# An Unrepresentative Democracy _

How Disinformation and Online Abuse Hinder Women of Color Political Candidates in the United States

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Part I - The Scale of Disinformation and Online Abuse Targeted at Women of Color Political Candidates: Content Analysis Using Data from Twitter

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Part II - The Impacts of Disinformation and Online Abuse on Women of Color Political Candidates

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Executive Summary

In a press interview, former Vermont state house representative Kiah Morris said she reported at least 26 incidents to the local police where she and her family felt threatened between 2016 and 2018 (Norwood et al., 2021). The severity of the targeted abuse both on and offline ultimately led Rep. Morris to a premature resignation three months before the end of her second term in office in 2018. In the same story, U.S. Rep. Nikema Williams expressed the view that the onslaught of mis- and disinformation and abuse seemed to be to designed to intimidate women of color out of government: "Early on, when we were getting the list of credible threats coming in for members of Congress, they were centered around members of color and there are only 25 black women that serve in the United States…there's not that many of us… which I think is part of the whole thing of people trying to scare people [black women] into silence" (Norwood et al., 2021).

As more women[1] have sought political representation by running for elected office, we have seen demonstrated increases in online harassment and abuse, including targeted mis- and disinformation campaigns. Civil society and human rights groups have been at the forefront of documenting and characterizing these forms of "gendered disinformation" and online gender-based violence (GBV) (Brechenmacher & Di Meco, 2020; Jankowicz et al., 2021; Ultraviolet, 2020; Wilfore, 2022). Researchers argue that these attacks are attempts to limit women's ability to participate in electoral politics and suppress their voices in a variety of settings (Di Meco, 2019a; Jankowicz et al., 2021; Judson et al., 2020; Sessa, 2020).

While women in general may be subject to significant mis- and disinformation and abuse online, an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1990), which recognizes that women of color have to contend with multiple sources of oppression at the same time and that this impact is unique, can better illuminate the additional challenges faced by women of color in general (Asian American Disinformation Table, 2022; Disinfo Defense League, 2022), and women of color political candidates specifically (Guerin & Maharasingam-Shah, 2020; Thakur & Hankerson, 2021; Ultraviolet, 2020). By not sufficiently examining the intersectionality of women of color's experiences, we may miss the point of some mis- and disinformation campaigns, which are intentionally designed to exploit existing forms of discrimination by targeting people based on both race and gender identity (Thakur & Hankerson, 2021).

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1 In this report we focus on people who identified as women. We do not address the experiences of people who identify as non-binary, although those are also important.

In this report, we use the phrase "mis- and disinformation" to encompass three categories of information that researchers have developed: false information shared without the intent to cause harm (misinformation); false information shared with the intent to cause harm, often for some political, social, or other goal (disinformation); and accurate information shared in a misleading context (malinformation) (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). As we do not attempt to determine the intent of the person sharing information online in this research, we decided to use the phrase "mis- and disinformation" to refer to both categories of false information regardless of intent.

We also examine online abuse in this report. More specifically, in our study, we examined 15 types of abusive content (see Appendix C) including categories such as sexism or misogyny, doxing, threats of violence, racism, the use of offensive language, and attempts at demeaning the person. A subset of these categories constitutes a form of abuse that is referred to as online gender-based violence (GBV)—harmful acts directed at an individual because of their gender (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). GBV results from differences in access to power between people with different gender identities (Bloom, 2008). Given the societal roles and powers ascribed to men in many societies, most experiences of GBV around the world are directed against women and girls (United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2005).

As Sinders (2022) argued, the harms that stem from mis- and disinformation and online GBV are similar and include perpetuating bias and falsehoods, psychological abuse, and real world impacts. However, she also notes that, with a few exceptions (see for example Di Meco, 2019a; Jankowicz et al., 2021) many researchers and most policymakers and social media platforms overlook these similarities, in particular the coordination around the creation and distribution of harmful content.

Previous work at CDT examined the problem of election related mis- and disinformation (see Adler & Thakur, 2021; Llansó & Horton, 2020). Building on this research and, after consultations with partners (see for example Thakur & Magby, 2020) and assessing scholarship on the problems of race, gender, and mis- and disinformation (Thakur & Hankerson, 2021), we identified two key research questions (Hankerson & Thakur, 2021):

- Are women of color political candidates more likely to be subject to mis- and disinformation and online abuse compared to other types of candidates?

- What are the impacts of mis- and disinformation and online abuse of women of color political candidates?

We focus on both mis- and disinformation and online abuse because they are part of the larger problem of violence against women in politics and both are often aimed at undermining the political efficacy of women in public spaces (Krook, 2018).

These questions are particularly important given that women of color face significant barriers of entry into representative politics (only 10% of candidates that ran for Congress in 2020) (Reflective Democracy Campaign, 2020). Some researchers suggest that what the candidates face online, including online abuse, could contribute to this (Norwood et al., 2021). A lack of representation of a significant part of our population among our elected officials is extremely problematic for our democracy.

This research began in late 2021 and, given the scale of the work, took place over several months. Our focus was on the 2020 Congressional elections in the U.S. We chose not to examine state and local elections to maintain a feasible project and so only make inferences from our findings based on candidates in Congressional elections. We also note that campaigns during the 2020 elections took place during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020) and relied heavily on these social media platforms to operate.

We present our research results in two parts. In Part I, we conducted a content analysis of over 100,000 posts on Twitter during the 2020 election that were targeted at or were about a random selection of candidates that ran for Congress. Our objective was to compare the levels of mis- and disinformation and abuse targeted at or about different groups of candidates.

We found that during the 2020 U.S. Congressional election:

1. Women of color candidates were twice as likely as other candidates to be targeted with or the subject of mis- and disinformation.

2. Although women of color candidates are not the most likely target of online abuse overall—white men are—they are the most likely to be the target of particular forms of online abuse, including sexist abuse (as compared to white women), racist abuse (as compared to men of color), and violent abuse (four times more than white candidates and two times more than men of color.)

3. Women of color candidates were the most likely to be targeted with or the subject of posts that combined mis- and disinformation and abuse.

4. Women of color candidates were at least five times more likely than other candidates to be targeted with tweets related to their identity that focused specifically on their gender and race.

5. Women of color candidates were less likely to be the subject of tweets that were positive compared to white women candidates, but more likely to be the subject of positive tweets compared to white men candidates.

Of note throughout all our findings is the specific targeting of women of African descent or African American women. This group of candidates was subject to the highest levels of mis- and disinformation, certain forms of abuse, and tweets with both mis- and disinformation and abuse compared to other women of color and most other candidates. Indeed, they were also more likely to receive tweets where the main focus was their gender and racial identities.

In Part II, we conducted a series of interviews with women of color candidates that ran for Congress in 2020 and their teams. These interviews were conducted on the basis of informed consent and anonymity. In all, we interviewed 13 women candidates and 7 staffers (from a total of 14 different campaigns). From the interviewees we learned that:

In their view, the aim of the people behind the mis- and disinformation and abusive attacks was to destroy the candidates' resolve. They believed the purpose of the attacks was to get them to internalize the abuse directed toward them, to accept the oppression they face as women of color, and to drop out of politics.

The mis- and disinformation and abuse they encountered was not only about challenging their electoral prospects by damaging their reputations with voters, but also about attacking them based on their identity as women of color.

Identity-based online GBV targeted at women of color candidates focused on the transgressiveness of running for office (i.e. a woman seeking power, as someone presumed unworthy or unsuited for power or authority).

In many cases the attacks were focused on the fact that the candidates identified as women, and were often intensified by referring to the candidates' other identities or attributes, such as their race, age, marital and parental status.

While many of the attacks interviewees described were severe, we also learned about the degree of resolve and coping that the participants displayed as they encountered these attacks. Together with their campaign teams and a broader community of support, some candidates employed several resilience and coping strategies and, in most cases, they continued their campaigns through the election. Many remain in representative politics.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we make the following recommendations for social media platforms, other political candidates (particularly women of color), their parties, and researchers working in the field.

To combat abuse and mis- and disinformation targeted at women of color political candidates, social media companies should:

- Clearly articulate policies that prohibit content that harasses or abuses someone on the basis of gender or race.

- Offer training for political campaigns on how to use their platforms and specifically on tools that are available to users to address online abuse and mis- and disinformation.

- Publicly provide information about how they consider gender and race in their policies and enforcement processes against mis- and disinformation and abuse.

- Provide publicly available transparency reports around election mis- and disinformation and abuse before, during, and after an election.

- Make data available to independent researchers that enables them to study the impact of mis- and disinformation and online abuse, including GBV, on political candidates.

- Take additional steps to protect and prevent abuse and mis- and disinformation from reaching women of color candidates. They should:

  ◦ Conduct risk assessments of their ranking and recommendation systems to evaluate their impact on women of color candidates and what abuse mitigation measures the service provider can implement.

  ◦ Offer tools that allow users to report content that violates the companies' policies against abuse or mis- and disinformation and to control who can interact with their accounts.

  ◦ Invest additional resources into enforcement of content policies prohibiting abuse and mis- and disinformation in the run up to and after elections, including a necessary increase in responding to appeals.

  ◦ Ensure that content moderation systems, including human moderators and algorithmic systems, are attuned to the needs of and the threats faced by women of color political candidates, in particular.

  ◦ Understand that not all candidates require the same type or degree of support from a social media service provider to address these problems.

- Scrutinize the role of political advertising in spreading mis- and disinformation and abuse on their services.

Campaigns, political organizations, and other initiatives supporting candidates should:

- Offer free or low-cost campaign training designed to prepare women of color candidates for the social media landscape.

- Create additional toolkits to inform candidates of digital security best practices. Existing toolkits should be better promoted to address the needs of women of color candidates.

Researchers should:

- Pursue research analyzing the problem of online abuse and mis- and disinformation with an intersectional lens; we hope that this report can serve as a point of reference for future research.

- Repeat this or a similar study for the 2022 U.S. elections and use a longer period (i.e., more than two months) for data collection from Twitter.

- Expand research to other platforms, especially Facebook.

- Focus on abuse or mis- and disinformation from political candidates targeting women of color candidates.

- Examine posts where women of color candidates are not explicitly tagged or named but still referred to in other ways (e.g., by another name).

Part I

The Scale of Disinformation and Online Abuse Targeted at Women of Color Political Candidates: Content Analysis Using Data from Twitter

Dhanaraj Thakur, Michal Luria, DeVan L. Hankerson, and Saiph Savage

Content advisory: This report includes examples of racist, sexist, threatening, and other abusive language and imagery.

Introduction

Mis- and disinformation targeted at women politicians can sometimes be predicated on misogynistic views of women which seek to replicate those views through false information (Di Meco, 2019a; Jankowicz et al., 2021). In many ways, this overlaps with online abuse that women politicians face including online gender-based violence (GBV) or harmful acts directed at an individual because of their gender (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Online GBV and disinformation against women in politics have similar aims—to challenge, control, and attack their presence in spaces of public authority.

While researchers have examined these problems with regard to women generally, few have taken an intersectional approach to mis- and disinformation and online abuse (Thakur & Hankerson, 2021). That is, individuals traverse multiple identities all the time, and mis- and disinformation and abuse may not just operate across gender but across other identities such as race. Recognizing the reality of intersectional identities, researchers can better understand both how a person may have to contend with multiple sources of oppression at the same time, and the unique impact from this multifaceted oppression (Crenshaw, 1990).

Fortunately, some researchers have examined the ways identities, based on gender, race, etc., mediate the impacts of mis- and disinformation and abuse online (Gray & Adeyemo, 2021; Reddi et al., 2021; Ultraviolet, 2020). However, few have determined whether identities such as race and gender mean that some groups (e.g., women of color political candidates) are more likely to be impacted by mis- and disinformation and abuse than others. Some studies have suggested that this is the case (e.g., Guerin & Maharasingam-Shah, 2020) but they typically only study a few candidates which, in the case of the U.S., often includes the "Squad" (e.g., Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib among others).

In the first part of our report, we consider a more comprehensive set of political candidates. We take a random sample of the over 1100 candidates that ran for Congress in 2020 U.S. elections and examine tweets that mention them or include replies or quotes to things they said on Twitter. More specifically, we conduct a content analysis of tweets during the 2020 election period (between October and November 2020).

We ask: Are women of color political candidates more likely to face mis- and disinformation and abuse than other groups of candidates? Our research presents the first set of findings (that we are aware of) that address this question. We believe this is particularly important given that women of color are very much underrepresented in politics. They only made up about 10% of candidates that ran for Congress in 2020 (Reflective Democracy Campaign, 2020), although they make up 20% of the population (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Further, they already face significant barriers of entry into representative politics (Norwood et al., 2021). A lack of representation of a significant part of our population is extremely problematic for our democracy.

In this part of our report, the main questions we investigate are:

- Are women of color political candidates more likely than other candidates to experience mis- and disinformation about them on Twitter, and to what extent?

- Are women of color political candidates more likely than other candidates to experience abuse on Twitter, and to what extent?

- Are women of color political candidates more likely than other candidates to experience both mis- and disinformation about them and abuse on Twitter, and to what extent?

The results, which we explain in detail below, show that women of color political candidates are in fact subject to higher levels of mis- and disinformation (and mis/disinformation and abuse) compared to all other groups of candidates. While they do not face the highest average levels of abuse compared to other candidates, the abuse they are subject to is more violent and racist than what other groups face. Our findings indicate that under-represented groups already faced with many societal and physical barriers are subject to the manifestation of those same barriers online—perhaps to an even greater degree. That points to serious challenges for our democracy and information ecosystem.

Methods and Approach

Sample and Data Sources

Our objective was to develop a comprehensive understanding of mis- and disinformation and abuse targeted at or about women of color candidates in the 2020 election. We compared data sources and decided that Twitter (via its API for Academic Research) offered the best (but not complete) data about posts targeted at or about individual candidates during that period. While our focus was on women of color candidates, we also wanted to be able to make comparisons with other groups of candidates. To do this, we developed a representative sample of candidates that ran in 2020, using a stratified random sampling approach with strata based on gender, race, and party affiliation.

The first step in developing this sample was identifying all candidates that ran for Congress in 2020; we used data from Reflective Democracy (2020) which identified 1,149 Congressional candidates who ran on November 3rd, 2020. This dataset included U.S. Senate and House candidates by race and gender. We also cross-referenced race data for candidates of color found on the Reflective Democracy database with data from the Center for American Women and Politics (Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), 2020) to verify which candidates were women of color.

Identifying Candidate Twitter handles

Next, we needed to identify the Twitter handles of all these candidates. We used Ballotpedia, a digital encyclopedia of American politics and elections to search for the accounts of the candidates who ran in November 2020. This method typically provided us with links directly to campaign Twitter accounts or to a campaign website. If a direct link to Twitter was not available on a Ballotpedia profile, the candidate's campaign website was the second option for sourcing a Twitter handle that represented them. In cases where neither the Ballotpedia profile nor the current iteration of a campaign website included a link to a Twitter handle for the candidate, we turned to other sources, specifically ProPublica (ProPublica, 2019) and the UCSD database of Congressional Twitter Accounts (University of California San Diego, 2022).

