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She's Hot, for a Politician: The Impact of Objectifying Commentary on Perceived Credibility of Female Candidates

Michelle E. Funk & Calvin R. Coker

The way female politicians are discussed in traditional and new media may contribute to the way individuals evaluate those candidates. Objectification theory suggests that framing individuals in a way that reduces them to their physical characteristics is detrimental to perceived agency. To that end, an experiment was designed to determine the impact of objectifying comments on the evaluation of female candidates. Researchers created two Facebook feeds discussing a hypothetical female candidate. For both feeds, the discussion focused on the candidate's policy credentials, with one feed containing commentary on the female candidate's body. Aspects of credibility and suitability for office were impacted by objectifying commentary, implying the need for future research directed at the specific impact objectification has on candidate evaluation.

Keywords: Credibility; Facebook; Objectification; Women in Politics

The White House Correspondents' Dinner offers an opportunity for the nation's political and media elite to reflect with light hearts on the dysfunctional relationship between Capitol Hill and increasingly politicized news networks. Cecily Strong, at the 2015 Correspondents' Dinner, brought attention to an oft-unchallenged assumption of the media when covering female candidates. Following jokes at the expense of the President, GOP leadership, and the mainstream media, Strong asked representatives of the media to repeat a promise regarding the 2016 Presidential race: "I solemnly

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swear not to comment on Hillary Clinton's appearance, because that is not journalism" (Makarechi, 2015, para. 3). Strong's comments surfaced across the Internet on following days, inviting a deeper discussion about the nature of commentary on female candidates. Some analysts (Ohm, 2015; Rosenberg, 2015) contended that Strong's point was well received but was too little to stem the tide; double standards exist for female politicians, and objectifying women in politics was an inevitable part of campaign coverage. Rosenberg (2015) suggests a distinct disadvantage for high-profile female politicians like Hillary Clinton that stems from the media's fascination with appearance. For if "Clinton presented herself as a disembodied floating head [...] we'd be stuck with a national conversation that's now in its third decade: Hillary Rodham Clinton's Hair" (Rosenberg, 2015, para. 5). That disadvantage, some suggest, does not exist for male candidates.

Though some pundits defend coverage of candidate appearances as necessary and useful observations by journalists (Cillizza, 2015; Le Tellier, 2012), subsequent discussions on social media are considerably more suspect. Indeed, a discussion of a female candidate in the news can feature sexism and misogyny, including problematic frames that can then be repeated (Attenborough, 2013). In light of the risk of proliferation, commentary that reduces individual candidates, especially women, to their base physicality need to be analyzed in new media contexts. Personalized media, such as Facebook, are popular venues for commentary on both news issues and politicians themselves (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). As campaigns have moved to the online sphere, decentralized political talk on social media has become the norm. Housholder and LaMarre (2014) suggest that messages presented on Facebook have an impact on candidate credibility, implying the need to study not only Facebook as a message medium but the nature of messages on Facebook as well.

Furthermore, in light of increased visibility of female candidates in national political races (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Perks & Johnson, 2014), understanding the relationship between objectifying messages and candidate perception is of the utmost importance. Nussbaum (1995) suggests that rhetorically reducing an individual to their physical selves strips an individual of agency and articulates the subject as incapable. Similarly, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) theorize a litany of normatively negative psychosocial outcomes with internalizing objectification, pointing to male gaze and objectifying commentary as contributing to an environment hostile and exclusionary to women. Heflick and Goldenberg (2014) further caution that, despite normatively negative outcomes associated with dehumanization, negative affect, and literal objectification of women, such messages continue to exist in the public and political sphere. With the pleasant inevitability of more female candidates comes the possibility of unknown effects of irresponsible media coverage and objectifying commentary.

The present study is an experiment designed to determine the impact of objectifying discussion of female candidates on candidate evaluation. While there are multiple facets that contribute to candidate evaluation, ultimately the frame of discussion of female politicians may substantively contribute to the way that individuals perceive

and judge those candidates (Bjerke & Hansen, 2012; Druckman, Jacobs, & Ostermeyer, 2004; Kaid & Sanders, 1978). If objectification is a prevalent frame when discussing high-profile female politicians, as numerous scholars suggest (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2010; Perks & Johnson, 2014), then it is crucial to define the role objectification may play in candidate evaluation. To that end, the present study builds upon previous works on the nature of candidate credibility and objectification of women in the political sphere. First, the theoretical frames for political discourse on Facebook and objectification theory are discussed. Second, the experimental design, procedure, and analytics are covered in depth. Finally, the results are reported, as are the implications and concluding thoughts.

