



Linguistic Strategies of Gender and Power in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election: A Critical Analysis of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump's Tweets through Sara Mills' Model of Sexist Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a comprehensive critical analysis of the linguistic strategies employed by the two major candidates in the 2024 United States presidential election, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, focusing specifically on the manifestation of sexism and gendered discourse in their official communications on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). The research is grounded in Sara Mills' (2008) influential theoretical framework on language and sexism, which distinguishes between overt sexism—direct, linguistically identifiable discriminatory language—and covert sexism—subtle, indirect forms of gender bias embedded in rhetorical structures, presuppositions, tone, and culturally embedded assumptions about gender roles and leadership. Through a qualitative methodological approach, the study examines eight carefully selected tweets, four from each candidate, chosen to represent contrasting rhetorical strategies related to gender, authority, political identity, and leadership legitimacy. The analysis reveals a complex and nuanced picture of how gender operates in contemporary American political discourse. The findings demonstrate that neither candidate employs overtly sexist language in their tweets, avoiding the use of generic masculine pronouns, gendered affixes, unequal titles, or explicitly discriminatory vocabulary. However, their engagement with gendered power structures differs fundamentally and revealingly. Kamala Harris's rhetorical strategy systematically avoids both overt and covert sexist formulations. She adopts an assertive, evidence-based, and professionally authoritative voice that draws on rhetorical traditions historically coded as masculine in political communication. By employing direct critiques of her opponent's policy record, using expert testimony, and maintaining a focus on substantive issues rather than personal attributes, Harris challenges conventional gender expectations and subverts the covert sexist norms that have traditionally constrained female politicians' communicative options. Her language simultaneously reproduces masculine-coded rhetorical forms while resisting the gendered limitations those forms have historically imposed. Donald Trump's tweets, by contrast, operate through mechanisms of covert sexism as defined by Mills' framework. Through strategic deployment of contrastive framing that positions female leadership as chaotic and male leadership as restorative, through presuppositions that embed assumptions about gender and competence, through rhetorical tone that belittles and diminishes, and through appeals to culturally embedded masculine ideals of strength, dominance, and emotional control, Trump's discourse subtly but persistently reinforces stereotypes of female inadequacy in political leadership. His tweets construct a binary opposition in which Kamala Harris is framed as the source of national disorder, instability, and failure, while he himself is positioned as the natural, authoritative, and masculine corrective force capable of restoring strength, peace, and prosperity. This rhetorical pattern aligns precisely with Mills' concept of covert sexism, in which discriminatory implications are embedded in language without direct expression, allowing for plausible deniability while nonetheless reinforcing gendered power hierarchies. The analysis demonstrates that sexism in contemporary political discourse operates primarily not through explicit statements but through interpretation, reception, and the activation of culturally embedded gender norms that shape how messages are constructed, delivered, and received. The study highlights the critical importance of examining not only what is said in political communication, but also how messages are shaped by the gender of the speaker, the gendered expectations of audiences, and the broader societal context in which political discourse unfolds.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of language, gender, and political power has long constituted a rich and contested terrain of scholarly inquiry, drawing the attention of linguists, political scientists, sociologists, and communication theorists alike. Political discourse, as the primary medium through which candidates for public office articulate their visions, construct their identities, and persuade electorates, offers a uniquely revealing window into the deep structures of social power and cultural ideology. Within this broader field, the specific question of how gender operates in political communication has become increasingly urgent, as women have gradually but significantly increased their representation in political leadership positions across the globe, challenging centuries-old assumptions about the natural relationship between masculinity and political authority.

The 2024 United States presidential election presents an especially compelling case study for examining the linguistic dynamics of gender and power. For the first time in American history, a major party nominated a woman of color, Vice President Kamala Harris, as its presidential candidate, setting the stage for a direct electoral contest between a female candidate and a male opponent, former President Donald Trump, whose political career has been marked by controversial and often explicitly provocative rhetoric about gender, race, and power. The campaign unfolded against a backdrop of intense partisan polarization, rapid evolution in digital communication platforms, and heightened public awareness of issues related to sexism, misogyny, and gender-based discrimination in public life. Social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), emerged as a central battleground for political messaging, enabling candidates to communicate directly with millions of followers without the mediating influence of traditional journalism. These platform characteristics create unique opportunities for analyzing how candidates construct their political identities, attack their opponents, and appeal to voters through carefully crafted linguistic strategies.