In cases when we were unable to locate either a website URL or a social media handle, we used Twitter to search for candidates by name, checking thoroughly to be sure the account represented only the candidate and no one else. Finally, where no information was available, we checked the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (The Internet Archive, 2022) to account for potentially deleted accounts or for social media information likely removed from a campaign website.

In every case, after identifying a Twitter handle, we checked its creation date and disregarded any accounts created after the election period. In instances when a single candidate had multiple accounts created prior to the election, we made a decision to use the account with the highest follower count. In cases where a social media handle was no longer active (having been deleted or suspended), we relied upon the Wayback Machine tool to collect account creation details to ensure that selected Twitter handles fell within the relevant timeframe. Of the approximately 1,149 candidates that ran, we identified Twitter handles for 958, or 83%, of the candidates. Of these, 5.1% or 49 accounts were deleted. We decided to keep deleted accounts in the sample as they still represented a historical record of potential mis- and disinformation and abuse targeted at or about candidates during the election period.

With this population of 958 candidates, we then used a random stratified sampling approach to develop a representative sample based on: political party affiliation, gender, race, and whether they ran for the House or Senate. The final sample consisted of 292 candidates (see Table 1).

Using the Twitter Academic API, we identified all tweets related to candidates during the election period, specifically between October 1 and November 30, 2020. We wanted to include some part of the campaign period and also the post-election period when such tweets were still being posted. We only kept tweets targeted at or about candidates, or, more specifically, tweets that were mentions ("@"), replies to a candidates' tweets, or quoted replies of a candidate's tweet. Our focus was on what others said to or about the candidates and not what the candidates themselves posted. Therefore, we did not include tweets from the candidate or unedited retweets of candidate posts. From this set of tweets, we randomly selected up to 400 tweets per candidate for analysis in order to keep the manual content analysis exercise manageable.

The dataset does not include tweets deleted by posters or those removed by Twitter. Tweets that contained abuse or mis- and disinformation may have been more likely to be reported or removed as a violation of Twitter's guidelines than those that did not, which means the dataset may underestimate prevalence of abuse or mis- and disinformation. Apart from removed tweets, we also recognize the possibility that the data provided via Twitter's API may not include all tweets posted during the election period. Given these caveats, we believe that the results of this research are representative of the data that was available to us.

Data Set

In all, we constructed a data set of 103,952 tweets that included mentions, replies, or quoted responses to our set of 292 candidates. That's an average of 356 tweets per candidate. Table 1 presents a summary of the results by the different types of candidate categories we examined in our analysis (i.e., based on race and gender). We discuss the strengths, limitations and ethical considerations of using this data for answering our research questions in Appendix B: Content Analysis Methods. Please contact the Center for Democracy & Technology to request a copy of the data set (research@cdt.org).

In this study, we focus on women of color, which we acknowledge is quite a broad category. More specifically, we use the term to cover the groups listed in Table 1: Asian American or Pacific Islander, women of African descent or African American women,[2] Hispanic or Latinx, and Multiracial and women of a Middle-Eastern or North African (MENA) background.[3]

These categories are based on those provided in the Reflective Democracy (2020) dataset. Of the 38 women of color candidates in the sample, 31 were Democrats and 7 Republican.

Type of Candidate	Count of Candidates	Total tweets coded
Women of Color	38	14,264
Women of African descent or African-American women	20	7,472
Hispanic or Latinx	11	3,992
Asian American or Pacific Islander	4	1,600
Other Women of Color (Multiracial and MENA)	3	1,200
Men of Color	42	14,353
White Women	65	23,785
White Men	147	51,550
Grand Total	**292**	**103,952**

▲ **Table 1. Summary of total tweets coded by candidate type.**

Source - CDT

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2 Here we use the terms 'women of African descent' instead of the term 'Black women' as an all encompassing term to refer to people, especially women with geographical roots on the continent of Africa. The term 'Black' while commonly used and understood does not reflect a place of origin or a common historical linkage but instead is more a reflection of colonial practice, initiated in the late 1500s. These terms were used to create racist contrast especially to "whiteness," which at the time (as well as in the present day to some extent) was used to describe elite English women, because of the whiteness of their skin which indicated that they were upper class and therefore did not go outside to labor. (Smithsonian, National Museum of African American History & Culture, 2022). In 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted similar language recognizing 2015 to 2024 to be the International Decade of People of African Descent. (United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner, 2022). Understanding that these terms are deeply embedded into American culture and language does not negate the racist binary implied in their usage nor the ways they function to dehumanize, subordinate and obscure cultural ties.

3 We acknowledge that even the subgroups used here (e.g., Asian American or Pacific Islander) are still very broad and do not allow for more nuanced analysis. Additional research could build data sets with more granular categories of race.

Based on our analysis of this data, the results we describe in this report generally are statistically significant to at least the 95% level, although there are a few instances where we point out that this is not the case. See Appendix A for χ2 results among other analyses. We recognize that some candidates are more popular and therefore will attract more attention than others. While ideally it would be best to have data on and control for the number of impressions that each tweet created, we used the number of followers of each candidate as a proxy to measure their popularity and the potential exposure of each tweet. Using the Wayback Machine, we were able to identify follower counts as of specific dates in the past. Follower numbers are based on the 2020 election period, and are as close to Nov 1, 2020 as possible.

We controlled for the number of followers in the logistic regressions. This analysis showed that the results discussed in the main findings section are all still statistically significant (see Appendix A). As discussed earlier, the Twitter API may not include all tweets posted during the election period and the most egregious tweets may have been removed, therefore limiting our results.

Manual Content Analysis

In this project, we decided to take a manual approach to labeling tweets (hereafter referred to as "coding"). We chose manual coding because of the sensitivity of the topic and the nuance required to fully understand mis- and disinformation and abuse in its socio-political context. For example, in the context of abuse, automatic coding may indicate abusive language, but not who the language is directed to (is it towards the candidate, the opposing party's candidate, or someone else?). Or, automatic coding may detect slurs, but sometimes these are used in a positive context, for example inner-group reclaiming of slurs within marginalized communities (Thiago et al., 2021). Mis- and disinformation is even more difficult, if not impossible, to identify using natural language processing—it requires understanding context and distinguishing between an opinion and a stated fact as well as judging whether the stated fact is mis- and disinformation if it is false.

The scale and manual approach of this research required a large group of coders to go through the content (see more on the team of coders in section "Team of Coders" in Appendix B). As a result of this choice, creating a shared and consistent understanding of how to code Twitter content was one of the main challenges. We thus facilitated a week-long orientation for the coders who took part in the content analysis (a total of 10 coders), and supported their coding activity with an open channel for questions and weekly discussion meetings. More about the research methodology and our approach to form consistency between coders can be found in Appendix B ("Method").

We combined a top-down approach that relied on prior work of similar topics with a piloting and bottom-up testing period. In the initial definition of our codebook categories, we relied on prior research on the various topics that were a critical part of our study: content analyses and other forms of research about gender (Gordon et al., 2017; Heldman et al., 2018) and race stereotypes (Dovidio et al., 1986; Gaertner & McLaughlin, 1983; Tukachinsky et al., 2017); research on other identity stereotypes such as disability (Burns & Haller, 2015) and sexual orientation (Chung, 2007; Tagudina, 2012); research on candidate representation during elections (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021; Heldman et al., 2018; Oates et al., 2019); and research on abuse on social media (Gorrell et al., 2018; MacAvaney et al., 2019; Waseem et al., 2017) and mis- and disinformation about public figures and other topics on social media (Guerin & Maharasingam-Shah, 2020; Sessa, 2020; Stabile et al., 2019). We used a broad definition of abuse for this study to cover 15 different types of online abuse based on social media reporting categories and prior research (Guerin & Maharasingam-Shah, 2020; Waseem et al., 2017). These included the general use of offensive language, threats of violence, racism, missogyny, doxing, homophobia, religious slurs, and more. The complete list is in Appendix C.

We then identified the most critical coding categories to answer our research questions and made sure to avoid over-coding by focusing on these, especially given the resources needed for a large-scale manual content analysis. We tested these selected categories in an iterative piloting stage, in which the team of researchers coded a few hundred tweets at a time and reflected on each variable and how it informs or does not inform our research questions.

After several piloting iterations, we identified five categories in our codebook that would answer our research questions:

1. **Disinformation**, whether or not the tweet included some form of mis or disinformation, about the candidate or more broadly.

2. **Abuse**, whether it was present in the tweet towards a candidate or not, and what kinds of abuse were expressed in a tweet.

3. **Sentiment**, or what the stance of a tweet was towards a candidate (positive, negative, neutral).

4. **Narrative**, or what aspect of a candidate was the focus of discussion (policy, ideology, electability, character and identity).

5. **Identity**, if and which specific aspects of identity were mentioned in a tweet (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc).

To read more about each coding category and the rationale for including it in the codebook, please refer to Appendix C ("Codebook").

Main Findings

The three main research questions that we set out to explore in this study examine three types of harmful content that are targeted at or about political candidates: mis- and disinformation, abuse, and the combination of the two. Table 2 presents a summary of our findings regarding these three areas and Figure 1 presents a graphical summary of the data, highlighting differences between groups.

Regarding our three main research questions, the results show that women of color are more likely than all other groups to be subject to mis- and disinformation, less likely than white men to be subject to online abuse (although they are more likely to be subject to violent and misogynistic abuse which we discuss later in this section), and more likely than other groups to be subjected to tweets that combine mis- and disinformation and abuse.

The rest of this section explores these results in more detail along with additional analysis and examples of tweets. While this table alone raises many interesting points of discussion, the focus of this study is on women of color, and we attempt to center that group in the findings below. Where we do discuss other groups, it is in relation to women of color. Thus, we do not examine, for example, questions comparing white men and men of color, or white men and women, but those could be the basis for additional research.

1. Women of Color Candidates Were More Likely to Be the Target of Mis- and Disinformation Than Any Other Group

Our findings indicate that women of color candidates that ran in the 2020 U.S. elections were twice as likely to be targeted with or be the subject of mis- and disinformation compared to white men and women candidates (see Table 1). Approximately 6% of tweets targeted at or about women of color candidates contained mis- and disinformation compared to approximately 3% for white men and women candidates. Women of color were also subjected to more mis- and disinformation than men of color.

Women of Color (n=38)

- 6.0%
- 12.2%
- 3.3%

Men of Color (n=42)

- 3.9%
- 10.9%
- 2.2%

White Women (n=65)

- 2.8%
- 7.5%
- 1.6%

White Men (n=147)

- 3.3%
- 15.2%
- 1.6%

All candidates (n=292)

- 3.6%
- 12.6%
- 2.0%

0%   5%   10%   15%

Tweets by type of Candidate	Average % of tweets containing...		
	disinfo	abuse	abuse and disinfo
Women of Color (n=6,623)	6.0%	12.2%	3.3%
Men of Color (n=6,359)	3.9%	10.9%	2.2%
White Women (n=12,085)	2.8%	7.5%	1.6%
White Men (n=23,984)	3.3%	15.2%	1.6%
All candidates (n=49,052)	3.6%	12.6%	2.0%

- ■ Average % of tweets containing disinfo
- ■ Average % of tweets containing abuse
- ■ Average % of tweets containing abuse and disinfo

▲ Figure 1. Comparison of Different Candidate Groups by Type of Tweet. Comparison of results of the content analysis across the different categories of 292 candidates that ran for Congress in 2020. The percentages are based on tweets targeted at or about candidates that included each type of content and not all the tweets in the dataset.

Table 2. Summary results from the content analysis of tweets at or about 292 candidates that ran for Congress in 2020. The percentages are based on tweets targeted at or about candidates that included each type of content (n=49,052) and not all the tweets in the dataset. The results are grouped by all four categories of candidates that we focused on in this study (note that mixed raced candidates are subcategories of women or men of color).

Source - CDT

In our content analysis, we were concerned with tweets that were posted in response (replies or quotes) to something the candidates themselves tweeted, or that mentioned the candidate. Mis- and disinformation identified in these tweets falls into two broad categories: mis- and disinformation about the candidate and general mis- and disinformation that is not directly about the candidate. While mis- and disinformation about candidates was specific to them (see an example in Figure 2), general mis- and disinformation often focused on the election itself, including the false narrative that mail-in ballots are fraudulent (see an example in Figure 3). Based on this combined definition, women of color were more likely to be targeted by or be the subject of mis- and disinformation. We didn't find any major differences in types of mis- and disinformation or false narratives shared about women of color candidates compared to other candidates—the difference was the scale of the problem.

When we split the results for mis- and disinformation by sub-group of women of color (see Table 3), all groups were subject to more mis- and disinformation than white men and women (approx. 3%), and that women of African descent or African American women were the most targeted (7.5%). The content of mis- and disinformation targeted at these women were not particularly different from other women of color, but, here too, the scale of the problem was different.

▲ **Figure 2. Example of mis-or disinformation related to a candidate.** This attack takes a quote from the candidate out of context, using a very common tactic used to spread disinformation.
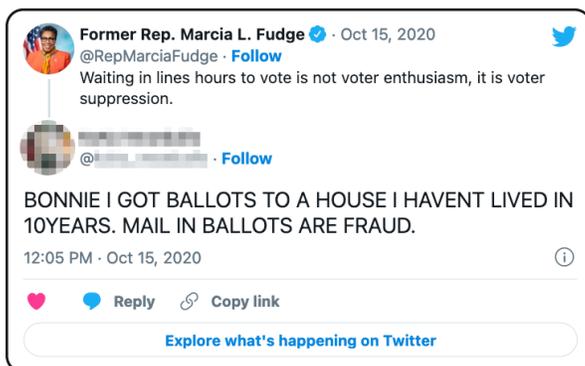
▲ **Figure 3. Example of general mis- or disinformation.**

Finally, these results differ based on political party affiliation in some ways. That is, women of color candidates who ran as Democrats (81% of all women of color in our sample) faced the highest level of tweets containing mis- and disinformation (6.4%) compared to other Democrats (men or women). Among Republicans, 3.6% of tweets for women of color contained mis- and disinformation compared to 4.3% for white women (the groups with the two highest percentages). In general, Democratic candidates regardless of race and gender were more likely to be targeted with mis- and disinformation (on average 4.1% of tweets) compared to their Republican counterparts (3.2%).

2. Women of color were on average subject to less abuse than white men candidates

Our study examined 15 types of abusive content (see Appendix C) including categories such as sexism or misogyny, threats of violence, racism, and offensive language and attempts at demeaning the person. When we reviewed the average percentage of tweets received across all types of abuse, we found that women of color candidates (12.2% of tweets) were subject to less abuse online than white men (15.2%). Our research showed that women of color did receive slightly more abuse than men of color (see Table 1) and more than white women (7.5%).

While abuse towards any candidate is bad, this finding about white men seems counterintuitive, given global research that suggests women in general are more likely to be abused online than men (Plan International, 2020). However, recent research in the U.S. suggests that men in the general population may in fact be more likely to report being harassed online than women (Vogels & Pew Research Center, 2021). In addition, the population that we were concerned with here (2020 political candidates) may differ meaningfully from the general population given their public profile as political candidates.

