional language, personal narratives, and representations of gender can all communicate political ideas.

The research study similarly identifies CDA, drawing on Fairclough and Wodak, as a method for examining how language and visual communication relate to power.

ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES

The cases are analysed according to six main themes:

1. **Direct political communication**
2. **Authenticity and personal storytelling**
3. **Emotional and visual communication**
4. **Political education and youth engagement**
5. **Feminist visibility and representation**
6. **Online harassment and gendered digital hostility**

These themes emerged from the research questions, theoretical framework, literature review, and source dissertation.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research uses publicly available political communication and secondary sources. No private messages or confidential personal information are used.

Because online political communication can involve harassment and sensitive material, the study avoids unnecessarily reproducing abusive language. The analysis focuses on the political significance of harassment rather than amplifying individual abusive comments.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations.

First, a qualitative case study cannot represent all women politicians.

Second, social media platforms change rapidly. Algorithms, platform policies, audience behaviour, and political contexts may change over time.

Third, publicly visible engagement does not automatically prove that audiences changed their political behaviour.

Fourth, the study does not conduct a statistical analysis of followers, likes, or voting behaviour.

Finally, because the study relies primarily on publicly available and secondary material, it cannot fully capture the private experiences of the two political figures.

These limitations do not invalidate the research. Instead, they define what the study can reasonably claim.

QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY I: ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez emerged as a major political figure in the United States following her 2018 primary victory in New York's 14th Congressional District. Her political journey differed from the traditional elite pathway because of her working-class background and previous experience in community organising and service-sector employment. Her official congressional biography highlights her family background, educational experience, community work, and organising activities.

Her political identity has been associated with issues including economic inequality, climate change, workers' rights, healthcare, racial justice, and social equality.

However, her importance to this research is not only her political ideology. She represents a new form of political communication in which social media is closely integrated with political identity.

DIRECT COMMUNICATION

One of the strongest findings of the case study is the importance of direct communication.

Ocasio-Cortez uses social media to communicate with audiences without always depending on traditional media organisations. Instagram Live, videos, posts, and other forms of digital communication create opportunities for citizens to hear political explanations directly from her.

The source study identifies these interactions as important because they reduce the psychological distance between politician and citizen.

This is an important change in political communication. The politician is no longer communicating only through formal speeches. Instead, communication can occur while answering questions, explaining a policy, discussing an event, or responding to criticism.

AUTHENTICITY AND RELATABILITY

Authenticity is one of the most important elements of Ocasio-Cortez's digital communication.

She often presents herself in informal settings and uses conversational language. Instead of maintaining a completely formal political image, she allows audiences to see aspects of everyday life.

The source study identifies this style as an important source of trust and connection.

De Fina's (2025) study provides independent scholarly support for this interpretation. Her analysis demonstrates how Ocasio-Cortez uses shifts between formal political spaces and everyday personal environments to reduce the distance between herself and followers.

This does not necessarily mean that audiences believe everything she says. Rather, it suggests that the *relationship* between politician and audience has become part of political communication.

EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION

The case also demonstrates the importance of emotion.

Political communication traditionally values rational argument, policy detail, and formal rhetoric. Social media, however, allows politicians to communicate anger, hope, frustration, humour, empathy, and personal experience.

The research study finds that Ocasio-Cortez frequently connects political issues to everyday human experiences.

This makes complex political issues easier for some audiences to understand.

Emotion therefore should not automatically be treated as the opposite of serious politics. In digital environments, emotion can be a way of making political issues meaningful.

POLITICAL EDUCATION

Another significant finding is that Ocasio-Cortez uses social media for political education.

She explains complicated political topics in accessible language. Rather than assuming that audiences already understand political institutions or policy terminology, digital communication can provide explanations in a more conversational format.

The source study argues that this educational role is particularly important for younger citizens who may feel disconnected from traditional political institutions.

This suggests that politicians in the digital economy increasingly perform more than one role. They are representatives, advocates, communicators, educators, and media personalities at the same time.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Ocasio-Cortez's communication style also demonstrates how digital platforms can reduce the distance between young people and politics.