This study investigates the role of sexism in political discourse during the 2024 U.S. presidential election through a detailed qualitative analysis of tweets posted by the two major candidates, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. The research is grounded in Sara Mills' (2008) influential theoretical framework on language and sexism, which provides a sophisticated analytical apparatus for distinguishing between overt forms of sexist language—direct, linguistically identifiable expressions of gender discrimination—and covert forms, in which sexist meanings are embedded indirectly through rhetorical structures, presuppositions, tone, and culturally embedded assumptions about gender roles and leadership. Mills' framework is particularly valuable for analyzing contemporary political discourse because it recognizes that as overt sexism has become increasingly socially unacceptable in many public contexts, discriminatory messages have not disappeared but have instead migrated to more subtle and deniable forms of expression.

The study employs a qualitative research methodology, which is particularly well-suited for analyzing the nuanced ways in which language use and implied meaning interact with

broader social structures. Through close reading and systematic analysis of eight carefully selected tweets—four from each candidate—the research seeks to reveal how gendered assumptions manifest not only in what is said, but more fundamentally in how language is interpreted, how it is received by audiences, and how it is shaped by societal expectations about gender-appropriate behavior and communication. The analysis attends to multiple levels of linguistic structure, including lexical choice, syntactic patterns, rhetorical framing, presupposition, implicature, and the interaction between textual content and broader discursive context.

The study is guided by two central research questions. First, the research asks whether sexism is used in political discourse during the 2024 U.S. presidential election, and if so, to what extent it is present and in what forms it manifests. Second, the study investigates whether sexism in political discourse can be used exclusively by men against women, or whether it can also be employed by women against men, exploring the potentially asymmetric nature of gendered political communication. Through these questions, the study draws on Mills' distinction between overt sexism, which is linguistically identifiable through specific markers such as generic pronouns, gendered affixes, and unequal titles, and covert sexism, which operates through more subtle mechanisms such as tone, presupposition, contrastive framing, and the activation of cultural assumptions about gender and leadership.

The analysis aims to contribute to a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of how political figures both reproduce and resist gendered discourse norms, and how their language is interpreted through the lens of societal gender expectations. Ultimately, this research seeks to uncover the underlying discursive mechanisms that maintain or challenge gender inequality in political communication, even in the absence of explicit sexist vocabulary, and to illuminate the complex ways in which gender, power, and language intersect in the high-stakes arena of presidential politics.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SEXISM, LANGUAGE, AND SARA MILLS' MODEL

2.1 The Concept of Sexism in Language

Discrimination based on sex, most commonly but not exclusively directed against women, is a pervasive feature of human societies, rooted in deep historical structures of gender inequality that have shaped social institutions, cultural practices, and individual identities across civilizations. As Anne Pauwels argues in her foundational work "Women Changing Language," sexism is not merely a matter of individual attitudes or behaviors but is fundamentally built into the very structure of language itself. Linguistic sexism refers to the ways in which language systems and language use favor men and masculine perspectives while systematically disadvantaging women and feminine perspectives, often through subtle and seemingly neutral linguistic conventions that reflect and reinforce underlying gender hierarchies.

Sexist language does more than simply reflect existing gender bias; it actively reproduces and perpetuates the beliefs, values, and assumptions that sustain gender inequality across generations. These deeply embedded gender stereotypes,

passed down through linguistic inheritance and reinforced through everyday communicative practices, shape how individuals perceive themselves and others, how they evaluate competence and authority, and how they understand the possibilities and limitations associated with gender. While the feminist movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have successfully challenged many forms of blatant, overt sexism, leading to significant changes in both linguistic conventions and social attitudes, gender discrimination has by no means disappeared from language. Rather, as researchers like Christie (2001) have noted, sexism has increasingly migrated to more subtle, covert, and deniable forms of expression, making it more difficult to identify and challenge, while nonetheless maintaining its power to shape perceptions and reinforce inequality.

The concept of covert or indirect sexism is especially relevant to understanding contemporary political discourse, where explicit expressions of gender bias have become socially risky for public figures. As Lakoff (1990) observed, sexism in language is ultimately a reflection of women's broader social position and the dilemmas they face in navigating public life. When overt discrimination becomes unacceptable, discriminatory messages do not simply disappear but instead find new, more subtle forms of expression that allow speakers to maintain plausible deniability while nonetheless communicating gendered meanings to audiences who share the necessary cultural interpretive frameworks.

2.2 Sara Mills' Model of Overt and Covert Sexism

Sara Mills' (2008) influential work "Language and Sexism" provides a sophisticated analytical framework for understanding the multiple ways in which sexist meanings are produced, communicated, and interpreted in discourse. Mills builds on earlier feminist linguistic scholarship while offering a more nuanced account of how sexism operates at the intersection of linguistic form, speaker intention, and audience interpretation. Central to Mills' framework is the distinction between overt sexism and covert sexism, a differentiation that has profound implications for analyzing political discourse.