In addition, it is possible that women of color political candidates are also more likely to report abuse to Twitter or that the company's automated content detection systems are more likely to flag particularly violent or racist content for removal. This could be the case particularly if women of color political candidates are more likely to receive more violent and misogynistic tweets, which is in fact one of our findings below. Either way, deleted content would not be in our dataset.

To better understand this finding, we examine the results for different subgroups within women of color and for different types of abuse.

A. AMONG SUBGROUPS, LATINX WOMEN ARE SUBJECT TO MORE ABUSE THAN ANY OTHER GROUP

As with mis- and disinformation, we found differences in the rates at which the sub-groups of women of color receive abusive tweets. From Table 4 we see that Hispanic or Latinx women were targeted with the highest levels of abuse among women of color (16.3%). This level is also slightly higher than that received by white men (15.2%) but not statistically different.

This trend applies to both Democratic (15.4%) and Republican (16.5%) Hispanic or Latinx women. The relatively low level of abuse directed at Asian American or Pacific Islander women candidates is interesting given current levels of abuse targeted at this population in general (Asian American Disinformation Table, 2022). However, with only four Asian American or Pacific Islander (AAPI) women candidates in the sample (only 11 ran for Congress in 2020), it is difficult to make comparisons to the AAPI community more generally.

B. WOMEN OF COLOR CANDIDATES ARE SUBJECT TO MORE VIOLENT FORMS OF ABUSE THAN ANY OTHER GROUP

Table 5 provides a summary of the abuse targeted at particular groups of candidates broken out by abuse types (see Appendix C for results of all types of abuse).

From Table 5, we can see that women of color candidates are subject to much higher levels of sexism and misogyny, racism, and tweets promoting violence (or emphasizing violence) compared to other candidates. The latter included tweets that threaten or encourage others to harass or physically harm the candidate, see for example Figure 4. White men candidates (and men of color) on the other hand were subject to more tweets that contained generally offensive language. This refers to tweets containing cursing, rudeness, and other forms of offensive language directed towards the candidate (see for example Figure 5).

Type of Candidate	Average % of tweets containing disinfo
All women of color (n=38)	6.0%
Women of African descent or African American women (n=20)	7.5%
Hispanic or Latinx (n=11)	3.9%
Asian American or Pacific Islander (n=4)	4.6%
Other (Multiracial and MENA) (n=3)	5.8%

▲ Table 3. Average % of tweets with mis- and disinformation about or towards women of color candidates, by sub-group.

Source - CDT

Type of Candidate	Average % of tweets containing abuse
All women of color (n=38)	12.2%
Women of African descent or African American (n=20)	11.7%
Hispanic or Latinx (n=11)	16.3%
Asian American or Pacific Islander (n=4)	5.6%
Multiracial and MENA (n=3)	13.5%

▲ Table 4. Average % of abusive tweets targeted at women of color candidates, by sub-group.

Source - CDT

Proportion of Abusive Tweets that included...

Type of Candidate	Generally Offensive Language	Sexism/ Misogyny	Racism	Promotes or Incites Violence
Women of Color (n=38)	33.9%	29.7%	22.9%	4.7%
Men of Color (n=42)	43.2%	3.1%	20.8%	1.9%
White Women (n=65)	41.5%	21.5%	3.1%	0.6%
White Men (n=147)	44.5%	1.4%	1.0%	1.0%
All Candidates (n=292)	44.2%	9.9%	7.1%	1.5%

▲ **Table 5. Average % of abusive tweets received by type of candidate, and by abuse-type.**

Source - CDT

▲ **Figure 4. An example of a tweet threatening violence, targeted at an African American candidate.**

Women of color were more likely to be subject to misogynistic content and racist content than any other group. For our purposes, sexist or misogynistic content included content directed at women based on their gender, including content intended to shame, intimidate or degrade women (for example, see Figure 6). Asian American or Pacific Islander (33.4% of abusive tweets) and women of African descent or African American women (35.6% of abusive tweets) were subject to the highest percentage of abusive tweets with misogynistic content compared to other groups.

As noted earlier, the categories of misogyny and violence are aspects of online gender-based violence (GBV). Online GBV received by female politicians is predominantly directed against them as women rather than criticizing their political views or policies (Barker & Jurasz, 2019) and is aimed at undermining their political careers by controlling how the public views them. Also, researchers have argued that women candidates are subject to more violent forms of abuse than men (Bardall, 2013; Krook, 2018).

Another form of abuse that we coded for was racist content, which included content that was offensive or insulting and directed at a person based on their race, including content that aimed to attack, harm, or undermine the candidate. Women of African descent or African-American women also received the highest proportion of racist tweets (36.4% of abusive tweets) compared to all other groups. Figure 7 presents an example of this where the poster not only uses directly insulting language towards the candidate, but also issues an indirect insult to the achievements of LGBTQ veterans and veterans of color. The poster perpetuates white grievance premised on 'supposed' white exclusion.

Our research did not examine why persons tweeted abusive or other content at political candidates. However, anecdotal evidence from our content analysis exercise suggests that abuse directed at white men was often in response to something that they said, while for women of color it was often out of context. For example, compare the following two tweets. In Figure 8, a tweet by former Congressional representative Debbie Mucarsel-Powell acknowledging a local business owner voting in her district draws a misogynistic comment about the appearance of two of the women pictured, the candidate herself and former congressional representative and former U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Donna Shalala, both of whom are women of color. In Figure 9, a tweet by a white male candidate on his views about life starting with conception draws an abusive response.

3. WOMEN OF COLOR CANDIDATES ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE THE TARGET OF COMBINED MIS- AND DISINFORMATION AND ABUSE THAN ANY OTHER GROUP

In this study, we coded for mis- and disinformation tweeted at or replying to a candidate that could contain false information about the candidate specifically, or false information generally. The former can include what researchers have called gendered disinformation, or the distribution of false information about persons or groups based on their gender identity (Di Meco, 2019b; Jankowicz et al., 2021; Judson et al., 2020; Sessa, 2020). As noted earlier, online GBV and mis- and disinformation against women in politics have similar aims—to challenge, control, and attack their presence in spaces of public authority.

In practice, the two often occur together, and, to assess this, we coded for tweets that included both mis- and disinformation and abuse. In Table 1, we note that women of color politicians received the most tweets containing both mis- and disinformation and abuse (3.3% of all tweets targeted at or about them). This is approximately twice the rate of white women and men. More specifically, for women of African descent or African American women the rate was 4.4%, the highest among all other groups.

▲ **Figure 5. An example of a tweet containing generally offensive language targeted at a white male candidate.**

▲ **Figure 6. Tweet using misogynistic language towards an Hispanic candidate.**
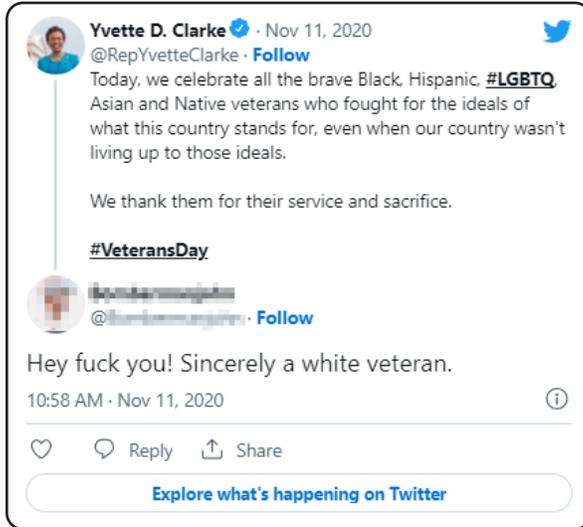
▲ Figure 7. Example of a racist tweet targeted at an encumbent African American candidate.

▲ Figure 8. Out of context response to a tweet by an Hispanic candidate.

While we did not code specifically for mis- and disinformation targeted at persons based on their gender identity, this finding supports prior research (Di Meco, 2019b; Jankowicz et al., 2021; Judson et al., 2020; Sessa, 2020) which shows that mis- and disinformation can be combined with abuse targeted at women politicians, and more importantly suggests that women of color candidates are more likely to be subject to these kinds of attacks.

Some examples of this type of combined mis- and disinformation and abuse are provided in Figures 10 and 11. Here, the posters referred to the false claim that mail-in voting was used to steal the election (see Figure 10) and used abusive language towards the candidate in addition to sharing information from a known source of mis- and disinformation (see Figure 11). Note that while we didn't find any significant differences in the types of mis- and disinformation received by women of color and other candidates, the scale of the problem was different as noted in Table 1.

While researchers have identified and highlighted the problem of gendered disinformation, including the combination of mis- and disinformation and abuse (see for example Di Meco, 2019a; Jankowicz et al., 2021), we add to the limited research (Gray & Adeyemo, 2021; Guerin & Maharasingam-Shah, 2020; Reddi et al., 2021) that shows that this problem is not just gendered but intersectional. That is, even though women overall were more likely to be subject to mis- and disinformation than men, women of color were more likely to be targeted by mis- and disinformation, and, more importantly, combined forms of abuse and mis- and disinformation, than both white men and women.

4. TWEETS TARGETED AT WOMEN OF COLOR CANDIDATES ARE MORE LIKELY TO FOCUS ON THEIR IDENTITY COMPARED TO OTHER CANDIDATES

In addition to questions of abuse and mis- and disinformation, we also coded for the main narrative that is communicated in each tweet, one of which was the candidate's identity. This included a focus on a candidate's perceived or actual race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion. We relied on narrative categories from prior work (e.g., Oates et al., 2019) to understand if posters were more preoccupied with identity characteristics for some candidates over others. We found

Proportion of Tweets focused on Identity that included...

Type of Candidate	Gender	Race	Gender and Race	Religion	Sexual Orientation
WomenofColor (n=38)	58.2%	64.1%	29.3%	2.1%	1.5%
MenofColor (n=42)	5.6%	80.5%	0.1%	2.5%	3.5%
WhiteWomen (n=65)	84.1%	10.7%	4.6%	2.1%	2.1%
WhiteMen (n=147)	18.7%	22.3%	5.0%	10.8%	12.8%

that tweets targeted at or about women of color were more likely to focus on their identity (6.2%) than white women (2.2%) or white men (0.4%). We also coded for types of identity that are mentioned in a tweet—these results are summarized in Table 6.[4]

For women of color, whenever identity was the main focus of a tweet at or about them, it was often about their gender or race. For men of color it was primarily about race, and for white women it was primarily about gender. Among women of color, targeting of identity in terms of race (70.4%) and gender (68.1%) was particularly pronounced for women of African descent or African American women and higher than any other group. Tweets about multi-racial and Middle East/North African (MENA) women were more likely to focus on their religious identity (9.5%), although not statistically different from white men. While this suggests that, among tweets related to identity, gender or race was what people focused on for women of color, we also checked to see if the combination of the two (i.e., gender and race) was how people engaged this group when it came to tweets related to identity. Here we found that women of color were more likely than any other group to face tweets concerning both their gender and race (29.3% of identity related tweets) whenever identity was the main focus of a tweet at or about them.

▲ Table 6. Average % of tweets about Identity by type of candidates, and by type of Identity. Note that not all Identity types were included and so percentages do not add up to 100% (see Appendix A for additional results).

▲ Figure 9. A response to the content of a tweet by a white male candidate that also included abusive language.

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4 Note that we do not account for characteristics such as religion or sexual orientation in our classification of candidates, so for example, there may be more white queer candidates which could explain these results.

Type of Candidate	Negative stance	Neutral	Positive stance
Women of Color (n=38)	34.9%	8.7%	56.3%
Men of Color (n=42)	37.5%	10.7%	51.8%
White Women (n=65)	32.4%	6.2%	61.4%
White Men (n=147)	56.2%	8.1%	35.7%

▲ Table 7. Average % of tweets with a given stance by type of candidates.

Source - CDT

▲ Figure 10. Example of a tweet with both abuse and disinformation targeted at an Hispanic candidate.

5. WOMEN OF COLOR ARE LESS LIKELY TO FACE TWEETS WITH A POSITIVE STANCE THAN WHITE WOMEN

The previous results noted that, in many cases, the experience of women of color candidates on Twitter was different from those of white women, highlighting the need for an intersectional analysis where possible. Women of color candidates received more abuse, mis- and disinformation, and the combination of the two than white women. Another difference in the experience of candidates was the sentiment of the tweet towards the candidate. We coded sentiment as the overall stance that was expressed towards the candidate in the tweet; it could have been positive, negative, or neutral (see Table 7).

Positive in this case implies that the person posting the tweet expresses support for the candidate, negative implies a stance that opposes the candidate (which may not necessarily be abusive or contain mis- and disinformation, but for example expresses disagreement with a candidate's position of a given issue), and neutral does not express a particular positive or negative sentiment towards the candidate.

Women of color were subject to tweets that were less likely to be positive than white women, but more than white men (in fact, white men received the highest proportion of tweets with a negative stance). On average, white women were subject to more tweets with a positive stance than all other groups. They also faced the smallest proportion of tweets with a negative stance. While it's hard to explain this pattern using this

▲ Figure 11. Example of a tweet with both abuse and disinformation targeted at an African American candidate.

study alone, another insight is that there is a significant difference in these results between Republican and Democratic white women. The latter are even more likely to receive positive tweets (74.5%) compared to Republican white women (28.8%). Note that the difference in tweets with a positive stance between Republican (52.7%) and Democratic (59.2%) women of color candidates was much smaller. Our results suggest that white Democratic women receive more positive tweets and also much less abuse, mis- and disinformation or a combination of the two than women of color candidates, and almost every other group.

Mis- and Disinformation and Abuse Targeted at Women of Color Political Candidates

Whether it's in terms of the differences between women of color candidates and other women, or in terms of differences among women of color candidates themselves, our findings demonstrate the importance of taking an intersectional approach to understanding the nature of mis- and disinformation and abuse targeted at political candidates online. We found that:

- Women of color candidates were more likely to be targeted by or be the subject of tweets with mis- and disinformation than other groups of candidates, and among them, women of African descent or African-American women were the most likely to be targeted with such content.

- Women of color candidates in general were less likely than white men to be targeted with abuse on Twitter. However, Hispanic or Latinx women candidates were subject to more abuse on Twitter than other groups (although not statistically different than white men).

- Women of color are more likely to be subject to violent forms of abuse than others, and more likely to be subject to misogynistic content and racist content than any other group; women of African descent or African American women were subject to the highest proportion of abusive tweets that contained violence or racism among all groups.

- Women of color were more likely to receive tweets that combined abuse and mis- and disinformation than other groups, and the rate was highest for women of African descent or African American women.

- Tweets about the identity of a candidate were more likely to focus on race, gender, and the combination of the two when it came to women of color than any other group.

- Women of color were less likely to receive tweets with positive stances compared to white women and specifically Democratic white women.