FACEBOOK USE AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

American use of Facebook has steadily increased since the site's inception (Conroy, Freezell, & Guerrero, 2012; Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012; Vraga et al., 2015). Pew Research data indicate that in 2014, Facebook remained the preferred social media platform by a large margin, with 71% of adult Internet users following Facebook (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Facebook continues to be a platform for day-to-day discussion and peer-to-peer interaction, with over 70% of active users checking Facebook daily (Duggan et al., 2015). Finally, Facebook specifically serves as a platform for discussion of significant social issues, with particular individual predispositions such as political attitudes significantly shaping the way that individuals engage in discourse on the site (Vraga et al., 2015).

Vraga et al. (2015) confirm findings of previous scholarship that political discourse is increasing in frequency on social media (e.g., Kim, 2011; Valenzuela, 2013). As Facebook has become a forum for discussion of political issues, the risk of incidental exposure to political information while using Facebook for nonpolitical means has increased substantially (Vraga et al., 2015). Incidental exposure, whether it be to cross cutting perspectives (Kim, 2011) or variations on one's political viewpoints (Valenzuela, 2013), has a noticeable impact on the behavior of some social media users. Political discourse on Facebook is certainly increasing, and not just for those who intentionally seek out political talk on social media (Vraga et al., 2015).

Political communication on Facebook has a measureable offline impact on political engagement, political knowledge, and political attitudes (Cho et al., 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). To wit, Housholder and LaMarre (2014) offer support that social media can have a measurable impact on candidate credibility. Their study of source credibility for politicians on Facebook suggested that attitude homophily towards a candidate had a mediating effect on source credibility. As presence of candidate-sponsored messages—and, to a greater extent, political talk—proliferates on Facebook, the nature of those messages and of candidate credibility become increasingly important. Of specific interest is the notion of attitude homophily; if objectifying messages can decrease credibility (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Perks & Johnson, 2014) and there is a relationship between homophily

and credibility (Housholder & LaMarre, 2014), we may find that objectifying messages substantially implicate evaluation of female candidates.

Objectification and Hot Cognition

The role that objectifying commentary may play in candidate evaluation, however, is not immediately clear. Some cognitive frameworks, such as those proposed by Lodge and Taber (2013) argue that voters may not make decisions guided in totality by the objective facts presented to them about issues or candidates. Rather than assuming a rational voter, Lodge and Taber (2013) suggest the average voter is more likely to rationalize their decision post hoc. Rather than make decisions about policies and candidates based on rational assessment of the facts, pre-deliberative cognitive processes are impacted by pre-existing affect triggered by the discussion in question. In summation, voters make decisions based on how they feel towards a particular subject and justify the decision following the initial determination without being fully conscious of their actions. Lodge and Taber (2013) call this process “hot cognition,” positioning themselves opposite “cold cognition,” an entirely rational deliberative model.

Some scholars (e.g., Dolan, 2014; Sanbonmatsu, 2002) suggest that voting behavior is not governed by extrinsic cues, such as gender stereotyping, as those cues are washed out when accounting for political party and gender. These models of voting behavior, however, fail to account for the role that incidental cues may play in shaping deliberative process. Though Dolan (2014) found “little evidence that people take any traditional gender stereotypes they may hold and translate them directly into a decision to vote for or against a woman candidate” (p. 21), we argue that the deliberative process that accounts for conscious attitudes, such as political party, may be influenced by incidental cues that activate predispositions towards a particular subject. Indeed, the “hot cognition” framework proposed by Lodge and Taber (2013) would assume that a number of factors, including extrinsic cues, social predispositions, and pre-existing attitudes, would all influence voter cognition in different and interrelated ways.

Guided by the cognitive framework proposed by Lodge and Taber (2013), the present study is grounded in Fredrickson and Robert’s (1997) objectification theory. Objectification theory posits a relationship between articulating women as sexual objects and normatively negative outcomes. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggest that objectifying commentary, media images, and the pervasiveness of male gaze contribute to a range of problematic social views and attitudes. Objectifying practices, according to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), frame the material reality of women’s experience in society, as “bodies [that] exist within social and cultural contexts, and hence are also constructed through sociocultural practices and discourses” (p. 174). Indeed, Moradi and Huang (2008) summarize over a decade of research to conclude that myriad negative social and psychological impacts occur for women who are either objectified through the media or who internalize objectifying messages. In the context

of the present study, then, the objectification in the political realm will be addressed specifically.

We adopt a situated operationalization of “literal objectification,” meaning that the subject is reduced to their base physical being through comments by others. Heflick and Goldenberg (2014) define literal objectification as “any outcome in which a person is perceived as, or behaves, object like, relative to humanlike” and positions the construct as distinct from “animal/human conceptualizations of dehumanization” (p. 225). Literal objectification occurs when individuals are the focus of inordinate discussions of their physical being. This conception of objectification moves beyond existing empirical research on questions of self-objectification (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011), allowing researchers to determine the extent to which objectification of a subject impacts the way that subject is viewed by others. A number of scholars (e.g., Gervais, Holland, & Dodd, 2013; Grabe & Samson, 2010; Loughnan et al., 2010) have suggested a range of negative subject evaluations related to objectification, including negative assessment of competence and trustworthiness and increased focus on the subject’s body relative to one’s face. Though a minority of studies (e.g., Loughnan et al., 2010) have determined objectification can occur across genders, largely objectifying frames and literal objectification occur in the context of female subjects (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2014).