Overt sexism refers to forms of language use that are directly and recognizably discriminatory on the basis of gender. According to Mills, overt sexism can be identified through specific linguistic indicators that have been historically associated with gender bias. These include the use of generic masculine pronouns, such as "he" used to refer to humans in general, which linguistically erases women from generic reference and reinforces the assumption that the male is the universal human subject. Generic nouns that contain the word "man" to refer to all people, such as "mankind," "chairman," or "businessman," similarly encode a masculine bias in the language's fundamental vocabulary. Gendered affixes, such as the feminine suffixes "-ess" (as in "actress," "hostess," "comedienne") or the prefix "lady-" (as in "lady doctor"), create marked feminine terms that are often perceived as less serious, less authoritative, or derivative of an unmarked masculine norm. Titles that distinguish women based on marital status, such as "Mrs." and "Miss" versus the unmarked "Mr." for men, similarly encode different expectations and judgments for men and women in public life. Overt sexism

also includes explicitly derogatory terms directed at women or statements that directly assert gender-based inferiority.

Covert sexism, by contrast, refers to forms of language use that express or imply gender discrimination but do so indirectly, in ways that allow the speaker to deny responsibility for the discriminatory meaning. As Mills explains, covert sexism often operates through the use of humor, irony, or joking frames, which allow speakers to say things that would be unacceptable if stated seriously while maintaining the defense that they were "just joking." This strategy, identified by Lakoff (1990) and Crawford (1995), enables the expression of sexist content while providing the speaker with a ready-made defense against accusations of discrimination. The irony or humor frame signals that the utterance should not be taken at face value, yet the sexist content is nonetheless communicated and can reinforce prejudiced attitudes in audiences.

Presupposition is another crucial mechanism of covert sexism identified by Mills. Presuppositions are background assumptions that must be taken for granted for an utterance to be interpretable. When sexist meanings are embedded in presuppositions rather than asserted directly, they become more difficult to challenge because they are not explicitly stated but are assumed as common ground. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) demonstrate, even seemingly neutral comments can carry sexist implications when they rely on presuppositions about gender roles, capabilities, or appropriate behavior. For example, praising a female politician for being "tough enough" for politics presupposes that toughness is generally unexpected or exceptional for women, thereby reinforcing the assumption that politics is naturally a masculine domain.

Mills also emphasizes that the identification of sexism in discourse cannot rely solely on the analysis of linguistic form but must attend to the interaction between text, context, speaker, and interpreter. An utterance that might be non-sexist in one context could function as sexist in another, depending on how it is interpreted and what cultural assumptions it activates. This contextual and interpretive dimension is particularly important for analyzing political discourse, where speakers and audiences bring different interpretive frameworks and where the gender of the speaker fundamentally shapes how messages are received.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is methodologically appropriate for investigating the complex, nuanced, and context-dependent phenomena of sexist discourse in political communication. Qualitative analysis allows for close examination of linguistic strategies, rhetorical structures, and implied meanings that would be difficult to capture through quantitative methods. The research focuses on understanding how sexism operates not merely as a set of linguistic forms but as a dynamic process involving speaker intention, textual structure, and audience interpretation, following Mills' emphasis on the interpretive dimensions of sexist discourse.

3.2 Data Collection

The data for this study consists of eight tweets posted by the official accounts of the two major candidates in the 2024

United States presidential election, Kamala Harris (@KamalaHarris) and Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump). Four tweets were selected from each candidate's account, drawn from the period of active campaigning leading up to the November 2024 election. Tweets were selected purposively to represent contrasting rhetorical strategies related to gender, authority, political identity, and leadership legitimacy. The selection aimed to include tweets that directly or indirectly engaged with questions of leadership competence, political authority, and the relationship between gender and governance. All tweets were publicly available and were accessed through the X platform.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by Sara Mills' (2008) model of sexism in language, which provides a systematic framework for identifying both overt and covert forms of sexist discourse. Each tweet was analyzed for the presence of overt sexism indicators, including generic masculine pronouns, generic masculine nouns, gendered affixes, unequal titles, and explicitly derogatory gender-based language. Tweets were also analyzed for covert sexism mechanisms, including the use of humor or irony to embed discriminatory content, presuppositions that carry gendered implications, contrastive framing that positions male and female figures differently, rhetorical tone that belittles or diminishes, and appeals to culturally embedded masculine ideals of leadership.

The analysis attends to multiple levels of linguistic structure, including lexical choice, syntactic patterns, rhetorical framing, presupposition, implicature, and the interaction between textual content and broader discursive context. The gender of the speaker is considered a crucial variable throughout the analysis, as Mills emphasizes that the same linguistic forms can have different meanings and effects depending on whether they are used by male or female speakers, given the asymmetric nature of gendered power relations.