Some of these results persist even when we disaggregate the findings by political party (keeping in mind that most women of color were Democrats in our sample and among all candidates that ran in 2020), and all statistically significant results remained so even when controlling for candidate follower counts during the election period. These results reflect the significant degree of misogyny and racism that women of color have faced and continue to face in public spaces (Amnesty International, 2018). Representative politics is no exception (Norwood et al., 2021).

Of note throughout all our findings is the specific targeting of women of African descent or African American women with mis- and disinformation, abuse, or both. In almost all the main findings discussed earlier, this group of women candidates were subject to the highest levels of mis- and disinformation, abuse, or both. Indeed, they were also more likely to receive tweets where the main focus was their gender and racial identities.

This is perhaps not surprising given U.S. history and the current state in which women of African descent or African American women are more likely to receive lower incomes, go unrecognized as it relates to their political power, and experience worse health outcomes compared to other groups (DuMonthier et al., 2017). Researchers (particularly women of African descent or African American women scholars) are well aware of this phenomenon (Madden et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2021). Others such as Bailey (2021) have developed the term "misogynoir" to capture how racism and misogyny in particular shape the experiences of women of African descent or African American women online. Our findings therefore reflect learnings about which these and other scholars are already aware. By building on their work using new data, we can bring awareness of this issue to additional audiences.

Our findings therefore reflect learnings about which these and other scholars are already aware. By building on their work using new data, we can bring awareness of this issue to additional audiences.

The differences between candidate groups reported here are statistically significant unless otherwise noted (e.g., the levels of abuse received by Hispanic or Latinx women and white men). Still, in most cases, groups of candidates differed in the proportion of tweets targeting them with abuse, mis- and disinformation, or both by only a few percentage points. However, even small percentage points of difference are important when considering the scale of online interactions for political candidates. During the two month period we examined, some political candidates received hundreds of thousands of tweets. Thus, a 5 percentage point difference between groups of candidates, for example, could still be a significant number of actual tweets. This can have an impact not just on the candidates but also how others view them.

That said, we do note a few important limitations to this study as well as opportunities for further research. Our data is based on what was available from the Twitter API at the time of the data collection (May to June 2022). This most likely excludes tweets that Twitter or posters themselves removed before that period and after the November 2020 elections (i.e., the most egregious content either flagged by Twitter or reported by the candidates or other social media users). We suspect that the results may be worse for women of color if we had access to a more contemporaneous and comprehensive data set.

This report also could not explore the identity and motives of the perpetrators of the tweets examined here. Other research examines the motivations, tactics, and behaviors of online abusers and those who spread mis- and disinformation (Acemoglu et al., 2021; Buchanan, 2020; Chen & Sin, 2013; Metzger et al., 2021). Additional research that focuses on those who target women of color candidates would be beneficial. Also of note is the fact that, in some cases, we found that candidates themselves may be spreading mis- and disinformation (e.g., the Big Lie) or harassing other candidates. This wasn't one of the research questions we examined here but could be the subject of future research.

Finally, Part I of our research primarily focused on our observations of the nature and scale of online abuse and mis- and disinformation targeted at political candidates on Twitter. While we found a pattern where women of color candidates were more likely to be targeted with these types of content, the analysis alone does not allow us to examine the impacts of these findings. In Part II, we ask women of color candidates directly about their personal experiences and impacts these types of abuse and mis- and disinformation had on them and their campaigns.

Part II

The Impact of Disinformation and Online Abuse on Women of Color Political Candidates

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Content advisory: This report includes examples of racist, sexist, threatening, and other abusive language and imagery.
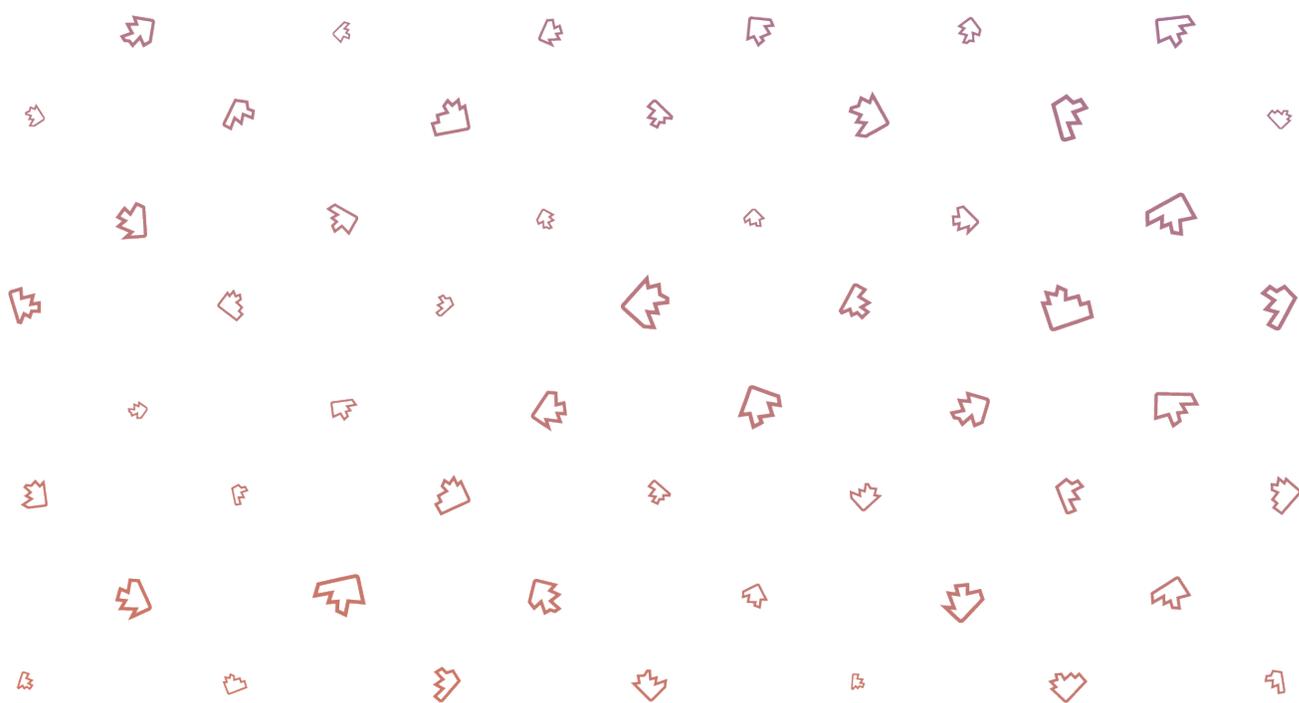
Introduction and Objectives

"And even though, you know, campaigning is so hard and it's such a toll on your mental state and your physical state, it reminded me like this is bigger than what I'm feeling at this moment today. Like, this is something bigger that we're working for. Like we are pulling, we are pulling up a seat, you know, like Shirley Chisholm said, pulling up a seat at the table, even though no one invited us there. Like I am coming to the table whether you like it or not, so, you know…move (laughs)."

– Woman of color candidate who ran in the 2020 U.S. elections.

Research on mis- and disinformation often focuses on the types of false narratives that are shared, how they are shared, and the people and groups behind their distribution. While much of this work focuses on specific events that give rise to a lot of online mis- and disinformation such as elections, one important aspect of this work is understanding the impacts on candidates themselves. If mis- and disinformation is predicated on false narratives which are often based on discrimination and bias, then we need to understand the impacts on targeted groups. An emerging body of research examines the gendered impacts of online disinformation and abuse targeted at women political candidates in several countries[5] (Di Meco, 2019a; Jankowicz et al., 2021; Judson et al., 2020; Sessa, 2020).

In Part I of this report, we demonstrated that women of color political candidates are in fact more likely to be targeted by mis- and disinformation and some forms of abuse on Twitter when compared to other groups of candidates; the problem is not just gendered but also intersectional.

Building on the previous chapter, we want to better understand the impacts of online abuse and mis- and disinformation targeted at women of color political candidates. While the analysis of the Twitter data demonstrated the patterns of targeted abuse and mis- and disinformation, and indicated that the phenomena is often more frequently experienced by women of color, in Part II we ask about the substantive impact on the individuals experiencing it. By talking directly with potentially impacted persons, we can explore some of the effects of mis- and disinformation and abuse. Note that in this part of the study we did not focus on any specific social media platform (unlike Part I) but rather the various social media used by some women of color political candidates.

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5 In this report we focus on people who identified as women. We do not address the experiences of people who identify as non-binary, although those are also important.

Previous research has taken this approach to understand the impacts of mis- and disinformation on women politicians (Di Meco, 2019a); however, there is little work exploring this problem from the point of view of women of color political candidates. This is crucial if we are to understand the challenges that all women face in political representation.

This report addresses this research gap by employing a qualitative method to gather the stories of women of color who ran for political office during the 2020 election. The goal of this study is to examine gendered disinformation in an election setting and to explore, at an individual level, how gendered disinformation is used as a tool to undermine the political efficacy of women. More specifically, we want to understand the perceptions, perceived impacts, and experiences of gendered disinformation and online gender-based violence (GBV) among political candidates who identified as women of color in the 2020 U.S. election and their staff.

GBV is defined as harmful acts directed at an individual based on gender. In online spaces, it can take a range of forms: verbal abuse and harassment, threats of offline violence, non-consensual image/video sharing, doxxing, gaslighting, stalking, etc. (See for example Kee, 2005). Gender-based violence results from perceived differences in the expected roles associated with each gender identity in society, and more importantly the unequal power relationships between those identities (Bloom, 2008).

More recently, researchers have begun to examine how mis- and disinformation are related to online GBV. Some have defined a category of "gender-based disinformation," which involves spreading false information about persons or groups based on their gender identity (Di Meco, 2019a; Jankowicz et al., 2021); gender-based disinformation not only expresses negative views of women and non-binary people, including trans individuals, but it also seeks to reinforce the discrimination faced by those groups.

Both online GBV and disinformation campaigns directed toward women politicians or candidates aim to undermine them. Gendered disinformation campaigns do so by spreading false information about leaders' qualifications, experience, and intelligence, sometimes using sexualized imagery. Though intent is difficult to ascertain, as we found in the first part of this report using data from Twitter, false information can be combined with racist and misogynistic content and this is more likely to be targeted at women of color candidates than others.

To understand the impacts of online GBV and disinformation on the candidates themselves, we interviewed a total of 13 women of color who ran for Congress, and seven staffers (from four different campaigns of women of color candidates) between January and May 2022. Based on these interviews, we learned that it was difficult to disentangle examples of gendered disinformation from online GBV because they often

occur together. As we relied on the interviewees to share their experiences and did not conduct a separate analysis of actual social media posts directed at them, we do not attempt to provide specific examples of gendered disinformation or online GBV beyond what the interviewees reported.

The interviewees described some of the main impacts of mis- and disinformation and online GBV aimed at women of color political candidates and their campaigns. We consistently heard from interviewees that, in their view, the aim of the people behind the attacks was to destroy the candidates' resolve. They believed the purpose of the attacks was to get them to internalize the abuse directed toward them, to accept the oppression they face as women of color, and to drop out of politics. In this way, the mis- and disinformation and abuse they encountered was not only about challenging their electoral prospects by damaging their reputations with voters, but also about attacking their identity as women of color. This understanding of mis- and disinformation and online GBV suggests that the attacks function to enforce the boundaries of an identity, policing certain people on the basis of a very specific understanding of what it means to be a woman or a woman of color.

In the case of online GBV targeted at women of color candidates, identity-based attacks focus on the transgressiveness of running for office (i.e. a woman seeking power, as someone presumed unworthy or unsuited for power or authority; or a woman of color seeking status and power as someone presumed unsuitable or unworthy of either). In many cases, the attacks were focused on the fact that the candidates identified as women, and were often intensified by referring to the candidates' other identities or attributes, such as their race, age, marital, or parental status.

While many of the attacks interviewees reported were severe, we also learned about the degree of resolve and coping that the participants displayed in the face of these attacks. Together with their campaign teams and community, the candidates employed several resilience and coping strategies and, in most cases, they continued their campaigns through the election. Many remain in representative politics. The fact that they are women of color in the U.S. reflects a higher likelihood that they have always had to deal with misogyny and abuse, and, therefore, by necessity, may have had to develop mechanisms to navigate a lifetime of discrimination. We describe these findings in more detail in subsequent sections and conclude with a summary of concerns that interviewees raised about proposed approaches to addressing the problem.

We consistently heard from interviewees that, in their view, the aim of the people behind the attacks was to destroy the candidates' resolve. They believed the purpose of the attacks was to get them to internalize the abuse directed toward them, to accept the oppression they face as women of color, and to drop out of politics.

Approach and Methods

In order to understand the impacts of online GBV and gendered disinformation, we take a qualitative approach. This allows us to discern the impact of the content on the intended recipient from their point of view (Salganik, 2019). Thus, our main method for this study was to interview women of color candidates and staff to women of color candidates.

We focus our sampling on women who identify as women of color due to the evidence presented in the previous chapter that people holding these specific intersectional identities are the most targeted by gendered disinformation and other kinds of abuse. In addition, many high-profile individuals do not manage their own social media accounts, or, if they do, they may work with a team. This suggests that talking to staffers on a campaign can also be helpful. More specifically, our aim in interviewing staffers was twofold:

- To discern similarities and differences in impact between intended recipients and witnesses.
- To lend further support to candidates' stories by offering multiple perspectives about the same set of events.

Our specific focus was women of color who ran for Congress during the 2020 general election. To develop our sample, we first identified all women of color candidates for federal office in the 2020 general election using a database developed by the Reflective Democracy Campaign (2020), which relied on candidates' self-reported descriptions of their race and gender. We then segmented this group according to those who were active on social media (at the time of this study) and those who were not. We initially reached out to those who were active on social media to recruit them for an interview. We also used a snowball sampling approach where we asked those who agreed to be interviewed for recommendations for other participants. We reached out to campaign staffers using a similar approach.

In all, we interviewed 13 women who ran for Congress, and seven staffers (a total of 14 different campaigns) between January and May 2022. Of these candidates, two were Republican, one was independent, and the rest were Democrats. The interviews were done after obtaining the participants' informed consent and completed on the condition of anonymity in order to enable the candidates and staffers to speak frankly. As a result, we do not disclose the locations associated with these races or outcomes of their electoral bids.

We attribute quotes used in this report to candidates and staffers using generic identifiers (e.g., "Staffer" or "Candidate"), although each quote references statements made by distinct speakers; we do this to avoid re-identification of interview participants. Quotes grouped together should not be read as belonging to the same speaker. In general, we omit racial identifiers for participants where revealing this information would risk re-identification, especially since only a small proportion of people that ran for Congress in 2020 were women of color (e.g., about 7% of all candidates in the 2020 congressional elections were African American or Black women, less than 4% were Latinx women, (Reflective Democracy Campaign, 2020). We include racial identifiers in instances only where re-identification of specific candidates is not possible and race is an important part of the quote.