Nussbaum’s (1995) treatise on objectification further clarifies the notion of literal objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggest that to be objectified means “being treated primarily as a body valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (p. 174). Objectification is defined broadly in Nussbaum (1995) as a pejorative term, connoting a way of “speaking, thinking, and acting that the speaker finds morally or socially objectionable, usually, though not always, in the sexual realm” (p. 249). At times, objectification is the reduction of an individual in a sexual context to the role of object, and, in others, objectification manifests as the reduction of a person’s defining characteristics to their physical attributes at the expense of other characteristics (Nussbaum, 1995). In the political sphere, objectification could take numerous forms. Specifically meaningful for the present study are two of the seven ways Nussbaum (1995) isolates as mechanisms for reducing an individual to their physical characteristics. The first strategy is the “denial of autonomy” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 257). Denying autonomy is indicating that the candidate had no right to engage or make changes in the political process as a consequence of one’s physical being. The second strategy, inertness, is similar to the denial of autonomy: A candidate is described as impotent based on one’s physical characteristics. The candidate could be frail, or have a failing that would disqualify one from governance. Objectification theory suggests that objectifying frames would impact the evaluation of an objectified subject; as such, we propose the following hypothesis.

- H1: Individuals exposed to objectifying frames will evaluate a hypothetical candidate as less credible relative to those that were exposed to policy-only frames.

Political scholars (e.g., Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009, 2010; Perks & Johnson, 2014) argue that talking about female candidates differently than male candidates is not only pervasive but also uniquely problematic. Carlin and Winfrey (2009) indicate that there are substantive differences in coverage between male and female candidates in terms of amount (Kahn, 1994, 1996; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991), quality (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Banwart, Bystrom, & Robertson, 2003; Devitt, 2002), and negativity (Heldman, Carroll, & Olson, 2005; Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991), all of which are able to “erode a woman candidate’s credibility” (p. 327). Sarah Palin, for example, was covered not just as the governor of Alaska and potential vice presidential candidate. Discussions of her motherhood, intelligence, age, and attractiveness all coincided with nonobjectifying commentary (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Heflick and Goldenberg (2009, 2010) found that objectification of Sarah Palin had an impact on Palin’s credibility and, by extension, individual likelihood to vote for McCain and Palin. We propose the objectification of female candidates activates pre-existing attitudes about women in the political sphere and prompts individuals to evaluate the candidate as less credible.

The political discussion surrounding Sarah Palin clearly illustrates the nature of objectifying commentary in the political realm. Numerous scholars (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009; Heflick & Goldenberg, 2010) have suggested that Palin was discussed in the media as sexually desirable. Accompanying these conversations were explicit statements regarding her capability to fulfill the duties of the vice presidency, her seriousness as a candidate, and her overall knowledge. Objectification need not manifest as contending that a candidate is sexually desirable and is therefore unfit for office; the juxtaposition of objectifying commentary and policy discussion provided by the media implied the relationship, and the conclusion to draw.

Though there are active, concerted conversations about the needed respect for women in politics, sexism remains pervasive within the media and among voters. There are reasons to believe that, regardless of its unacceptability, some degree of prejudice against women persists despite well-intentioned social conditioning to problematize sexism. Indeed, Grabe and Samson (2010) found gender had a meaningful relationship on the way newscasters’ credibility was perceived. Male participants saw a sexualized version of the anchor as less suited for war and political reporting. Similarly, Braden (1996) indicates journalists “often ask women politicians questions they don’t ask men” and describe them “in ways and with words that emphasize women’s traditional roles and focus on their appearance and behavior” (p. 1). There are “stereotypes that in the coverage of female and male candidates, with women being described significantly more often than men in terms of their sex, marital status, and children” (Bystrom, Robertson, & Banwart, 2001, p. 2000). Objectification theory posits that men and women may have different reactions to objectifying commentary; where women may internalize objectification and perceive themselves as less competent (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003) or perform less competently when objectifying themselves (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 1998; Quinn, Kallen, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2006), men may treat objectification as a justification to evaluate a person’s effectiveness negatively (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). The

internalization of objectification should, therefore, have a manifest impact on perceptions of female credibility. If objectification is meaningful enough to impact an individual's performance, it stands to reason that externalizing objectification would similarly impact evaluation. As such, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Male participants will evaluate a hypothetical candidate as less credible relative to female participants.