Memes, short videos, livestreams, humour, and interactive content are more familiar to younger digital audiences than traditional political speeches.

The research study finds that her use of internet culture and informal communication helps make political content more accessible to younger audiences.

However, digital engagement should not automatically be equated with voting or formal political participation. A person may watch a political video without becoming politically active.

Therefore, the study understands youth engagement as an important form of political socialisation rather than claiming that every online interaction produces direct political action.

FEMINIST VISIBILITY

Ocasio-Cortez also represents a form of feminist political visibility.

Her public identity challenges traditional expectations that women politicians should be restrained, formal, emotionally distant, or particularly cautious in their presentation.

The source study argues that her identity combines political authority, activism, relatability, and digital fluency.

Her identity also illustrates intersectionality. Gender interacts with ethnicity, class, age, and political identity. This means that her digital political experience cannot be understood only through the category of "woman."

ONLINE HARASSMENT

The empowering aspects of digital visibility exist alongside serious challenges.

The case study identifies sexist insults, threats, racist comments, and personal attacks directed towards Ocasio-Cortez.

These attacks often concern appearance, personality, emotional expression, or gender rather than policy.

The source material suggests that she sometimes responds to such attacks by turning them into wider discussions about sexism and political participation.

This is an important form of political resistance. Instead of allowing an attack to remain purely personal, it can be reframed as an example of a wider structural problem.

The broader literature supports the seriousness of this issue. Amnesty International found that online abuse can silence women and discourage them from expressing political opinions.

QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY II: MAHUA MOITRA

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Mahua Moitra represents a different political and cultural environment.

In India, social media has become deeply connected with political debate, electoral communication, parliamentary discourse, ideological conflict, and public mobilisation.

The source study identifies Moitra as a prominent female political voice whose parliamentary speeches and public statements have achieved significant online circulation.

Her case is useful because her digital influence is closely linked to political rhetoric and parliamentary performance.

RHETORICAL AUTHORITY

Unlike Ocasio-Cortez's highly conversational and personal digital communication, Moitra's influence in the source material is

strongly associated with rhetorical confidence and argumentative political communication.

Her parliamentary speeches often circulate online through short video clips.

This demonstrates an important feature of digital politics: political influence does not necessarily require content to be created specifically for social media. A speech delivered inside a parliament can become a social media event when it is clipped, shared, discussed, and circulated online.

The source study identifies rhetorical performance and digital visibility as important elements of Moitra's political influence.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SPHERE

Moitra's case demonstrates how social media can function as an alternative public sphere.

Political speeches that might otherwise reach only parliamentary audiences can circulate widely online. Citizens can watch, share, debate, support, or criticise the content.

The source study argues that social media allows political actors to bypass some traditional media gatekeeping and communicate alternative political narratives directly to citizens.

This is particularly important for opposition voices and politicians whose political messages may not receive consistent attention from mainstream media.

VISUAL AND VIDEO POLITICS

Video plays an especially important role in Moitra's digital political influence.

Short clips of parliamentary speeches can be separated from their original institutional context and circulate as independent political content.

The source study finds that these videos can increase memorability and public visibility.

This illustrates how political communication has changed. A complete parliamentary speech may be lengthy, but one particularly powerful sentence or exchange can become the main digital representation of a politician.

In this way, digital platforms can transform rhetorical performance into political branding.

INTELLECTUAL AUTHORITY AND GENDER

Moitra's case also shows that women can construct political authority through intellectual and confrontational communication.

Women politicians often face expectations that they should be polite, agreeable, or emotionally controlled. A strong and confrontational communication style may therefore challenge gender norms.

The source study suggests that Moitra uses rhetorical confidence and public confrontation to establish political authority within a male-dominated political environment.

This supports the broader argument that women do not all use the same communication strategies. Gender matters, but it interacts with national culture, political ideology, personality, and political context.

ONLINE HARASSMENT

Moitra's digital visibility also comes with significant hostility.

The case study identifies trolling, sexist abuse, personal attacks, and defamation as challenges associated with her public digital presence.

This reflects a wider pattern identified in research on women in politics.

The important point is that women may be criticised not only for their political arguments but also for their personality, appearance, tone, emotional behaviour, and personal lives.