4. ANALYSIS OF KAMALA HARRIS'S TWEETS

4.1 Tweet 1: Critique of Trump's Business Record

The first tweet from Kamala Harris reads: "People say Donald Trump is a great businessman but just look at his record: He was handed \$400 million on a silver platter and filed for bankruptcy six times."

This tweet represents a direct political attack on Donald Trump's reputation as a successful businessman, an image that has been central to his political identity and appeal. Harris highlights the contrast between the public perception of Trump as a business genius and the factual record of receiving a substantial inheritance while experiencing multiple business failures. The phrase "on a silver platter" emphasizes the unearned nature of his wealth, while the enumeration of bankruptcy filings provides concrete evidence for her critique. Applying Mills' framework, this tweet contains no overt sexist language. Harris does not employ generic masculine pronouns in a discriminatory way, using "he" only to refer specifically to Trump. There are no gendered affixes, unequal titles, or explicitly derogatory gender-based terms. The critique is focused entirely on Trump's business record and the gap between his reputation and his actual achievements.

The tweet also contains no covert sexism as defined by Mills. There is no use of humor or irony to embed discriminatory content, no presuppositions that carry gendered implications, and no rhetorical framing that relies on gender stereotypes. The critique is fact-based and substantive, targeting Trump's performance and credibility rather than any personal or gender-based attributes.

However, Mills' framework encourages examination beyond surface-level linguistic features to consider how language interacts with broader gendered power structures and how messages may be interpreted differently based on the speaker's gender. As a female politician delivering a direct, unflinching critique of a male opponent, Harris's tweet may be received differently by audiences than if the same critique were delivered by a male politician. Research on gendered perceptions of political communication has consistently shown that women who adopt assertive, confrontational rhetorical styles are often evaluated more harshly than men who use identical styles, reflecting underlying assumptions about appropriate gender behavior. Thus, while the tweet itself is linguistically non-sexist, its reception may be shaped by gendered expectations, illustrating Mills' emphasis on the interpretive dimensions of sexism.

4.2 Tweet 2: The Rhetoric of Weakness

The second Harris tweet states: "Donald Trump is weak. He seeks flattery from dictators: Weak. He has demeaned America's military: Weak. He has called for terminating the Constitution: Weak."

This tweet employs a powerful rhetorical structure based on repetition, using the word "weak" three times to characterize different aspects of Trump's behavior and political positions. The anaphoric structure—repeating "weak" at the end of each clause—creates emphasis and reinforces the central message that Trump lacks the strength required for presidential leadership.

The tweet contains no overt sexist language. The pronoun "he" refers specifically to Trump, and there are no gendered affixes, titles, or derogatory gender-based terms. The critique focuses on Trump's actions and statements: seeking flattery from dictators, demeaning the military, and calling for termination of the Constitution.

In terms of covert sexism, the tweet raises more complex analytical questions. The repeated accusation of "weakness" engages with culturally embedded assumptions about leadership and gender. As Mills notes, covert sexism often operates through presupposed cultural values that link certain traits with gender. In Western political discourse, "strength" has historically been coded as masculine, while "weakness" has been coded as feminine. Leadership ideals have traditionally been constructed around masculine-coded traits such as aggression, dominance, emotional control, and physical and moral toughness.

By labeling Trump "weak," Harris draws on this cultural framework, implicitly invoking the association between leadership legitimacy and masculine-coded strength. However, the direction of this gendered implication is complex. Harris, as a female politician, is accusing a male opponent of weakness, thereby inverting the traditional gender hierarchy in which women are positioned as weak and men as strong. This

inversion could be interpreted as subverting gendered expectations rather than reinforcing them.

Mills' framework recognizes that the same linguistic forms can function differently depending on who is speaking. A male politician calling a female opponent "weak" would likely activate different gendered meanings, potentially reinforcing stereotypes of female inadequacy. Harris's use of the term, while still drawing on masculine-coded leadership ideals, positions her as the judge of strength rather than its object. This rhetorical stance challenges the assumption that only men can legitimately evaluate and embody political strength.

Thus, while the tweet engages with gendered cultural assumptions, it simultaneously subverts those assumptions by placing a female speaker in the position of authoritative evaluator. This dual function—reproducing and challenging gender norms—is precisely the kind of complexity that Mills' framework is designed to illuminate.

4.3 Tweet 3: Accusation of Mental Instability

The third Harris tweet reads simply: "Trump is unhinged."

This brief but powerfully evaluative statement questions Trump's emotional stability and mental fitness for the presidency. The term "unhinged" is a strong, informal adjective that suggests loss of control, irrationality, and instability—qualities that are fundamentally incompatible with the responsibilities of presidential leadership.