The semi-structured interviews covered how the participants used social media during their campaigns; the kinds of social media content they were subject to, including mis- and disinformation and abuse; how others (including perpetrators of mis- and disinformation and online GBV) addressed their race, ethnicity, and gender; and how they responded. See Appendix F for the complete interview guides for both candidates and campaign staffers. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using a thematic coding process. This means that we sought to identify the experiences, meanings, and realities of the research participants; we clearly indicate where we have chosen to interpret meaning and where participants have provided meaning themselves by quoting them directly. We grouped these meanings and experiences into a set of themes, and, based on that, we discuss our major findings later. We describe our methodological approach in more detail in Appendix F.

Research limitations

As researchers, our access to candidates, especially elected officials, was limited by the quality of our organizational or professional relationships with relevant representatives. There are also significant gatekeeper effects that further impacted our ability to interview members and candidates alike. Our access to candidates (those who ran but lost their primary bids) was also limited due to the time delay between their primary races and our outreach. This meant that available contact information was at least a year old. For many of the candidates, campaign-related contact information was outdated by the time we tried to reach them. These limitations affected the volume of responses we received and the overall number of interviews we were able to conduct. We also did not hear back from as many Republican candidates as we would have liked. Some Republicans who responded to initial outreach commented that they disagreed with our framing of the problem as one of online abuse and mis- and disinformation targeted on the basis of gender or race.

Understanding Disinformation and Online Gender Based Violence (GBV)

As noted, online harassment and abuse based on gender expression can include verbal abuse, threats of violence, non-consensual image/video sharing, doxxing, gaslighting, etc (Kee, 2005). There is an important body of research and advocacy that addresses the problem of online GBV targeted at women of color (Amnesty International, 2018; Madden et al., 2018; Turner et al., 2021), as well as women in public life such as politicians and journalists, often with the aim of undermining their careers and silencing them (Bardall, 2013; Norwood et al., 2021; Posetti et al., 2021).

Of specific concern is a type of mis- and disinformation—gendered disinformation, which involves intentionally distributing false information about persons or groups based on their gender identity (Di Meco, 2019a; Jankowicz et al., 2021; Judson et al., 2020; Sessa, 2020). Researchers have shown how gendered disinformation, particularly that targeting women politicians and journalists, oftens consists of false information about the women that is sometimes presented in a sexualized way with the aim of undermining their careers. Gendered disinformation campaigns are predicated on misogynistic views of women and seek to replicate those views through false information.

In many ways, online GBV and mis- and disinformation against women in politics have similar aims—to challenge, control, and attack their presence in spaces of public authority. That is, some forms of mis- and disinformation are used to complement or support violence against women.

From the interviews, we found that mis- and disinformation targeted at women of color included false information about the candidate's qualifications, experience, or intelligence and was often combined with racist, misogynistic or other abusive content. For example, some interviewees described how mis- and disinformation included misogynistic content and sexual epithets:

> "I received some inbox messages and [was] tagged in some stuff on Instagram, um, with some monkeys and squirrels and that [I] would be a good whore, you know, stuff like that." (Candidate)

> "I remember one guy in particular called her a poll smoker."[6] (Staffer)

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6 Euphemistic reference to sexual acts. See, urban dictionary entry for "poll smoker" (Urban Dictionary, 2006.)

The outcomes that stem from these kinds of attacks are experienced similarly across individuals and include perpetuating bias and falsehoods, and real world impacts including the psychological and emotional trauma of those targeted (Sinders, 2020).

The responses from candidates and staffers reflected the overlap between gendered disinformation and online GBV. For example, some participants described the harms from online GBV and mis- and disinformation they encountered and the emotional cost of pushing back:

> "Me being a woman of color as well and young, it was just extremely disheartening. It felt worse when it was fellow Democrats and progressives honestly, than it did with Republicans just because of the nature of the comments, like I said. I think I have a pretty thick skin with social media but I mean, some of the comments were extremely grotesque in nature. Like I said, it was just very slanderous ... Because [the candidate] had been an elected official previously... there were just a lot of personal, almost small town rumors flying around, and so it just became extremely overwhelming." (Staffer)

> "... I had to prove that I was this or that, I would hang up, and I would cry. You know, I would just be emotional about it, because I knew they were attacking who I was, and I know who I am. So, it was challenging. It was a constant challenge with that." (Candidate)

It is important to recognize the toll and harm that both the staffer and candidate (from different campaigns) described when dealing with the abuse and mis- and disinformation, a point we discuss further in the section on Impacts.

Another way in which gendered disinformation supports online GBV is by potentially allowing the purveyor of the false information to exert some material control over the woman candidate, specifically how the public views the candidate. Abuse as a form of control is a feature of GBV, particularly where it is targeted at women (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002).[7] As some participants noted, mis- and disinformation also can be a powerful means of controlling the narrative about a candidate and how people viewed them:

> "...it really let me know just how the politics are ... honestly. [...] [Someone] could take [their] opinion about something and basically project that onto others as [the] truth." (Candidate)

———————————

7   Although not addressed in our report it's important to note that trans and non-binary persons are also subject to high levels of GBV (Wirtz et. al., 2020).

> "...we saw ads that were flat out untrue as well, paid ads that I think prompted some of the social media stuff. [A] Republican Super PAC ran an ad about how our candidate wanted to defund the police and make the community less safe and showed our candidate in the ad, and our candidate had said multiple times on the record, I do not want to defund the police but I think that, people see that on TV and then they go online and they're like, this is the person who wants to defund the police, and so there was a lot of stuff like that where positions that our candidate didn't even stand for were being attributed to her." (Staffer)

In these cases, the perpetrator of mis- and disinformation about a candidate is trying to control the public's views about that candidate, and with GBV the use of abusive content attempts to control and influence the public character of the woman being targeted and shut them out of the conversation altogether (Di Meco, 2019b).

How Disinformation and Online Abuse Hinder Women of Color Political Candidates in the United States

Using Social Media for Electoral Campaigning: Mechanisms

Social media is an important tool in modern elections and campaigns. And as all the campaigns we discuss here took place during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020), they relied heavily on social media platforms to operate. As one candidate said, "Because of the pandemic, we were pretty much restricted to social media. So, we used Facebook a lot, especially for meet and greets."

The three main social media platforms that all interviewees reported using for campaign purposes were Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. A few mentioned other platforms such as YouTube, but these three were consistently referenced by all the interviewees. Respondents in general reported using Facebook as the primary campaign social media platform—establishing a page for their campaign, hosting Facebook Live events, and discussing their campaign in local Facebook political groups. They used Twitter mainly for informational purposes—promoting upcoming events, policy ideas, and establishing a broader reach for the campaign beyond the local area.

Twelve candidates and all seven staffers reported that Facebook and Twitter had the most abusive content, while one candidate cited Instagram as the social media site with the most abusive content. Some participants also reported that it was difficult to get mis- and disinformation or abusive content removed from social media platforms:

> "[For] a couple of the more heinous posts, I would reach out to Facebook and say, "Hey, Facebook, this is terrible." And Facebook's like, "It's fine. It's okay. We don't see anything wrong with this." It's almost like it's saying, you chose to be a public figure so you had this coming. And I basically gave up on trying to get Facebook to care." (Candidate)

Regardless of platform, some candidates learned early on that using social media for campaigning required that they maintain a healthy distance from any day-to-day administration of the social media account itself. As a result, candidates often delegated the task of social media management to the candidate's team and limited their direct management of their own social media. This was driven in part by an attempt to cope with the harmful content targeted at them:

> "But again, if you have a good campaign team, they will shield you from a lot of that stuff. My social media person is my general, she was so good at getting on those trolls and deleting those messages and blocking them, that a lot of people weren't able to see those troll comments." (Candidate)
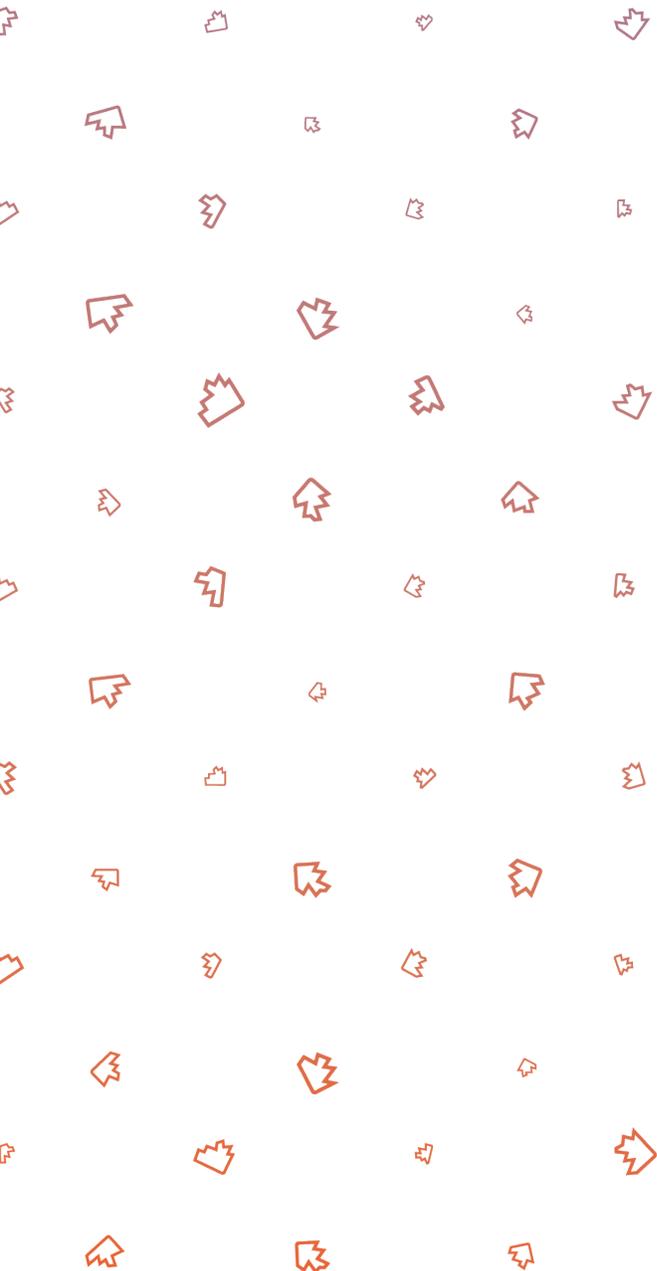
> "I had to get to a point where I had to push myself away from my social media and let somebody else handle it. Even though I felt like that was important to me to be able to speak directly to people. But I couldn't keep speaking directly to people who just wanted to make sure I was hurt." (Candidate)

Some of the candidates who delegated social media management to others actually started out writing some of their own posts and monitoring their social media accounts, but eventually sought help managing their social media after becoming overwhelmed with the amount of abusive content aimed at them. However, not all candidates had the resources required to hire additional support. At least four candidates reported being the primary authors of their social media posts, often because of a lack of funding. In some cases, this meant that they shared the work with volunteers or had to do most of it themselves:

> "We were such a small team, either I posted or one of my two volunteers. So it was just the three of us that would post everyday." (Candidate)

> "I wrote everything myself. I would have some people contribute ideas, but they usually didn't represent me, so I did my own posts." (Candidate)

In sum, there was a range in the degree of involvement by the candidates in managing their social media, with some managing it themselves, or in collaboration with others, and others delegating most tasks to their team. The decision of whether to delegate social media management was driven, at least in part, by the desire to avoid exposure to abusive content. Even where they did outsource most tasks to others, candidates were often still involved in drafting some messages and reviewing and responding to some posts.

Respondents also noted the importance of social media as a promotional tool for their campaigns. For example, targeted ads are a major part of building a presence on social media platforms, and many candidates described using these tools to expand the reach of their campaigns on all three major platforms. They also noted that the political ads of opponents or other groups were another major source of sometimes false or inaccurate content. Using ads to raise their profile online also had the effect of increasing who became aware of and interacted with them online, often exposing them to more abuse:

> "Especially probably the Facebook ads is where I would say the most [abuse] happens, just because Facebook's sort of ad targeting is so kind of shotgun blast-like, you're getting a lot of different people roped in, and so you do see a lot of hate and vitriol in the comment sections of big ads that we would have been pushing. I don't recall any specific instances but I do believe that there was racially motivated stuff, like I do believe I saw the N-word a couple of times when I was going through that." (Candidate)

In many ways, the use of targeted ads, particularly by those who had to rely extensively on social media for their campaigns, helped create what Di Meco (2019a) calls the double-edged sword of social media for women politicians. That is, by necessity, they have to use a tool that also exposes them to significant amounts of online GBV, mis- and disinformation, and harm.

Impacts of Gendered Disinformation and Online GBV

The main section of this report examines responses from candidates and staffers about the ways in which they were subject to mis- and disinformation and online GBV, and how that impacted them. We divide our analysis of impacts into several categories that include trauma (which is how the candidates themselves described their experiences), misogyny, the role of intersectionality, and cognitive and behavioral changes.

Trauma and its Dehumanizing Effects

Whether through organic outreach on social media or through the use of targeted ads, candidates and their campaign teams described how interactions with mis- and disinformation and abusive content from other social media users harmed them.