Therefore, the political cost of visibility can be higher for women.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The two cases demonstrate both important similarities and meaningful differences.

SIMILARITIES

FIRST, BOTH USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO INCREASE DIRECT POLITICAL VISIBILITY.

Neither politician depends entirely on traditional media to communicate with audiences.

SECOND, BOTH RELY ON STRONG PERSONAL POLITICAL IDENTITIES.

Their digital communication is connected to who they are as political figures, not only to individual policies.

THIRD, BOTH DEMONSTRATE THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION.

Their styles are different, but both use emotion to create political engagement.

FOURTH, BOTH CHALLENGE TRADITIONAL EXPECTATIONS OF WOMEN IN POLITICS.

They demonstrate that women can be assertive, politically knowledgeable, visible, and publicly confrontational.

FIFTH, BOTH FACE GENDERED DIGITAL HOSTILITY.

The source study finds that both experience trolling, misogyny, personal criticism, and gendered scrutiny.

DIFFERENCES

OCASIO-CORTEZ: RELATABILITY AND PARTICIPATION

Ocasio-Cortez's communication places strong emphasis on informal interaction, personal storytelling, political education, and audience participation.

Her style is particularly suited to platforms where everyday personal content can exist alongside political communication.

MOITRA: RHETORIC AND POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

Moitra's digital influence is more strongly connected to parliamentary rhetoric, argumentative communication, political confrontation, and the circulation of speech clips.

Her political influence often develops through the transformation of institutional political performance into digital content.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Ocasio-Cortez operates within American political culture, where individual political branding and personal digital identity are highly developed.

Moitra operates within India's multilingual and highly contested political environment, where parliamentary speeches, regional identities, party politics, television debates, and social media interact.

COMMUNICATION STYLE

Ocasio-Cortez often reduces the distance between politician and citizen by presenting everyday experiences.

Moitra often establishes authority through rhetorical confidence and intellectual argument.

The difference is important because it demonstrates that there is no single "female political communication style."

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis produces seven major findings.

FINDING 1: SOCIAL MEDIA HAS REDUCED TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Both cases show that social media allows women politicians to communicate without complete dependence on traditional media.

This creates greater control over political representation.

The source study similarly finds that direct digital communication can allow women to bypass traditional gatekeepers.

FINDING 2: AUTHENTICITY HAS BECOME A POLITICAL RESOURCE

Both politicians demonstrate that audiences increasingly respond to political figures who appear accessible and genuine.

However, authenticity is not simply spontaneous. It is produced through choices about language, visuals, topics, timing, and

self-presentation.

FINDING 3: EMOTIONAL COMMUNICATION IS INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT

Digital political communication is not purely rational or policy-centred. Emotion can make political ideas understandable and memorable.

Ocasio-Cortez uses personal storytelling and emotional explanation. Moitra uses rhetorical intensity and confrontation.

Thus, emotion can take different forms.

FINDING 4: SOCIAL MEDIA CAN ACT AS POLITICAL EDUCATION

The cases show that political communication can become educational.

Citizens can receive explanations of political systems, policies, constitutional questions, economic issues, and social problems in more accessible formats.

The source study specifically identifies political education as an important element of Ocasio-Cortez's digital communication and identifies Moitra's public commentary as contributing to discussions about constitutional values and accountability.

FINDING 5: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IS INCREASINGLY DIGITAL

Young citizens increasingly encounter political ideas through videos, memes, livestreams, and social discussions.

However, online engagement should not automatically be treated as electoral participation.

Social media is better understood as one important site of political socialisation.

FINDING 6: DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT AND DIGITAL VULNERABILITY COEXIST

This is perhaps the most important finding.

Social media gives women more opportunities to speak, but it also exposes them to greater visibility and therefore greater hostility.

The source study describes this contradiction as a central feature of women's digital political participation.

FINDING 7: DIGITAL POLITICAL INFLUENCE IS INCREASINGLY BASED ON COMMUNICATION PERFORMANCE

Political authority is no longer produced only through institutional office.

Visibility, storytelling, relatability, rhetoric, visual presentation, emotional communication, and audience interaction have become important sources of political influence.