The tweet contains no overt sexist language. It is a direct assertion about Trump's psychological state, with no gendered markers or references.

In terms of covert sexism, the tweet again raises complex questions about gender and interpretation. Emotional instability has historically been coded as feminine in Western cultural discourse, with women stereotyped as more emotional, irrational, and prone to loss of control than men. Men, by contrast, have been stereotyped as rational, controlled, and emotionally stable—qualities traditionally associated with fitness for leadership.

By applying a term connoting emotional instability to a male political figure, Harris again inverts traditional gender expectations. She positions herself, a female speaker, as the judge of male emotional fitness, challenging the assumption that emotional evaluation is a feminine domain. Moreover, her own rhetorical performance in this tweet is assertive, direct, and unapologetic—qualities that contradict stereotypes of female communicative style as hesitant, indirect, or emotionally expressive.

Mills would recognize this as a challenge to covert sexism. By adopting a rhetorical stance traditionally reserved for male political actors—the authoritative evaluator of opponent fitness—Harris disrupts the gendered expectations that have historically constrained women's political speech. Her tweet simultaneously draws on cultural associations between leadership and rationality while positioning a woman as the arbiter of that rationality.

4.4 Tweet 4: Economic Expertise and Authority

The fourth Harris tweet reads: "Experts agree: My economic plan will strengthen America's economy. Trump's will hurt it."

This tweet presents a direct comparison between the economic policies of the two candidates, claiming that independent expert opinion supports Harris's approach while opposing

Trump's. The reference to "experts" invokes external authority and evidence-based reasoning, positioning Harris as a rational, informed, and credible leader.

The tweet contains no overt sexist language. It is a straightforward policy comparison with no gendered markers.

In terms of covert sexism, this tweet is notable for its adoption of rhetorical strategies historically coded as masculine in political communication. Assertiveness, appeals to expert authority, confident declarative statements, and focus on substantive policy issues have traditionally been associated with male political speech. Female politicians have often been pressured to adopt more tentative, relational, or emotionally expressive styles, and have faced criticism when they depart from these expectations.

Harris's tweet makes no concessions to gendered expectations of feminine speech. She presents herself as an authoritative policy expert, claims the backing of objective expertise, and dismisses her opponent's approach without qualification. This rhetorical stance challenges the covert sexist assumption that women's political speech should be different from men's—more collaborative, less confrontational, more focused on process than outcomes.

Mills' framework recognizes such rhetorical choices as disruptions of covert sexism. By participating fully in the masculine-coded discourse of political authority, Harris implicitly rejects the notion that women must communicate differently to be acceptable in public life. Her tweet thus functions both as substantive political communication and as a symbolic challenge to gendered expectations about who can speak with authority.

5. ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP'S TWEETS

5.1 Tweet 5: Aggressive Motivational Rhetoric

The first Trump tweet analyzed reads: "When they knock us down, WE GET BACK UP AND WE FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT! #MAGA"

This tweet employs capital letters, repetition, and exclamation to create a tone of urgency, defiance, and motivational intensity. The message is framed as a collective call to action, with the inclusive "we" and "us" constructing a unified political community. The repetition of "FIGHT" with increasing intensity serves as a rhetorical device to energize and mobilize supporters, especially in the context of political struggle and perceived persecution.

The tweet contains no overt sexist language. It uses inclusive pronouns and avoids any explicit references to gender.

However, applying Mills' framework reveals important dimensions of covert sexism in this apparently gender-neutral text. The language of resilience, aggression, and combat—amplified by the emphatic repetition of "FIGHT"—draws on traditionally masculine-coded values and rhetorical styles. Toughness, dominance, confrontation, and the willingness to engage in struggle have historically been associated with masculinity in Western culture, while feminine-coded leadership styles have emphasized collaboration, consensus, and emotional sensitivity.

As Mills argues, covert sexism often operates through the normalization of masculine-coded discourse as the default or unmarked mode of political communication. When male

politicians adopt aggressive, confrontational rhetorical styles, they are perceived as appropriately strong and decisive. When female politicians adopt identical styles, they are often criticized as strident, emotional, or unfeminine. This asymmetry reflects underlying gendered assumptions about appropriate behavior and communication.

Trump's tweet participates in this masculine-coded rhetorical tradition, reinforcing the association between political leadership and masculine-coded traits. While the language itself is not sexist, its alignment with gendered norms of political communication contributes to a discursive environment in which masculine styles are privileged and feminine alternatives are marginalized. This is precisely the kind of subtle, structural sexism that Mills' concept of covert sexism is designed to capture.