Trauma can be defined as a range of experiences where a threat of violation is present, creating implications for an individual's relationship with their community or life context (Tummala-Narra, 2007). Some respondents described their experiences on social media while campaigning—whether as candidates or witnessing staff—as "traumatic." For staffers, this trauma arose from having to filter out harmful content for their candidate:

> "I would describe myself as the liver of this campaign. The toxins must get filtered through me. I'm not quite at cirrhosis but it's been a lot of toxins." (Staffer)

> "It hurt me to see, especially towards our candidate who was putting themselves in a very vulnerable position, taking the risk of running for office knowing that this sort of thing happens because they want to help their community. Our staff was working 60, 70 hours a week and then they have to go on Facebook at night and this is what they see." (Staffer)

In some ways, this is similar to experiences of social media content moderators and the deep psychological costs that results from continuously sifting through content meant to ridicule and harm (Bell et al., 2003; Dubberley et al., 2015; Steiger et al., 2021).
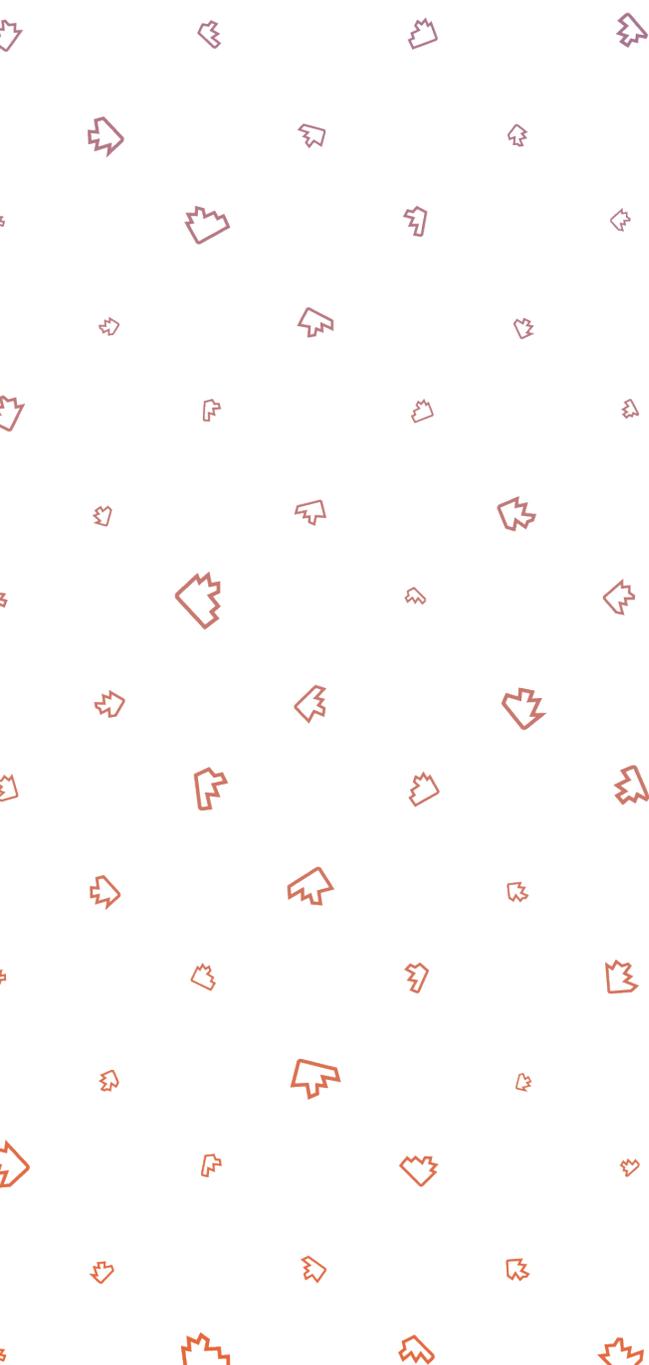
Candidates themselves also experienced trauma, as they were usually the target of the online GBV or mis- and disinformation:

> "And just reading the responses was like, "Oh my gosh, this is so heavy." I remember crying because it's just like I don't [know] what to do about any of this. And so [my] social media manager was on the front line of that as well. And then of course, George Floyd and so many other things just made it a very (I think) traumatic cycle." (Candidate)

While trauma and hurt were often the result, candidates also felt that the end goal of the perpetrators of online GBV and mis- and disinformation targeting them was to get them to internalize the abuse directed toward them, to accept the oppression they have historically and persistently faced as women of color. Candidates believed that these attacks were about making them feel less than human:

> "When it came to this, I felt I had never felt more dehumanized, more minimized in the work that I had done and the work that I was doing." (Candidate)

> "...So it's like people rather just have me not exist at all." (Candidate)

In every interview, whether candidate or staff, each respondent discussed what they perceived as the aim of content targeting their campaign: to denigrate the candidate specifically and get them to stop taking up space in the political arena.

Misogyny and Intersectionality

Candidates also reported that they felt that their identity as women made them the focus of online attacks. This is not to suggest that this identity alone was the basis for all the online GBV and mis- and disinformation targeted at them, but it was a consistent theme among all the interviewees reflecting the degree of misogyny in society as a whole. As one candidate put it, attacks undermining her ability to lead were based on gender:

> "I got a lot of attacks for being who I am and being [omitted racial identification] but I also got a lot of attacks for being a woman too. You know, like, 'Women can't lead,' 'You can't do this.' I got a lot of those types of messages too." (Candidate)

In some cases, the candidates were subjected to attacks alluding to a presumption of sexual availablity and/or promiscuity of women:

> "…somebody asked me if I had an OnlyFans.[8]" (Candidate)

> "…but the ones I'm remembering most were from Twitter…, basically a guy implying that he'd want to have sex with her [the candidate]." (Staffer)

The perpetrators of the online GBV that produced these reflections among staffers and candidates were attempting to reduce the women to sexual objects and downplay the reality that they were political candidates (Barker & Jurasz, 2019). As discussed earlier, this is an attempt to control the way the public views the candidate and one that promotes and exploits a particularly misogynistic view of women.

In addition to their identities as women, the interviewees noted that online GBV and mis- and disinformation targeting the candidates also relied on other aspects of their identities, such as their race/ethnicity. Candidates reported that it was the use of multiple facets of their identity to target them that made the content most impactful, most traumatic, and most harmful. This finding is in line with the research on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990), which notes that women of color have to contend with multiple sources of oppression at the same time and that this impact is unique:

> "For black women, every single day is a fight. Every issue all the time. It's about us. It's about us. We get the brunt of everything else. We have the triple isms. And I talk about that all the time. We have racism. And if you're old, you have ageism. And then you have misogyny. And we have it all." (Candidate)

> "It was more of the typical things that you see with a lot of women of color— of expecting way more than they can give emotionally, or logistically, or whatever. I think it just became a barrage on all different sides about how her race and sex played into a lot of different issues." (Staffer)

These attacks included the candidate's identity as a woman as well as her race. A candidate's racial identity could also be portrayed in a false way to play into existing biases among the electorate. One example of this type of mis- and disinformation was shared by a staffer:

> "…the things that really got to me particularly for [candidate], a lot of the mailers that her opponents sent out…Actually they would even do it in their social media posts too because [for] a lot of those things they used the same content for both of them. They would purposely darken her for their audience." (Staffer)

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8   OnlyFans is a site used by content creators, including sex-workers, to share and monetize their content.

For this kind of mis- and disinformation to be effective, it must not only aim to exploit people's lack of knowledge, as with mis- and disinformation in general (for example the actual skin tone of the candidate), but also their racism.

Other examples included identities such as age and presumed immigration status. Again, these were used as different ways to convey mis/disinformation, online GBV, or both:

> "I think the sexism wasn't as obvious, but what was very obvious was her age, saying that she was unqualified." (Staffer)

> "[Candidate] is also half Mexican. [A relative] was born in Mexico. So from time to time, there would be comments like that, particularly with her last name. Like go back to where you're from. We want Americans…" (Staffer)

Attacks based on the age or presumed immigration status of a candidate (as with other examples) undermine public perceptions of a candidate's ability to succeed in office. However, they also exploit an intersection of discriminatory attitudes.

In addition to misogyny, these attacks trade on racist beliefs, such as the belief that a candidate is "too dark" or possibly an immigrant as evidenced by their complexion or is non-white or not proximal enough to whiteness to have standing as a leader. They may also rest on ageist attitudes (such as the belief that a candidate is too young or too old).

A particularly virulent strain of misogynistic content concerned candidates who were also mothers, and in some cases young mothers:

> "I mean, there was definitely bad stuff during the…election but I think the first thing that really got to me was a social media influencer local for the Democrats [who] said, "Oh, well, she uses that baby as a prop." Now, when I announced for Congress, my child was months old. So I carried them because I was their food source but a lot of folks were very resentful of the fact that I had a baby because they thought, 'Oh, well, that is a very useful tool.'" (Candidate)

> "I mean, I don't know if there's a word [for] being against mothers…especially young mothers because the opponent, during the primary, was older. Then during the general, [the candidate's] kids were older, I think they were in their late teens. There were definitely a lot of comments that were a direct result of [the candidate] being a young mother." (Candidate)

> "I also got [comments like], I'm irresponsible because I have several kids, um, and who's going to take care of my kids while I'm at Congress? Like, do you ask men candidates that?" (Candidate)

The candidate's question, "Do you ask men that?" points to the heteronormative nature of the nuclear family, which can help men more than women candidates (Deason et al., 2015). In other words, male candidates are more likely to benefit from content that highlights their family and children than women candidates, who are viewed as the primary caregiver for the children and thus not appropriate candidates for political office.

Cognitive and Behavioral Changes

In several instances, candidates noted that they actually knew who the perpetrators of the online GBV or mis- and disinformation were, for example because their names were associated with the posts or they knew them within their community:

> "But on Facebook, [you know] people's first name, last name…And so I've been in the rooms with some of these folks and some of them pretend like the internet didn't happen for two years. And some of them are just like, "I don't know what to do now that we're in the same room." But yeah, Facebook's the worst." (Candidate)

> "[On Facebook] because it was mainly community members, I think that's what made it more hurtful…because these were people that I knew, that I thought were allied to our campaign…" (Candidate)

The fact that the candidates knew some of the perpetrators of abusive content can worsen the impact. Research about intimate partner violence (IPV) sheds light on the implications of this kind of abuse. IPV is a form of GBV where, among other things, the abuser is known to the person being targeted. As with GBV, IPV is also a significant problem in the U.S. (at least 1 in 4 women in the U.S. have experienced some form of IPV, (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Research has documented cognitive, emotional, and behavioral shifts among women IPV survivors that occur throughout the abusive relationship, during the process of leaving, and after the relationship or abuse had ended (Crann & Barata, 2016). These shifts represent changes in the woman's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors with regard to herself, the abuser, the abuse, a relationship, or some other aspect of her life (Crann & Barata, 2016).

Responses from interviewees suggested that candidates experienced similar shifts in response to abusive content especially from people they knew. Sometimes the shifts that participants experienced were abrupt, but more often they developed gradually over time. The first shift focused on resistance, meaning that women would develop

ways to resist future incidents of abuse using many of the coping tactics we discuss here later. The second shift related to regaining control in different ways, which included the realization that the women cannot control an abuser's behavior but could control their reflections on previous abuse experiences to change future interactions:

> "…when I'm dealing more with white people, it was just like, 'You're really sweet. I really like what you stand for but obviously you're going against a machine. You're going against this rich white man, well connected white man. Does that bother you?' And I was like, 'It's not so much of it bothering me. Yeah, everything is always about the win. I get that. But at the same time it's also about the representation. It's also about somebody standing up, win or lose, and saying, "Okay, [there] needs to be another voice here. People need options, and if nothing else that's the reason why I'm running, so people will always have an option." (Candidate)

The third shift focused on moving towards positivity. This shift describes the progress and positive change the women experienced after the abuse stopped, as well as rebuilding their lives:

> "We're just going to go. We're going to pray about it, and we're just, we're going to go." (Candidate)

The protective factors and processes shared through these various attitudinal shifts help illustrate pathways for resilience. Social support, both personal and institutional, was identified as an important external pathway for many women in the Crann & Burata (2016) study. Women politicians who have experienced GBV and mis- and disinformation online may use attitudinal shifts as well as other external and internal pathways for resilience as a means of coping with and healing from personal attacks.

Resilience and Coping Tactics

Resilience generally refers to an individual's ability to overcome an experience of trauma by (a) demonstrating the capacity to return to their former level of functioning following exposure to a stressful or traumatic event; (b) successfully adapting under challenging circumstances; (c) exhibiting a character trait or personality that enables positive adaptation to adversity; and (d) the timely attainment of psychological milestones (Tummala-Narra, 2007).

Research on IPV demonstrates what resilience may look like for women of color survivors of trauma and abuse exposure. For instance, in their research with African American and non-American women of African descent, West and Johnson (2006) emphasize that a culture of silence related to sexual violence is a short-term coping strategy that may leave an impression that women of African descent are relatively unscathed by their sexual trauma, which is not the case. West and Johnson (2006) suggest various coping strategies have been successfully used by women of African descent. These include the survivor's connection to their religion, faith, and spirituality which offers comfort and connection for some survivors.

Women of color candidates may use similar coping strategies when facing online GBV and mis- and disinformation. As pointed out in an earlier example, one candidate said: "We're just going to go. We're going to pray about it, and we're just, we're going to go." Other strategies include educating others about the consequences of abuse, developing social networks for support, activism and politics, and artistic expression.

In our interviews with candidates and staffers, we found that their strategies for coping included those outlined by West and Johnson (2006). For example, candidates and staffers outlined several tactics they used to deal with harmful content. These included the following coping strategies:

- Blocking and not engaging
- Delegating
- Focusing on the positive
- Hiding comments/taking down posts
- Using humor to diffuse impact
- Exercise and meditation
- Developing response strategies in advance

- Reporting abusive content to social media platforms

- Actively countering false narratives

- Drawing upon mutual support from similarly situated candidates

- Reliance on comms staff (creating psychological distance)

- Support from community members with shared identities

Among these, candidates and staffers provided a much greater level of detail and context for the following coping strategies: blocking and not engaging–hiding, taking down posts or comments; actively countering false narratives; delegating; and reporting abusive content to social media platforms.

One staffer noted that blocking and not engaging was the default strategy employed during the campaign because it aligned with operating procedures sanctioned by the DCCC:[9]

> "…there was protocol for that. A lot of it was hiding comments, and just not engaging was the biggest thing. I think it was a little bit to our detriment at some points, because then nobody's saying, "No, this rumor is false." But it was from the guidance of the comms director, the campaign manager, and the DCCC where it was pretty much just don't even respond and don't even do anything about it. That's pretty much the protocol…even whether they were mean, they were false, the official protocol was to not respond." (Staffer)

It's hard to say how effective this approach was, as the interviewees themselves were not sure. Most of these strategies were left to the candidates and their teams to manage, and no apparent party-based coordination mechanisms were in place to address mis- and disinformation and online GBV.

In addition, there was confusion about how hiding, deleting comments, removing posted content or actively countering false narratives might violate campaign rules around record keeping. Interviewees expressed concern that these specific actions could be construed as an attempt to tamper with the record of campaign interactions. These decisions were especially fraught when campaigns were uncertain about whether posts were from constituents, and even more so when the narratives misrepresented the candidate's positions on policy matters. Staffers described questioning whether deletions were allowed by the party:

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9 The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee is the official campaign arm of the Democrats in the House of Representatives. Its mission is to help elect Democratic house candidates to Congress.

> "We were running ads and people would respond directly to the ads and say some pretty ridiculous things, and so we went back and forth on, are we allowed to delete comments? Are we allowed to hide comments, and I think we did end up hiding some of the comments on the page that were particularly explicit or racist or sexist, just because we didn't think that it was a good idea to keep them up there for folks to see, and so that's one of the ways we dealt…" (Staffer)

Lastly, participants talked about their experiences reporting abusive content to platforms. Most candidates described using platform reporting mechanisms at least once. Of these reports, only one respondent successfully petitioned the platform to remove content that was false or abusive. According to study participants, the platform least responsive to user reporting was Facebook.

What Do Candidates and Staffers Think Social Media Platforms and Other Political Candidates Need to Know?

In addition to discussing some of the tactics used to cope with online GBV and mis- and disinformation, interviewees also raised specific concerns about how solutions might be developed to address these problems. More specifically, they highlighted several issues they felt social media companies and other political candidates should be aware of. According to respondents, addressing these concerns would go a long way toward helping them navigate the mis- and disinformation and abusive content they experienced on social media platforms.

Issues for Social Media Platforms' Attention

Respondents raised concerns that, as page administrators, campaigns did not have enough control in managing abusive content on their pages. This included being able to control how comments were handled after being posted and control over who was able to comment on posts. Interviewees explained that without better tools they were exposed to trolls and other bad actors who took advantage of the open platform to spread hate.

Interviewees also expressed concerns with respect to countering online GBV and mis- and disinformation. Specifically, they raised concerns that positive content focused on women of color is not amplified on social media platforms. They also raised concerns about the imbalance in the amount of positive content available to counter what they saw as an overabundance of hateful, bitter narratives and abuse aimed against women of color. Our discussions with the candidates and staffers did not raise specific suggestions on how social media platforms should address this.