This is not to say that gender is an unmitigated determinant of evaluation. Lodge and Taber (2013) do not discount the role of deliberation and thoughtful introspection in forming political opinions. They caution, however, against assuming that political decisions are made free from constraints of social and personal bias. Indeed, even the most informed and politically sophisticated are susceptible to peripheral cues that trigger predispositions; Lodge and Taber (2013) argue that "normatively, it is the most knowledgeable among us who should be best able to resist incidental influences, but empirically, these are the very citizens who are most affected" (pp. 131–132). It is difficult, however, to break apart these pre-existing attitudes to determine the way that each contributes to eventual deliberation, and how those attitudes are activated by incidental stimuli. While one might assume men exposed to objectifying frames would be most affected (as we anticipate an effect by gender and an effect by condition), we cannot be certain that these two factors would not interact in such a way that would nullify or reverse any effects. For example, while we would normally expect women to perceive a female candidate as more credible than men might perceive her to be, we cannot know if the addition of objectifying frames would cause women's perceptions of the candidate's credibility to decrease as normally expected or to increase out of defensiveness; women may have more personal experience feeling undermined by objectifying commentary, and this could cause a reversal of expected effects by condition. Alternatively, some men exposed to objectifying frames might feel embarrassed about the lack of professionalism displayed by their gender and rate the candidate as more credible by comparison. Because this interaction may result in a wider variety of outcomes, we propose the following research question to begin a discussion regarding the relative importance of gender and objectifying commentary on the impact of candidate evaluation:

RQ1: How will participant gender and experimental condition interact to impact evaluation of a hypothetical candidate's credibility?

In light of the subjective and controversial role that incidental cues may play in decision making, it is of the utmost importance that scholars study and understand stimuli that may indirectly contribute to political calculations.

METHOD

This experiment employed a 2 x 2 between-participants posttest-only factorial design. The factors were Objectifying Frames (present versus not present) and Subject Gender (male versus female). Two stimuli were generated to assess whether the inclusion of

objectifying remarks in a mock-up Facebook thread would impact the perceived credibility of a political candidate shown at the top of the thread in a photograph. The control stimulus contains only comments relating to policy with specific attention paid to ensure the statements were nonpartisan. The treatment stimulus contains the same exact remarks on the candidate's policy credentials but also contains interjections pertaining exclusively to candidate attractiveness throughout.

Participants

Undergraduate students from a large, Midwestern university were recruited from three, lower level courses: Public Speaking, Media Communication in Society, and Principles of American Journalism. These courses all fulfill general-education requirements for the majority of majors on campus, thus the variety of majors represented in the sample is likely to extend beyond communication and journalism. There are, presumably, participants in the sample who represent majors that explicitly study topics related to political communication and media, but we did not anticipate any effects of major because most students enrolled in these courses are early enough in their undergraduate careers so as to have little to no experience with media effects theory or research. Students took part in the experiment in exchange for extra credit in their respective courses.

Materials and Procedure

The stimuli used for the conditions were mock-ups of a Facebook post referring to a particular female politician, with subsequent comments composed by the researchers. The individual shown in the Facebook post is Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), in a photograph taken from an appearance on a cable news network. Gillibrand was chosen for her relative obscurity and geographic distance from the subject pool. All partisan identifiers were scrubbed from the stimuli, and her name was changed to Maria Thompson. The initial "post" contains a picture of Gillibrand, labeled as Maria Thompson, with a brief description of her as a hypothetical candidate absent salient party identifiers. The subsequent Facebook thread contains approximately 25 positive comments relating to policy, taking care to include vague praises and descriptions of issues in which both political parties would be interested (e.g., "We neeeeeed some new blood in Washington! I think this person may be the beginning of something big!"). The resulting stimuli, all components considered, present a nonpartisan candidate.

The images used for profile pictures, names used, and comments were compiled by both researchers with special attention given to gender of the speaker in the Facebook thread, ethnicity of names, and nature of the profile pic. In each instance, researchers sought to control for extraneous factors (such as racial and gender differences for meaningful comments) such that the effects on candidate evaluation would be marginal, if detectable at all. A second thread was composed for the treatment condition. The same photograph, bio, and policy comments were used without alteration. In the

treatment stimulus, however, researchers added a total of six comments that objectified Gillibrand (e.g., “She sounds good, but she needs to work on her image. She’d be way sexier as a brunette.”). The comments were spoken by individuals with generic male names and were inserted at various different points in the Facebook conversation.