This does not mean institutions no longer matter. Instead, institutional and digital forms of political authority increasingly operate together.

CONCLUSION

The central question of this study was how women use social media to create political influence within the digital economy. The evidence from the two cases suggests that social media has genuinely changed the possibilities available to women in political communication. For women who historically faced exclusion from traditional political and media institutions, social media can provide an alternative route to visibility. It allows women politicians to speak directly to citizens, construct their own public identities, explain political issues, respond to criticism, build communities, and participate

in political conversations without always depending on traditional media gatekeepers.

The cases of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Mahua Moitra demonstrate this transformation in different ways. Ocasio-Cortez has developed a digital political identity built around relatability, direct engagement, emotional storytelling, political education, and visual communication. Her digital presence demonstrates how the boundaries between political leadership, activism, personal identity, and influencer culture are becoming less distinct. Her use of everyday and informal communication has helped reduce the perceived distance between politician and citizen, a pattern also identified in recent research on her Instagram communication (De Fina, 2025).

Moitra provides a different model. Her political influence is strongly connected to parliamentary rhetoric, intellectual argument, public confrontation, and the circulation of speech clips through digital media. Her case demonstrates that social media does not always require politicians to create highly personalised content. Existing institutional political performances can themselves become digital political content.

Despite their differences, both cases reveal a similar structural reality: **women can gain political visibility through digital media, but they do not escape gender inequality simply by entering the digital sphere.** Online harassment, misogyny, trolling, personal criticism, and gendered scrutiny remain important problems. This finding is consistent with wider research showing that online abuse can limit women's freedom of expression and participation (Amnesty International, 2018; Wagner, 2022).

Therefore, the relationship between women and social media should not be described in simple terms of empowerment versus oppression. It is better understood as a **digital paradox**. Social media can give women a voice while exposing them to attacks for using that voice. It can increase political independence while making politicians more dependent on platform algorithms. It can make political communication more personal while encouraging the commodification of personal identity. It can make politics more accessible while also encouraging oversimplification and polarisation. The digital economy has therefore not removed the old structures of political inequality. Instead, it has changed the environment in which those inequalities operate.

The study ultimately argues that women's digital political influence should be understood as a form of negotiated power. Women politicians are not simply passive users of social media. They actively adapt, resist, reinterpret, and sometimes challenge the structures of digital platforms. The importance of the two cases therefore extends beyond Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Mahua Moitra themselves. Their experiences point toward a broader transformation in democratic politics: political authority is increasingly connected to the ability to communicate continuously, personally, visually, and interactively.

At the same time, a genuinely democratic digital political environment requires more than giving people access to platforms. It also requires protection from harassment, greater transparency in platform governance, media literacy, responsible political communication, and stronger institutional support for women in public

life. The future of women's political participation will therefore depend not only on whether women can enter digital spaces, but also on whether those spaces can become safer, more inclusive, transparent, and genuinely democratic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed.

1. STRENGTHEN PROTECTION AGAINST ONLINE GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT

Social media platforms should develop stronger and more transparent systems for reporting, investigating, and responding to gender-based abuse.

2. IMPROVE ALGORITHMIC TRANSPARENCY

Platforms should provide greater information about how political content is recommended, promoted, restricted, or removed.

3. ENCOURAGE DIGITAL LITERACY

Young citizens should be taught how to evaluate political content, misinformation, manipulated videos, and emotionally charged political messages.

4. SUPPORT WOMEN POLITICIANS' DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

Political institutions and parties should provide training and resources to help women politicians use digital media effectively and safely.

5. ENCOURAGE RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Politicians should use digital platforms not only for self-promotion but also for political education, constructive debate, and accurate public information.

6. CONDUCT MORE RESEARCH IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS

Future research should include more women politicians from India, South Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other regions that remain comparatively underrepresented in digital political scholarship.

7. STUDY AUDIENCES, NOT ONLY POLITICIANS

Future research should examine whether online visibility actually influences political attitudes, political participation, voting, activism, or trust.

8. INCLUDE INTERSECTIONALITY

Future studies should examine how gender interacts with caste, class, ethnicity, religion, language, region, age, and other forms of social identity in digital political communication.

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