In addition, interviewees said that campaign teams sometimes lacked sufficient social media training, specifically on how to best amplify their own political brand in the face of targeted harassment, and on how to use the platform to tell their own story. Without this type of training, interviewees found that, inevitably, the mis- and disinformation and abusive content targeting them drowned out their own campaign messaging.

Finally, some candidates were also concerned about the ways user anonymity might incentivize people to post and spread false or abusive content. In their view, anonymity promoted a lack of user accountability encouraging people to spread lies with impunity. Other candidates did not take this view and (as noted earlier) mentioned that knowing who the perpetrators of certain abusive posts were, because their names were public, did not lessen traumatic impacts, and, in fact, may have heightened them.

Issues for Candidates' Attention

In addition to raising concerns for social media companies, the candidates and staffers also underscored key areas of concern for similarly situated candidates running for elected offices. They raised two main points. First, they noted the lack of resiliency training options from campaign training organizations, especially those focused on women candidates. And second, they were concerned about the low awareness among candidates and their teams about how to practice digital safety and security online.

On the first point, resiliency training has been used in other contexts where people face online GBV and mis- and disinformation. For example, much like women politicians, women journalists are also subject to online GBV and coordinated mis- and disinformation attacks and are therefore subject to trauma exposure (Posetti et al., 2020). Resiliency training has been used to improve the capacity of journalists to adapt to and recover from exposures to traumatic and stressful circumstances (Martin & Murrell, 2020). Resiliency training can teach tactics to shield oneself from mis- and disinformation and online GBV, as well as how to engage in self-care, including ways to reflect on abuse and to recover one's sense of self and social connectedness in doing so.

According to interviewees, the damage they sustained from coordinated mis- and disinformation and online GBV was substantial, which underscores the utility of resiliency in weathering these attacks during a campaign. A number of respondents asserted that it was their responsibility to build their own resilience and to learn new skills for navigating the realities of political campaigning. To be clear, this assertion was not an attempt at self-blame: fault and responsibility are not the same. Respondents were not at fault for the content directed at them, but they believed that they and their teams alone shouldered the responsibility of figuring out how to move forward despite it.

As for the concern about candidate awareness, there are resources available (see for example, Cheng et al., 2009) which discuss how to assess risks online, incorporate security best practices, prevent doxing, and other digital security measures.[10] Interviewees' lack of awareness of these resources suggests that, at the very least, there needs to be more outreach and education for political campaigns, party organizations, and other organizations that work with candidates about sources of information on digital security.

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10 Other useful resources to aid in this endeavor include Tall Poppy (2022), (resources for dealing with online harassment), Block Party (2022), (helps manage harassment on Twitter), Glitch UK founder Seyi Akiwowo's book, How to Stay Safe Online, (Akiwowo, 2022) and A Digital Resilience Toolkit for Women in Politics from #ShePersisted (Wilfore, 2022).

Summary of Impacts of Mis- and Disinformation and Online GBV Targeting Women of Color Political Candidates

The interviews we conducted reveal some of the main impacts of mis- and disinformation and online GBV targeted at women of color political candidates and their campaigns. Interviewees targeted by harassers reported feeling diminished, questioning their worth, etc. This is a compounding trauma for women of color: the intersectional nature of online harassment is a second arrow landing in the same wound as the first.

Interviewees believed that the people behind attacks aimed to destroy their resolve and to persuade them to internalize the abuse directed toward them. In other words, they perceived the purpose was for them to drop out of politics and to accept the oppression they faced. In their view the mis- and disinformation and abuse was less about damaging their reputations or challenging their electoral prospects with voters. The attack itself functioned to enforce the boundaries of an identity, policing certain people on the basis of a very specific understanding of, in this case, what it means to be a woman or a woman of color. In the case of online GBV targeted toward women of color candidates, identity-based attacks surround the transgressiveness of running for office (i.e., a woman seeking power, as someone presumed unworthy of power or authority; or a woman of color seeking status and power as someone presumed unworthy of either).

We learned that, although many of the attacks were severe, candidates displayed a significant degree of resolve, resiliency and coping skill alongside their campaign teams. In most instances, study participants finished out their races and many remain in politics in some capacity. By necessity, women of color in the U.S. have always had to deal with misogyny and abuse, and these experiences likely helped some build resilience in electoral contexts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that women of color candidates face significant and substantial mis- and disinformation and online abuse, often at higher levels than other types of candidates. Record numbers of women of color are running for office in the U.S., in spite of the psychological toll of the trauma exposure from online mis- and disinformation and abuse. However, online mis- and disinformation and abuse may discourage even more women of color from running for political office or from continuing to serve in offices they currently hold. When women of color face this kind of exclusion from participation in public life, it undermines the ability of our society to function as a representative democracy.

To ensure that women of color continue to seek political office, it is imperative to address the pervasive online abuse and mis- and disinformation that they face by reducing its prevalence and by providing women (and all users) with tools and resources to mitigate its effects. We recommend social media companies, campaigns, and researchers take the steps outlined below to tackle the threats to women of color candidates posed by mis- and disinformation and online abuse.

Social media companies should:

- Clearly articulate policies that prohibit content that harasses or abuses someone on the basis of gender or race.

- Offer trainings for political campaigns on how to use their platforms and specifically on tools that are available to users to address online abuse and mis- and disinformation.

- Publicly provide information about how they consider gender and race in their policies and enforcement processes against mis- and disinformation and abuse.

- Provide publicly available transparency reports around election mis- and disinformation and abuse before, during, and after an election. These reports could provide a holistic view into content moderation and integrity operations by the service during the period around a specific election (e.g., aggregated numbers on flagged posts and actions taken), and should include a focus on mis- and disinformation and abuse that targets political candidates, broken down by demographics.
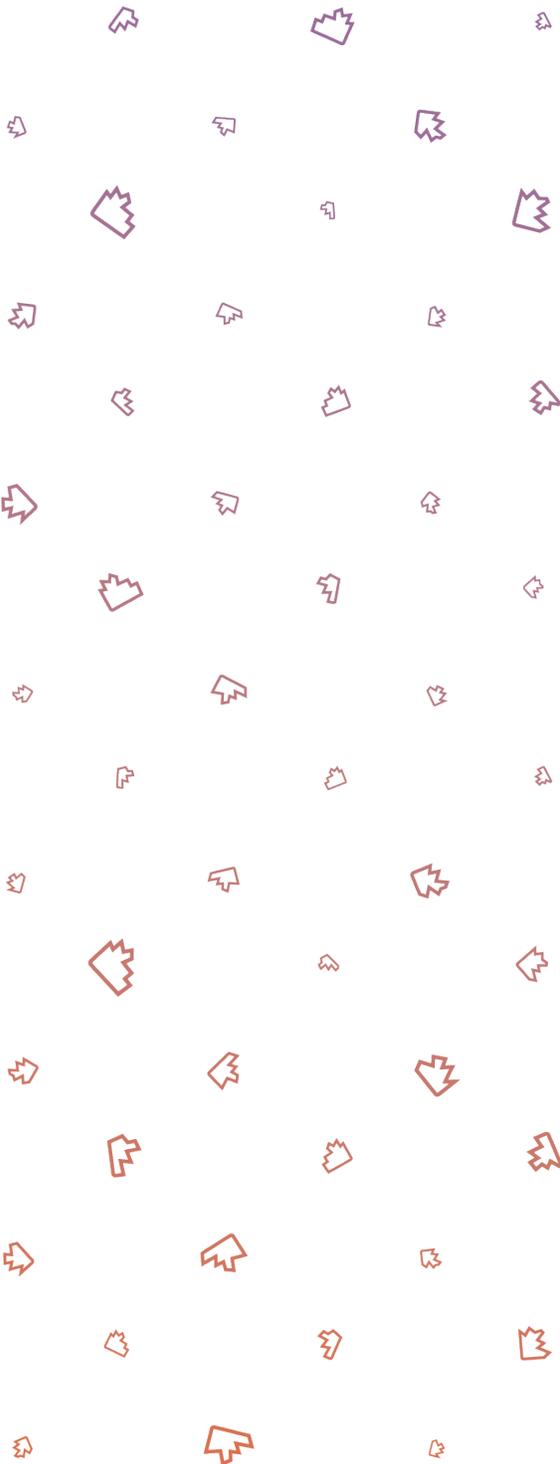
- ◦ Make data available to independent researchers that enables them to study the impact of mis- and disinformation and online abuse, including GBV, on political candidates.

- ◦ Companies should work directly with researchers to understand what data they need to conduct these studies. This may include data about content posted publicly or privately. It may also include data about the social media company's content moderation actions, including how much content is reported to them as violating their policies against mis- and disinformation or election mis- and disinformation; how much content they proactively detect that violates these policies; how much of the content reported or proactively detected they take action on and how much they do not take action on; and how quickly they act on content that violates these policies. In addition, it may include data about the impact of those content moderation actions.

- ◦ Companies should explore ways to make real-time monitoring or capture of data available to researchers, and/or make available to researchers deleted content about or targeted at political candidates.

- ◦ Social media companies should create established processes by which researchers can request access to specific categories of data and the means by which their requests can be evaluated. For more information about how social media companies should think about providing access to data to independent researchers, (see Nicholas & Thakur, 2022).

- Take additional steps to protect and prevent abuse and mis- and disinformation from reaching women of color candidates. They should:

  - ◦ Conduct risk assessments of their ranking and recommendation systems to evaluate their impact on women of color candidates and what abuse mitigation measures the service provider can implement.

  - ◦ Offer tools that allow users to report content that violates the companies' policies against abuse or mis- and disinformation and to control who can interact with their accounts. Offer additional tools for verified accounts that allow targeted individuals, including women of color political candidates, to quickly escalate abuse reports to specially trained moderators. Ensure that tools offer granular levels of control that can be customized for different users' needs. Ideally, multiple options will be available for users to choose.

  - ◦ Invest additional resources into enforcement of content policies prohibiting abuse and mis- and disinformation in the run up to and after elections, including a necessary increase in responding to appeals. This should include investments in human reviewers that have expertise in online GBV and disinformation, particularly those targeted at women of color. Platforms should also start monitoring and enforcement early and continue it for a lengthy period of time after elections conclude, rather than starting enhanced enforcement too late or ending it too early.

◦ Ensure that content moderation systems, including human moderators and algorithmic systems, are attuned to the needs of and the threats faced by women of color political candidates, in particular. In addition to the risk assessments of algorithmic systems described above, companies should ensure that human moderators are trained to understand that women of color candidates may be particular targets for mis- and disinformation and abuse.

◦ Understand that not all candidates require the same type or degree of support from a social media service provider to address these problems. Rather than pursue a "one size fits all" approach, companies should consult with different candidates and organizations supporting women of color running for office to understand the range of abuse and the types of interventions that different types of candidates need.

• Scrutinize the role of political advertising in spreading mis- and disinformation and abuse on their services. Companies should explore ways to fact check advertisements, including advertisements placed by politicians or political campaigns. They should also make public comprehensive ad databases that allow the public to see all advertising on a platform (including political ads) and, at the very least, basic information such as the organization that bought it and basic targeting criteria.

Campaigns, political organizations, and other initiatives supporting candidates should:

• Offer free or low-cost campaign training designed to prepare women of color candidates for the social media landscape. Throughout the interviews (Part II), respondents noted the lack of this type of training. In particular, these organizations should test the efficacy of resilience training for up-and-coming women of color political candidates. This type of support could help boost the physical, mental, and emotional health of candidates who may underestimate the reality of campaigning as a woman of color in the United States on social media.

• Create additional toolkits to inform candidates of digital security best practices. Existing toolkits should be better promoted to address the needs of women of color candidates. Staff interviewees suggested that their experiences on their candidates' campaigns could be used to create additional toolkits to help other candidates in the future. These resources could focus on setting realistic expectations concerning the volume and variety of harmful content new candidates are likely to face online.

Future Areas of Research

With the publication of this study, we hope other scholars will pursue research analyzing the problem of online abuse and mis- and disinformation with an intersectional lens and that this work can serve as a point of reference for future scholarship. Much of the research around online GBV and gendered disinformation understands the problem as gendered, reporting findings on women in general, while also acknowledging the targeting of women of color, but does not dig deep enough into its intersectional nature.

RESEARCHERS SHOULD:

- Repeat this or a similar study for the 2022 U.S. elections, and use a longer period (i.e., more than 2 months) for data collection from Twitter.

- Expand research to other platforms, especially Facebook.

- Focus on abuse or mis- and disinformation from political candidates targeting women of color candidates.

- Examine posts where women of color candidates are not explicitly tagged or named but still referred to in other ways (e.g., by another name). Often, a political candidate and their supporters may post content with abuse or mis- and disinformation that targets a women of color candidate without explicitly tagging her, meaning that people outside of that particular echo-chamber are not necessarily aware of this abuse or mis/disinformation.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Additional Results - Content Analysis

Appendix B - Content Analysis Methods

Appendix C - Content Analysis Codebook

Appendix D - Content Analysis Platform and Coding Interface

Appendix E - Description of Qualitative Research Methods

Appendix F - Interview Guides for Candidates and Staffers

Appendix A - Additional Results - Content Analysis

Type of Candidate	Count of Candidates	Average % of tweets containing disinfo
POC	**80**	**5.1%**
Women of Color	38	6.0%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	4	4.6%
Black or African American	20	7.5%
Hispanic or Latino	11	3.9%
Multiracial and MENA	3	5.8%
Men of Color	42	3.9%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	3.9%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	6	4.6%
Black or African American	21	4.0%
Hispanic or Latino	8	3.9%
Multiracial	6	2.2%
White	**212**	**3.1%**
Female	65	2.8%
White Women	65	2.8%
Male	147	3.3%
White Men	147	3.3%
Total	**292**	**3.6%**

▲ **Table A1. Expanded results - Average % of tweets with mis- and disinformation about or towards candidates by race and gender type.** Results are from the content analysis of tweets at or about 292 candidates that ran for Congress in 2020. The percentages are based on tweets targeted at or about candidates that included each type of content (n=49,052) and not all the tweets in the dataset.