Independent and Demographic Variables

Two conditions were used for the experiment. In both conditions, participants were asked to read the thread carefully, as they would be answering questions about its content. The control condition exposed participants to the Facebook thread containing the picture, fictional bio, and policy-related comments. The experimental condition was exposed to the thread containing the same conversation, with the addition of objectifying commentary. Both groups then responded to the same posttest survey. The contents of the survey are discussed below. Subjects scheduled a 45-minute period of time to come to a computer lab where the experiment was held. All stimuli and questionnaire materials were embedded in an online survey using Qualtrics, which randomly sorted participants into either the control or experimental condition. Demographics were collected first, followed by a distractor task, which was viewing a video of John Oliver discussing the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and the World Cup. After completing the distractor task, participants were exposed to a one of two mock-up Facebook threads. In both conditions, participants were asked to read the thread carefully, as they would be answering questions about its content. Both groups then responded to the same posttest survey. The contents of the survey are discussed below.

Subjects’ gender, age, and race were assessed using explicit questions. Political affiliation was assessed through three separate items. First, participants were asked assess their party preference placing themselves on a 6-item scale from Strong Republican to Strong Democrat. Second, participants were asked to assess their ideological affiliation by placing themselves on a 7-item scale from “Extremely Liberal” to “Extremely Conservative.” Finally, participants were asked if, in 2016, ideal candidates from both parties were present in the race, whether they would vote for the Republican or Democrat.

Dependent Variables

All dependent variables were assessed using Likert-type items using the options: “Strongly Disagree,” “Disagree,” “Somewhat Disagree,” “Undecided,” “Somewhat Agree,” “Agree,” and “Strongly Agree.” The following three constructs have been adapted from Bjerke and Hansen (2012).

Credibility was assessed through the creation of a composite score derived from six items from the posttest survey. Participants were asked to choose to what extent they agree or disagree with statements about the hypothetical candidate’s *competence*,

honesty, reliability, seriousness, diplomacy, and knowledge. The scale yielded excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Image was assessed similarly through a composite of three items. Subjects were asked to state to what extent they perceive these traits to be appropriate descriptions for the hypothetical candidate: *extroverted, charismatic, and eloquent.* The scale yielded good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$).

Suitability for Office was measured using one explicitly stated item: "To what extent do you think this politician is suitable for political office?"

The preceding section has detailed the methodological and constructive choices employed in the creation of this experiment. The following section reports the methods of analysis and the results of our tests.

RESULTS

The sample consisted of 66.5% females ($n = 296$) and 33.5% males ($n = 149$) for a total of 445 participants ($N = 445$). Of the 445 respondents, 79.3% were White ($n = 353$), 10.3% were Black ($n = 46$), 5.8% were Asian ($n = 26$), 2.2% were Hispanic or Latino ($n = 10$), and 2.2% identified as an ethnicity not listed in the questionnaire ($n = 10$). The sample comprised individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 ($M = 20.3$). When asked to choose between an ideal Democrat or ideal Republican candidate, 51% said they would vote for a Democrat ($n = 227$) and 49% said they would vote for a Republican ($n = 218$). Assessment of partisanship strength revealed that 2.9% identified as strong Democrats ($n = 13$), 21.6% as Democrats ($n = 96$), 26.1% as lean/slight Democrats ($n = 116$), 27.2% lean/slight Republicans ($n = 121$), 18.2% Republicans ($n = 81$), and 4% strong Republicans ($n = 18$). Additionally, on a spectrum between liberal and conservative, 3.4% identified as extremely liberal ($n = 15$), 18.7% as liberal ($n = 83$), 21.1% as somewhat liberal ($n = 94$), 21.1% as neither liberal nor conservative ($n = 94$), 19.1% as somewhat conservative ($n = 85$), 13.7% as conservative ($n = 61$), and 2.9% as extremely conservative ($n = 13$). Almost half of participants (49.66%) were in the control condition, which included policy-only commentary ($n = 221$; 157 females, 64 males), and 50.34% of were in the treatment condition, which included the same policy commentary and additional objectifying commentary ($n = 224$; 139 females, 85 males).

Hypothesis 1 posited that individuals exposed to objectifying frames would evaluate a hypothetical candidate less credible relative to individuals exposed to policy-only frames. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to assess credibility four ways. The first assessment tested groups using the six-item credibility scale but did not find significant differences, $F(1, 443) = 1.98, p = .161$, observed power = .289. The second assessment tested groups using the three-item image scale and found that those in the control condition ($M = 5.40, SD = 0.95$) rated the candidate as significantly more appealing than those in the treatment condition ($M = 5.20, SD = 0.96$), $F(1, 443) = 4.902, p < .05, \eta^2 = .011$. Third, an omnibus test revealed that there was no significant difference between treatment and control on whether respondents believed

the candidate was suitable for office, $F(1, 443) = 1.022, p = .376$, observed power = .143. Assessment of individual items found that those exposed to the objectifying commentary (the treatment condition) were more likely to rate the candidate as less competent, $F(1, 443) = 4.52, p < .05$ ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.12$), than those exposed to policy-only commentary, or control condition ($M = 5.27, SD = 0.99$), $p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$. Additionally, those in the treatment condition were more likely to rate the candidate as less serious, $F(1, 443) = 4.75, p < .05$ ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.33$), than those in the control condition were likely to report ($M = 5.16, SD = 1.15$), $p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$. Assessment of group differences using the image scale yielded a significant omnibus test, $F(1, 443) = 4.902, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$. Those in the treatment condition ($M = 5.19, SD = 0.96$) rated the candidate's image lower than those in the control condition ($M = 5.4, SD = 0.95$), $p < .05$. Thus, H1 was partially supported.