5.2 Tweet 6: Blaming the Female Candidate for National Decline

The sixth tweet reads: "Kamala broke it. I WILL FIX IT! Inflation will END. The border will be SAFE & SECURE. PEACE across the globe. VOTE TRUMP! #BringBackTrump"

This tweet presents a stark contrast between the two candidates, attributing national decline directly to Harris while promising that Trump will restore strength, prosperity, and security. The structure "X broke it / I will fix it" creates a binary opposition in which the female leader is positioned as the source of disorder and the male leader as the agent of restoration.

While the tweet contains no overtly sexist vocabulary, Mills' framework reveals multiple dimensions of covert sexism operating through presupposition, contrastive framing, and gendered cultural assumptions. By stating that "Kamala broke it," Trump presupposes that Harris bears primary responsibility for national problems—a claim that is asserted without evidence or argumentation. This attribution of blame to a female political figure resonates with deep cultural narratives about women's unfitness for leadership and their tendency to create disorder when placed in positions of authority.

The contrastive structure then positions Trump as the masculine corrective force who will "FIX IT," restoring order, security, and prosperity. This binary—female chaos versus male order, female failure versus male success, female weakness versus male strength—draws on traditional gendered power structures in which men are constructed as natural leaders and protectors while women are positioned as dependent and in need of male guidance and control.

Mills identifies such contrastive framing as a mechanism of covert sexism. The discriminatory implication is not explicitly stated—Trump does not say that women are unfit to lead—but it is embedded in the rhetorical structure and activated by cultural assumptions that audiences bring to the text. The message communicates gendered meanings while maintaining plausible deniability, allowing the speaker to deny any sexist intent.

The tweet's emphatic promises about ending inflation, securing the border, and achieving global peace further reinforce the image of Trump as a powerful, decisive, authoritative leader—qualities traditionally coded as

masculine in political discourse. The cumulative effect is a rhetorical construction that subtly but persistently undermines Harris's legitimacy as a leader while reinforcing masculine ideals of political authority.

5.3 Tweet 7: Framing Female Leadership as Dangerous

The seventh Trump tweet states: "The Arabs and Muslims in Michigan know that Kamala and her warmongering Cabinet will invade the Middle East, kill millions of Muslims, and start World War III! Vote Trump, and bring back peace!"

This tweet makes extreme claims about the foreign policy consequences of a Harris presidency, asserting that she and her cabinet will initiate military invasions, cause mass casualties, and trigger global war. The message is framed as reflecting the knowledge of Arab and Muslim voters in Michigan, a key electoral demographic.

The tweet contains no overtly sexist language. However, Mills' framework reveals sophisticated covert sexist strategies operating through multiple mechanisms. The characterization of Harris and her cabinet as "warmongering" invokes stereotypes of women in power as irrational, aggressive, and dangerously emotional—the mirror image of the feminine stereotype that expects women to be peaceful and nurturing. When women deviate from expected feminine behavior by appearing strong or assertive, they are often caricatured as excessively aggressive or unstable.

By presenting these claims as the knowledge of Arab and Muslim voters, Trump employs a rhetorical strategy of projection, attributing potentially sexist content to a third party while maintaining deniability. This allows him to communicate damaging implications about Harris's fitness for leadership while distancing himself from direct responsibility for those implications—a classic covert sexist strategy identified by Mills.

The contrast between Harris as "warmongering" and Trump as the bringer of "peace" again constructs a gendered binary in which female leadership is associated with chaos and destruction while male leadership is associated with order and safety. This binary draws on deep cultural narratives about men as protectors and women as needing protection, narratives that have historically been used to justify women's exclusion from positions of political authority.

The tweet's extreme claims about invading the Middle East and killing millions of Muslims also function to position Harris outside the bounds of acceptable, responsible leadership, portraying her as dangerously extreme and unstable. This characterization, when directed at a female candidate, resonates with stereotypes of women in power as emotionally volatile and prone to irrational decisions.

5.4 Tweet 8: Personal Attack Based on Appearance and Emotional State

The eighth and final Trump tweet reads: "Just watched Kamala's Fake News Conference - ALL LIES! She is desperate but, more importantly, she looks totally EXHAUSTED! She should rest now, and leave the Campaigning to me!"

This tweet represents the most direct personal attack on Harris among the analyzed texts, combining substantive criticism of her press conference with commentary on her physical appearance and emotional state. The tweet labels her conference as "Fake News" and her statements as "ALL LIES,"

then shifts to personal commentary, describing her as "desperate" and "totally EXHAUSTED," and concluding with the suggestion that she should stop campaigning and rest while leaving the work to Trump.

Mills' framework identifies this tweet as a clear example of covert sexism operating through multiple mechanisms. The commentary on Harris's appearance and emotional state draws on long-standing stereotypes of women as physically and emotionally fragile, less capable than men of withstanding the demands of public life. By suggesting that she looks "EXHAUSTED" and should "rest," Trump implies that Harris lacks the stamina, resilience, and physical capacity required for the presidency—a criticism that is almost never directed at male candidates, regardless of their age or health status.