Hypothesis 2 posited that independent of experimental condition, males would evaluate a hypothetical candidate as less credible relative to females. A one-way ANOVA was performed to test for group differences, again using the four different assessments. The omnibus test for group differences using the six-item credibility scale did not quite approach significance $F(1, 443) = 3.357, p = .068$, observed power = .448. Using the image scale, group differences were also not quite statistically significant $F(1, 443) = 2.896, p = .09$, observed power = .397. There was a significant difference in how males and females rated the candidate's suitability for office, $F(1, 443) = 8.34, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$. Males ($M = 4.55, SD = 1.21$) reported the candidate as being less suited for office than females reported her to be ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.09$), $p < .01$. Finally, individual items within the six-item credibility scale that did achieve significance included reliability, $F(1, 443) = 9.320, p < .01, \eta^2 = .02$. Post hoc analyses using Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) found that males ($M = 4.42, SD = 1.15$) rated the candidate's reliability as significantly lower than females rated her reliability ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.24$), $p < .01$. Additionally, there was a significant disparity in how males and females rated the candidate's honesty, $F(1, 443) = 16.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$. Post hoc analyses using Fisher's LSD found that males ($M = 4.42, SD = 1.15$) rated the candidate's honesty as significantly lower than females rated her honesty ($M = 4.89, SD = 1.16$), $p < .001$. Thus, H2 was partially supported.

Research Question 1 asked whether there would be an interaction effect of Gender and Condition on perceived candidate credibility. A two-way ANOVA was used to assess group differences. Using the six-item credibility scale, the omnibus test revealed that there was no significant interaction of Condition and Gender, $F(1, 443) = 0.428, p = .513, \eta^2 = .09$, observed power = .10. Using the three-item image scale, the omnibus test revealed that there was no significant interaction of Condition and Gender, $F(1, 443) = 0.160, p = .160, \eta^2 = .004$, observed power = .289. Using the single-item suitability for office measure, the omnibus test revealed that there was no significant interaction of Condition and Gender, $F(1, 443) = 0.768, p = .381, \eta^2 = .002$, observed power = .141. There was no interaction effect for Condition and Gender on any single item in the six-item credibility scale.

DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis illuminate the subtle yet consequential effects of exposure to objectifying Facebook conversation. Although social media comprises part of a voter's overall media diet, repeated exposure to similar narratives may, over time, result in compounded effects—especially during election seasons when exposure is high. Stereotypes about women's leadership, which are constructed through particular representations of the candidate, may influence voting behaviors indirectly through partisanship and other factors. Political-science research often suggests that candidate gender and gender stereotypes themselves are not directly responsible for variance in voting behaviors, and that party preference will eclipse or strongly overshadow all other factors (Dolan, 2014; Dolan & Lynch, 2015; Hayes, Lawless, & Baitinger, 2014). However, assessment of the relationship between gender stereotypes and voting intention in much of political science research tends to rely on questionnaire items that ask respondents explicitly if candidate gender is an important concern when making voting decisions. It is conceivable that these explicit items have left unanswered questions that may be illuminated by a series of different methodological choices, such as the use of Implicit Associations Testing (IAT), balancing questions relating to women with identical questions relating to men, or by examining attitudes that triangulate gender roles with traditionalism and family values (Dolan, 2010; Sanbonmatsu, 2002; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2009). Finally, existing research that discounts the role that socially undesirable characteristics, such as sexism and racism, play in the role of deliberation may ignore the underlying affective processes of political decision making in the general population (Lodge & Taber, 2013).

In light of substantial anecdotal evidence of the existence of objectifying frames in the media, combined with years of scholarship contending that objectifying frames are uniquely damaging (e.g., Fredrickson et al., 1998; Gapinski et al., 2003; Grabe & Samson, 2010), it is curious to see that only some aspects of credibility are impacted by objectifying discussion surrounding the candidates. There are numerous incidental contributors for why objectifying frames had limited effect on evaluation of the hypothetical candidate. Specifically, we propose the limitations of credibility as a construct and the nature of the experiment as likely explanations of our findings.