The focus on appearance shifts attention from Harris's substantive political communication to her physical presentation, reducing her from a political actor to a visual object to be evaluated. This strategy, identified by feminist scholars as a common mechanism of delegitimizing women in public life, functions to undermine her authority without directly addressing her arguments or policy positions.

The concluding line, "leave the Campaigning to me," establishes a clear hierarchical relationship in which Trump positions himself as the capable, dominant political actor and Harris as the overreaching, failing woman who should step aside. This framing reinforces traditional gender roles in which men are active agents in the public sphere while women are relegated to private, domestic roles.

Mills would identify this tweet as employing what she terms "belittlement" strategies—subtle forms of diminishment that strip women of authority and credibility without resorting to overtly sexist language. The combination of appearance commentary, attribution of emotional desperation, and the suggestion that she should withdraw from the contest works cumulatively to undermine Harris's legitimacy as a candidate while maintaining Trump's ability to deny sexist intent.

6. COMPARATIVE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

The analysis of eight tweets from Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, conducted through the lens of Sara Mills' (2008) model of sexism in language, yields several significant findings about the operation of gender in contemporary American political discourse.

First, neither candidate employs overt sexist language in their tweets. There are no instances of generic masculine pronouns used to erase women, no gendered affixes that diminish female-coded terms, no unequal titles that mark women differently from men, and no explicitly derogatory gender-based vocabulary. This finding reflects the broader social shift in which overt, explicit sexism has become unacceptable in mainstream political discourse, at least in the forms that can be easily identified and criticized.

Second, despite the absence of overt sexism, the two candidates engage with gendered power structures in fundamentally different ways. Kamala Harris's rhetorical strategy systematically avoids both overt and covert sexist formulations. She adopts an assertive, evidence-based, professionally authoritative voice that draws on rhetorical

traditions historically coded as masculine in political communication. By employing direct critiques of her opponent's policy record, referencing expert testimony, maintaining focus on substantive issues, and positioning herself as an authoritative evaluator of leadership fitness, Harris challenges conventional gender expectations and subverts the covert sexist norms that have traditionally constrained female politicians' communicative options. Her language simultaneously reproduces masculine-coded rhetorical forms while resisting the gendered limitations those forms have historically imposed.

Third, Donald Trump's tweets, by contrast, operate consistently through mechanisms of covert sexism as defined by Mills' framework. Across the four analyzed tweets, Trump employs contrastive framing that positions female leadership as chaotic, weak, and dangerous while presenting male leadership as strong, restorative, and peaceful. He uses presuppositions that embed assumptions about gender and competence without stating them explicitly. His rhetorical tone belittles and diminishes Harris through focus on her appearance and emotional state. He appeals to culturally embedded masculine ideals of strength, dominance, and emotional control, reinforcing the association between political legitimacy and masculine-coded traits.

Fourth, the analysis reveals that sexism in contemporary political discourse operates primarily through interpretation, reception, and the activation of culturally embedded gender norms, rather than through explicit linguistic markers. The same rhetorical strategies—assertiveness, direct critique, confident self-presentation—can function differently depending on the gender of the speaker and the gendered expectations audiences bring to the text. This finding underscores the importance of Mills' emphasis on the interpretive dimensions of sexism and the need to attend to context, speaker identity, and cultural assumptions in analyzing gendered discourse.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for understanding the relationship between language, gender, and political power. They confirm the continued relevance of Mills' distinction between overt and covert sexism as an analytical framework, while also revealing the complexity of how these forms of sexism operate in contemporary digital political communication.

The analysis demonstrates that covert sexism is not merely a residual category for sexist meanings that cannot be expressed overtly, but a sophisticated and systematic mode of discourse with its own characteristic strategies and mechanisms. Trump's tweets reveal a coherent repertoire of covert sexist techniques, including contrastive framing, presupposition, belittlement, projection, and the strategic deployment of culturally embedded gender stereotypes. These techniques work together to construct a discursive environment in which female political authority is persistently undermined and masculine leadership norms are reinforced.

The study also illuminates the asymmetric nature of gendered political communication. The same linguistic forms can have different meanings and effects depending on who is speaking. Harris's adoption of assertive, authoritative rhetoric challenges gender norms and expands the possibilities for female political

speech, while Trump's adoption of identical rhetorical forms reinforces existing gendered expectations. This asymmetry reflects the deeper structure of gendered power relations in which masculine-coded behavior is valued and rewarded when performed by men but may be penalized when performed by women.