The credibility construct used in this analysis contains individual items that vary in their sensitivity to objectifying stimuli. "Seriousness," for example, was more strongly affected by the condition to which participants were exposed. This effect is grounded in theoretical predictions of participant evaluation, as objectification and the trivialization of one's ability to be a serious professional within the political sphere have been connected in previous research (Ross, Evans, Harrison, Shears, & Wadia, 2013). On the other hand, aspects such as "reliability," which may activate ideas about consistency and "following through," are less related to objectifying commentary and more related to a candidate's prior experience. Stronger effects found on image-scale measures support the claim that stereotype activation in response to objectifying commentary may be much more potent when measuring personality traits less associated with a candidate's previous experience. Additionally, some credibility

items were more likely to be affected by participant gender regardless of condition, such as honesty; indeed, the stereotype that women are prone to dishonesty or exaggeration is one that has been seen across several studies measuring attitudes toward women (Burt, 1980; Fox & Potocki, 2015; Kahlor & Eastin, 2011; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Our results suggest that some elements of credibility measures may be affected more by the cumulative life experience and media habits of men and the impact that experience has on beliefs about women, not simply objectified women. Future research comparing these data against a similar study conducted with a male mock-candidate may confirm the accuracy of this claim.

Further support for the expansion of existing credibility scales may lie within the reciprocal nature of the meaning-making relationship between words and their constructs. For example, the word “abortion” may always have a negative connotation simply because of to what it refers; even to pro-Choice individuals, the word may carry a note of finality, drama, or discomfort just because the procedure of abortion is seen to them as an unpleasant, last-resort necessity. Merely changing what word is used in place of “abortion” (e.g., pregnancy “termination,” “discontinuation”) may be unsuccessful in shaking off connotations associated with the previous word because of the unidirectional yet strongly-held overlap between the constructs “abortion” and “trouble.” McIlwain and Caliendo (2011) found that the same attribute (e.g., “lazy,” “liberal”) applied to candidates of different races had different potent effects on perceptions of the candidates. Words can become racialized, gendered, or given other loaded meanings that may become tautological and therefore difficult to divide into separate constructs. Similarly, existing credibility scales created using factor analysis may not necessarily measure the construct of “credibility” as we understand it in an academic sense, but rather “credibility” through the lens of public opinion and social articulation of “credibility” that is uniquely gendered. This is not to say that existing credibility measures lack the traditional measures of theoretical rigor; as reported above, the Credibility and the Image scale both yielded excellent reliability. It is conceivable, however, that reliability measures are not the entire story of a construct. Instead, our findings suggest the possibility that some items that scholars use to measure credibility may fail to detect an even-handed evaluation of a candidate’s traits regarding credibility, and may instead measure traditional markers of masculinity of a given candidate.

As such, we propose that some scale items lack construct validity for credibility, in that some items may contain more overlap with the construct of masculinity than other items. This is especially problematic because no items are included that overlap with the construct of femininity (e.g., “organized” or “composed”), potentially resulting in a skewed or self-fulfilling construction of credibility as a male trait; this could potentially disrupt the clarity of credibility research. The present study modeled its credibility measure on Bjerke and Hansen (2012), who proposed additional, reliable mechanisms to measure credibility. It is conceivable, however, that items that activate personal experience (such as “reliable”) may load with items that conflate masculinity and suitability for office (such as “honest” or “serious”). Future studies may benefit from experimenting with a wide range of updated credibility items more associated

with femininity and image evaluation. Even if such items do not immediately appear to be related to credibility in a traditional sense, and adding more would initially seem to violate the parsimonious explanatory power of the existing scale, we cannot claim that this existing scale is already complete—it undeniably lacks a balance of items relating to public opinion of female-candidate credibility. Future research should improve upon this shortcoming.

A second explanation for the subtle effects found here may relate to the exceedingly complicated nature of credibility. Numerous scholars have indicated that credibility is not only multifaceted, but that many factors are interrelated and impact each other. The present findings suggest that messages and commentary may impact some aspects of a candidate's credibility, without impacting other facets. In the context of objectification theory, one would expect that frames that reduce a candidate to simply their physical selves would impact assessment of a candidate's competence, seriousness, and knowledge. Future research may do well to expand the existing credibility measures to more deeply analyze the makeup of "seriousness" as a theoretical construct. Much of the current research over candidate credibility may, in an attempt to unify a complicated theoretical and practical construct, be grouping otherwise nuanced facets together that may be better developed separately. Future research may investigate the potential for a scale specific to objectification, for example, designed to measure changes in assessment of candidate image that would most likely be impacted by objectifying commentary.