6.3 Implications for Understanding Political Communication

The findings have important implications for how political communication is analyzed and understood. They suggest that a focus on explicit, overt forms of discrimination may miss the most significant ways in which gender operates in contemporary politics. Covert sexism, precisely because it is subtle and deniable, may be more pervasive and more difficult to challenge than overt forms, while nonetheless maintaining its power to shape perceptions of political actors and their fitness for leadership.

The analysis also highlights the importance of attending to multiple levels of discourse in political communication. Understanding how gender operates in political texts requires attention not only to what is explicitly stated but also to what is presupposed, what is implied, what is framed, and what cultural assumptions are activated. It requires attention to the interaction between textual features and the broader discursive context in which texts are produced and interpreted.

For political candidates and their communication strategists, the findings suggest that awareness of covert sexist mechanisms is essential for both constructing effective messages and responding to opponents' attacks. Female candidates may need to navigate a complex discursive environment in which the same rhetorical strategies that are celebrated in male opponents may be used to undermine their own legitimacy. Understanding how covert sexism operates can help candidates and their teams identify and counter these strategies when they appear.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The analysis is based on a relatively small sample of tweets, selected purposively rather than randomly. While this approach allows for detailed qualitative analysis, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size and employ quantitative methods to assess the prevalence of different discursive strategies across larger bodies of text.

The study focuses exclusively on tweets, which represent only one genre of political communication among many. Future research could examine how the patterns identified here manifest in other genres, such as speeches, debates, interviews, and advertisements, and whether the dynamics of gendered discourse differ across these contexts.

The analysis is limited to the 2024 U.S. presidential election, a specific political context with its own unique characteristics. Comparative research examining similar dynamics in other electoral contexts, in other countries, and across different political systems would help establish the generalizability of these findings and identify context-specific variations.

Finally, this study focuses on discourse production—the texts produced by candidates—rather than on discourse reception—how audiences interpret these texts. Future research

employing experimental methods, focus groups, or reception studies could provide valuable insights into how different audiences perceive and interpret the gendered dimensions of political communication, and how these perceptions shape political attitudes and voting behavior.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a comprehensive critical analysis of the linguistic strategies employed by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in their official communications during the 2024 United States presidential election, focusing specifically on the manifestation of sexism and gendered discourse through the lens of Sara Mills' (2008) theoretical framework. The analysis has revealed a complex and nuanced picture of how gender operates in contemporary American political discourse, demonstrating that while overt, explicit sexism has largely disappeared from mainstream political communication, covert, indirect forms of gender bias remain pervasive and powerful.

The findings demonstrate that the absence of overtly sexist language does not indicate the absence of sexist discourse. Rather, sexism has migrated to more subtle forms of expression that operate through rhetorical framing, presupposition, tone, and the activation of culturally embedded assumptions about gender and leadership. These covert forms of sexism are more difficult to identify and challenge than overt expressions, yet they maintain their power to shape perceptions of political actors and to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies.

Kamala Harris's rhetorical strategy emerged as a challenge to covert sexist norms. By adopting an assertive, authoritative, evidence-based communicative style, and by positioning herself as a confident evaluator of political fitness, Harris subverted traditional gendered expectations about how women should speak and behave in public life. Her language simultaneously drew on masculine-coded rhetorical traditions while resisting the limitations those traditions have historically imposed on women.

Donald Trump's rhetorical strategy, by contrast, consistently deployed covert sexist mechanisms to undermine Harris's legitimacy as a candidate. Through contrastive framing that positioned female leadership as chaotic and male leadership as restorative, through presuppositions that embedded assumptions about gender and competence, through belittling focus on appearance and emotional state, and through appeals to masculine ideals of strength and dominance, Trump's tweets constructed a discursive environment in which Harris's authority was persistently questioned and traditional gender hierarchies were reinforced.

The study has demonstrated the enduring relevance of Mills' analytical framework for understanding the complex relationship between language, gender, and power in contemporary political communication. It has shown that sexism is not simply a matter of isolated linguistic forms but a dynamic process involving speaker intention, textual structure, audience interpretation, and broader cultural context. It has revealed that the same linguistic strategies can function differently depending on who is speaking and who is listening, reflecting the asymmetric structure of gendered power relations. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of how political figures both

reproduce and resist gendered discourse norms, and how the interpretation of political language is filtered through the lens of societal gender expectations. It uncovers the underlying discursive mechanisms that maintain or challenge gender inequality in political communication, even in the absence of explicit sexist vocabulary, and demonstrates the enduring power of covert sexist strategies in shaping perceptions of political leadership and legitimacy. As women continue to seek and attain positions of political power, understanding these discursive dynamics becomes ever more essential for scholars, practitioners, and citizens committed to achieving genuine gender equality in public life.

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