Our guiding theoretical framework assumes that objectifying commentary activates pre-existing societal predispositions that dictate gender roles and hierarchies. Once activated, however, those tendencies may not have an impact on assessment of a female candidate's diplomacy, or their honesty. As such, it is important to begin unpacking individual concepts that contribute to credibility, as some cues may impact some facets of credibility differently than others. In particular, the journalistic focus of women as physical bodies—existing either to please or to be instrumental in the providing for children—necessitates that coverage of female political candidates' policy and qualifications share a stage with less-relevant information, shifting or replacing audience attention in ways that do not occur with male political candidates. This difference in expectations levied upon men and women may be evidence that existing credibility scales should be expanded to include items that may be affected by objectifying media and sexism. For example, including an item measuring a candidate's "rationality" provides one such connection between objectification theory and political credibility, as the trivialization of one's mental processes is often a gender-specific symptom associated with objectification.

On a more pragmatic note, there were qualities of the experiment that may have led to subdued effects. The experimental stimuli contained only six objectifying messages, all but one with positive valence (one comment vaguely questioned the candidate's competence as related to hair color) compared to 25 messages that were positive, albeit unspecific, assessment of policy stances. It is possible that participants read the comments in the same way that one typically scrolls across a Facebook feed, stopping only on comments that are exceedingly different, meaning that participants

perhaps failed to read the entire thread. This emulates, in many ways, the type of exposure many individuals have to objectifying messages; they occur in passing, barely registering, until attention is brought to them. However, in the context of political analysts in the media, such a cacophony does not exist. The focus is on few voices, with most remarks failing to escape the conscious mind.

It is also conceivable that the sheer amount of policy discussion washed out the impact of objectifying commentary. Had the amount of policy and objectifying comments been similar, and less subtle, it is conceivable that the effect of the commentary would have been detected. There is a structural weakness of experiments designed to assess the impact of statements that may be impacted by social desirability. Participants may wish to push back on manipulation if the experimental treatment would expose racist, sexist, or otherwise undesirable traits. As such, researchers experience a conundrum in designing stimuli; too subtle, and one risks finding no effect, but, too overt, and one risks participants failing to answer honestly for fear of social sanction. As blatantly sexist remarks often receive backlash through social media, or even through other commentators in the media, it is possible that the effects of objectification may be difficult to discern in an experimental setting.

Finally, it is worth noting that our sample, comprised of college students, does not perfectly mirror the population in terms of demographic data, or, more importantly, political information efficacy. There is conflicting data on what role additional political sophistication and efficacy could play in the resolution of incidental cues that influence political decisions. Where some experimental data (see Mendelberg, 2001) suggest that drawing attention to incidental cues causes the effect to dissipate, Lodge and Taber (2013), suggest that the effects of incidental cues were magnified among the most politically sophisticated, implying a sort of hubris in the capacity of highly sophisticated individuals to identify and resolve incidental cues.

Concluding Remarks, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Despite the contributions this study makes to the academic conversation intersecting political credibility, gender discrimination, and social media effects, there are certain limitations. The sample size did not allow for more nuanced examination of interactions between condition, gender, and multiple other factors, especially in men. In light of lower representation of men in the sample, we are unable to adequately conclude effects based on gender within condition.

Effect sizes yielded in this study were modest, likely in part due to the realistic, somewhat infrequent nature of the objectifying commentary embedded in the treatment stimulus. The stimuli were designed with the intention of maintaining strict ecological validity. Explicitly sexualized messages may receive pushback in the political realm and are therefore replaced with subtle and arguably more insidious instances of objectification (Attenborough, 2014). There are a number of other reasons why effect sizes may have been rather small: internalized sexism (which may be revealed with the inclusion of IAT measures) in women, the effect of a

female proctor present during data collection, or aforementioned priming effects may have been present, but undetectable. Additionally, we chose to forego a manipulation check out of concern that additional salience would be brought to the objectifying commentary in the experimental condition, and that this would taint the subtlety of the manipulation. However, careful control of extraneous factors included in the stimuli allowed us to attribute many effects, however subtle or specific to the aforementioned single-item measures, consistently in association with condition.

For the purposes of this study, we did not manipulate candidate party but chose to keep our stimuli politically ambiguous. However, we cannot be sure of the extent to which female candidates are assumed by participants to be Left-leaning. Future studies may find it useful to compare different types of political candidates not assessed in this study, such as men, those who identify as a nondominant ethnic group, or even partisan-specific candidates. Another interesting variable for future research is the role of rebuttal statements—statements that criticize objectifying commentary and attempt to redirect the conversation back to policy. Manipulations of social support (in the form of supportive commentary or “likes” as would be seen on Facebook) may provide even more understanding of real-world variance in influence of exposure to Facebook conversation concerning politics and gender.

This study demonstrates the need for credibility research more suitably tailored to objectification theory as more women enter the political arena. As previously discussed, where existing credibility scales are deliberately designed to reflect the multifaceted nature of credibility as a construct, more attention should be paid to the capacity of some stimuli to impact some facets of credibility, but not others. As current measures may fail to adequately detect and reflect the differences some stimuli may have on aspects of credibility, further development and research may be required to fully comprehend the impact of objectifying commentary in the media, and the everyday.

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