Source - CDT

Type of Candidate	Count of Candidates	Average % of tweets containing abuse
POC	**80**	**12.1%**
Women of Color	38	12.2%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	4	5.6%
Black or African American	20	11.7%
Hispanic or Latino	11	16.3%
Multiracial and MENA	3	13.5%
Men of Color	42	10.9%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	14.9%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	6	11.1%
Black or African American	21	9.4%
Hispanic or Latino	8	14.3%
Multiracial	6	12.8%
White	**212**	**12.8%**
Female	65	7.5%
White Women	65	7.5%
Male	147	15.2%
White Men	147	15.2%
Total	**292**	**12.6%**

▲ **Table A2. Expanded results - Average % of tweets with abuse about or towards candidates by race and gender type.**

Source - CDT

Type of Candidate	Count of Candidates	Average % of tweets containing abuse+disinfo
POC	**80**	**5.1%**
Women of Color	38	3.3%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	4	1.8%
Black or African American	20	4.4%
Hispanic or Latino	11	2.0%
Multiracial and MENA	3	2.8%
Men of Color	42	2.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.6%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	6	2.7%
Black or African American	21	2.5%
Hispanic or Latino	8	2.1%
Multiracial	6	1%
White	**212**	**1.6%**
Female	65	1.6%
White Women	65	1.6%
Male	147	1.6%
White Men	147	1.6%
Total	**292**	**3.6%**

▲ **Table A3. Expanded results - Average % of tweets with abuse+disinfo about or towards candidates by race and gender type.**

Source - CDT

Type of Abuse	POC Female (n=38)	POC Male (n=42)	White Female (n=65)	White Male (n=147)	All Candidates (n=292)
Demeans or belittles	66.25%	71.14%	66.23%	73.60%	70.64%
Direct threat	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Indirect threat	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Doxing	0.3%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%
Embarrassing content	1.4%	1.8%	1.1%	0.8%	1.1%
Impersonation	0.4%	1.1%	0.2%	0.9%	0.7%
General offensive language	33.9%	43.2%	41.5%	44.5%	42.2%
Sexism or misogyny	29.7%	3.1%	21.5%	1.4%	9.9%
Racism	22.9%	20.8%	3.1%	1.0%	7.1%
Homophobia or transphobia	0.8%	1.5%	1.1%	0.9%	1.0%
Ethnic or religious slur	1.0%	0.2%	0.1%	0.0%	0.2%
Promotes or incites violence	4.7%	1.9%	0.6%	1.0%	1.5%
Sexual Assault	0.0%	0.2%	0.4%	0.4%	0.3%
Sexual Content	1.6%	0.2%	1.8%	1.7%	1.5%
Vandalizing	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
Other Form of Harassment	4.7%	1.1%	3.9%	2.4%	2.8%

▲ Table A4. Expanded results – Average % of abusive tweets received by type of candidate, and by abuse-type.

Source - CDT

Frequency Table:

disinfo	POCFemale	POCMale	WhiteFemale	WhiteMale
no	6198	6079	11698	23015
unverifiable	26	33	54	186
yes	400	247	333	783

Column Percentages:

disinfo	POCFemale	POCMale	WhiteFemale	WhiteMale
no	93.6	95.6	96.8	96
unverifiable	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.8
yes	6	3.9	2.8	3.3
Total	100	100	100	100.1
Count	6624	6359	12085	23984

▲ **Table A5. Chi-square results: mis- and disinformation by race and gender**. Pearson's Chi-squared test: X-squared = 169.36, df = 6, p-value < 2.2e-16. Source - CDT

Frequency Table:

abuse	POCFemale	POCMale	WhiteFemale	WhiteMale
no	5816	5666	11179	20348
yes	807	693	906	3636

Column Percentages:

abuse	POCFemale	POCMale	WhiteFemale	WhiteMale
no	87.8	89.1	92.5	84.8
yes	12.2	10.9	7.5	15.2
Total	100	100	100	100
Count	6623	6359	12085	23984

▲ **Table A6. Chi-square results: abuse by race and gender**. Pearson's Chi-squared test - X-squared = 451.43, df = 3, p-value < 2.2e-16. Source - CDT

Frequency Table:

Disinfo.abuse	POCFemale	POCMale	WhiteFemale	WhiteMale
no	6425	6244	11931	23686
yes	218	143	200	396

Column Percentages:

Disinfo.abuse	POCFemale	POCMale	WhiteFemale	WhiteMale
no	96.7	97.8	98.4	98.4
yes	3.3	2.2	1.6	1.6
Total	100	100	100	100
Count	6643	6387	12131	24082

▲ **Table A7. Chi-square results: disinformation+abuse by race and gender**. Pearson's Chi-squared test, X-squared = 82.186, df = 3, p-value < 2.2e-16. Source - CDT
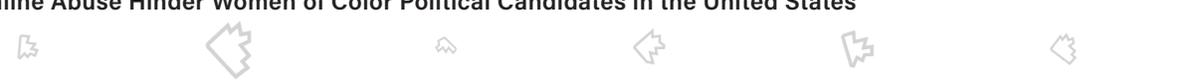
Appendix B - Content Analysis Methods

Research Ethics

In this work, we rely on public Twitter data posted by people around the 2020 elections in the U.S., that we obtained using the Twitter API for Academic Research (Twitter Developer Portal, 2022). Although this data is publicly available, researchers have considered the benefits and risks of using Twitter data for research. Prior work has looked at the gap between user agreement to terms of services of social media platforms and agreement to then have their posts analyzed in research (Zimmer, 2010). Other researchers have raised cases of posts shared during crisis and emergencies (Crawford & Finn, 2015), users unwittingly sharing private information via public posts (Mao, H., et. al. 2011), or even to the awareness of the fact that researcher APIs exist (Proferes, 2017). Due to all of these and other reasons, Fiesler and Proferes (2018) review concerns about whether or not public tweets should be quoted verbatim.

While we acknowledge these considerations, we found that, in order to address the objective of this research (identify mis- and disinformation and abuse targeted at women of color political candidates), we would need to collect and analyze tweets targeted at or about them, as there was no other feasible way of independently examining this phenomenon. That said, we took additional precautions when reporting on Twitter data we used. For example, although we decided to quote tweets verbatim, we removed handles and any other identifiable information of tweet authors. Overall our view is that the benefit of exemplifying the abuse and mis- and disinformation that women of color are subjected to outweigh potential risks for the people who posted abuse or mis- and disinformation once identifiable information is removed. Further, our considerations of the procedure, risks and applied precautions were submitted for external review and were approved by an independent IRB.
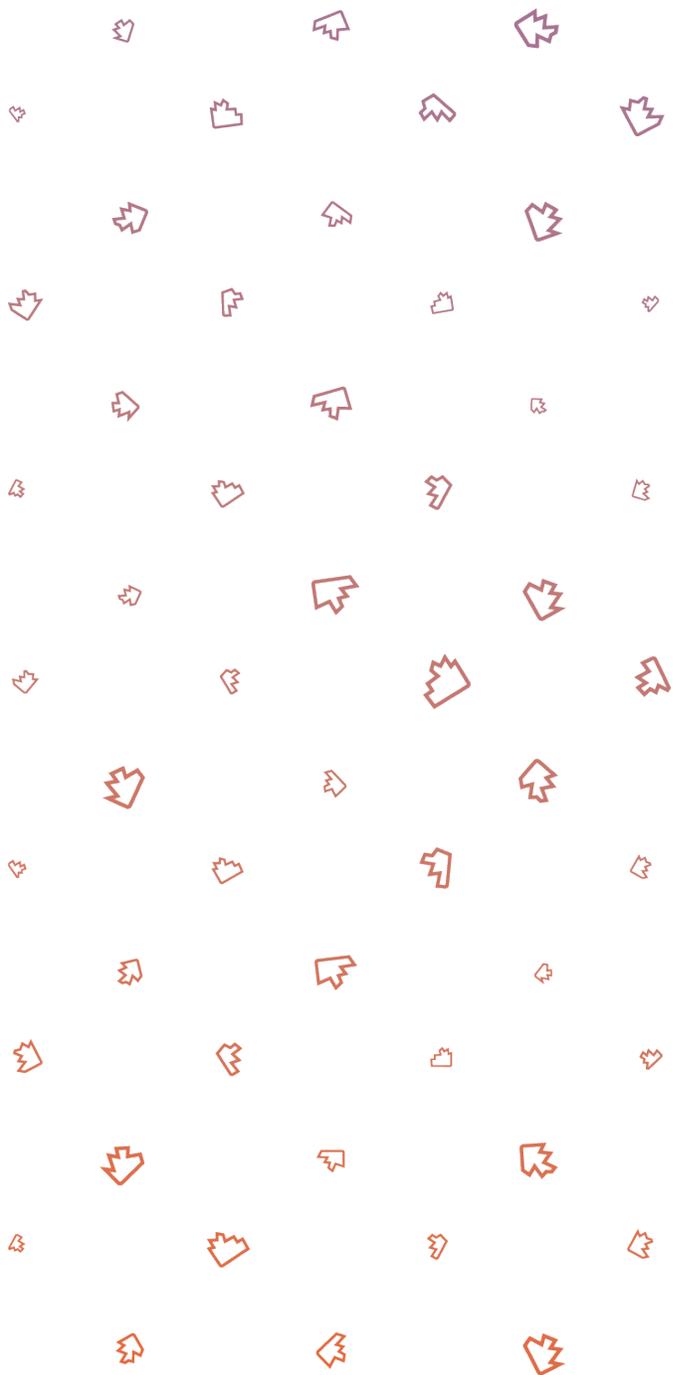
Research Variables

The research questions for the content analysis were as follows:

- Are women of color political candidates more likely than other candidates to experience mis- and disinformation about them on Twitter, and to what extent?

- Are women of color political candidates more likely than other candidates to experience abuse on Twitter, and to what extent?

- Are women of color political candidates more likely than other candidates to experience mis- and disinformation about them and abuse on Twitter, and to what extent ?

The content analysis of this research thus focused on two variables: abuse and mis- and disinformation. Both abuse and mis- and disinformation were previously researched in the context of social media—we built on prior research efforts to learn about these variables in the context of women of color political candidates in the 2020 election cycle.

ABUSE

One of the most prominent approaches to researching abuse on social media using content analyses is by using Natural Language Processing (NLP). This is especially valuable for large-scale studies that intend to extensively analyze content on a platform, which would require too many resources to do manually. However, given the sensitivity and complexity of fully understanding abuse towards women of color political candidates, we decided to approach the study using manual tweet-by-tweet coding and to work with a group of ten coders to maintain scale. As noted in the report itself, manual coding allowed us to take into consideration the socio-political context of GBV and the nuance of abuse. For example, NLP may indicate abusive language, but not who the language is directed towards. Or, NLP may detect slurs, but sometimes these are used in a positive context, for instance in inner-group reclaiming of slurs among marginalized communities (Thiago, et. al., 2021).

MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

Mis- and disinformation is an even more complicated variable to code in a content analysis, as even a manual tweet-by-tweet approach of a human coder is not sufficient to determine which content is or is not mis/disinformation. This cannot be done solely with NLP, (see for example Judson et al., 2020) as the process requires the ability to distinguish between an opinion and a stated fact, and to be able to judge whether the stated would qualify as mis/disinformation if it was false.

Most prior work that examined the question of mis- and disinformation on social media relied on lists of news sources and their determined credibility that have been developed by researchers over time (Guess, et. al., 2018; Grinberg, et. al., 2019). Other research projects have relied on fact-checking websites to identify mis- and disinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Huang & Carley, 2020).

Our approach was a combination of both compiled lists of reliable and unreliable sources, as well as using fact-checking websites to code specific narratives. For each tweet, coders were asked to determine whether it clearly contained mis/disinformation, does not, or whether there is information in the tweet that is "unverifiable" just from looking at it. In such cases of "unverifiable" tweets, two lead researchers of the study went through all tweets that were coded as "unverifiable", and used prior compiled lists, like Media Bias/Fact Check (2022), a fact-checking website, and discussion to resolve each case of "unverifiable" tweets. If the tweet could not be verified or refuted, the tweet was left as "unverifiable" in the dataset (and was not considered mis- or dis information in the analysis).

Team of Coders

Given the dynamic forms and nuanced features of both misogynistic and racist language, we required a team of coders who could interpret these variations. In addition to their professional experience, we specifically aimed to build a diverse team in terms of gender and racial background to improve the likelihood that our team would have capacity and enough familiarity to identify racism or misogyny directed toward ethnically diverse groups of people. In order to accomplish this, we selected a group composed of a disproportionately higher share of women and people of color. (See "Coder Training" for more on how we prepared the team to conduct this work.)

Our team of ten coders included eight women (80%) and two men; six people on the team were identifiable as people of color (60%) and the majority were enrolled in graduate student programs (60%). In selecting this team, we prioritized coders with prior experience conducting or assisting qualitative research. We were especially interested in applicants with content analysis experience, and especially those with familiarity in identifying and coding for online mis- and disinformation and abuse on social media.

Based on the potential for indirect trauma or negative emotional impacts from exposure to online abuse, misogyny and racism during the coding procedure, we created a space for the team to support and learn from each other throughout the project. We held weekly meetings during the main phase of the project ranging in duration from

30 minutes to 1 hour designed to allow the group to express individual experiences and reactions to coding this type of content in a group setting. In these sessions, we facilitated open discussion focused on coders' visceral reactions, feelings of stress or other types of discomfort related to the content encountered during coding.

It was important that everyone was given the opportunity to share their individual reactions, and to accomplish this we structured the time so that each individual was given space to discuss the content they'd seen, this meant that everyone held the floor at least once per meeting. We regularly discussed tactics for relieving tension as well as strategies for managing the workflow of a coding session. Anecdotally, some coders suggested listening to movie scores and coding outdoors as a means of grounding themselves while working. We also learned that many coders refrained from using Twitter or other social media services during the project in order to create distance between themselves and social media content outside of their work.

To pace participants' exposure to abusive content throughout the project, we limited coder's work per day to four hours, while encouraging them to take as many breaks as needed. Most participants were able to do the assigned daily work in less time. When recruiting coders, we also ensured that they had adequate availability during the project, and that they were not adding this research as overtime work, given emotional and mental requirements of the project.

Lastly, we provided coders with an open chat and email communication with the lead researchers, and reminded them that they are free to bring up any concerns, additionally needed breaks and other accommodation to prioritize their well-being while working on this research.

Coder Preparation

Given the scale of the project and the complexity of both abuse and mis/disinformation variables, we made significant effort towards creating a shared understanding of these terms and how to identify them in tweets among the lead researchers and the 10 coders working on the project. To do so, we facilitated a week-long "orientation" followed by a week-long "testing" phase for the 10 coders to get acquainted with the codebook, content and research questions. In addition, we maintained an open channel for questions via a group chat, and conducted weekly discussion meetings to discuss uncertainties in coding and recurrent challenges.

Coding Category	Fleiss' Kappa Scores at Day 5
Related to Candidate	0.5
Stance	0.609
Narrative	0.426
Abuse	0.529
Mis/Disinformation	0.49

▲ **Table B1. Fleiss' Kappa Scores at Day 5.**

Source - CDT

ORIENTATION

The lead researchers of this study facilitated a week-long orientation for the 10 coders who took part in the content analysis coding. Throughout this week, we familiarized coders with the codebook and its criteria, taught them to use the coding interface (see Appendix D), and formed a mutual language within the team about how to code a range of content types and aspects. For the research team itself, this orientation allowed discussion and modification of coding categories, adjustments to the codebook as needed, and iterations on the coding platform to be intuitive and easy for the coders to use.

During this orientation phase, each member of the team coded the same set of 100 tweets per day (for five days, with a total of 500 tweets by the end of the week). At the end of each coding day, we calculated Fleiss' Kappa scores for intercoder reliability (i.e. the extent to which different coders applied the same labels to a tweet—Kappa scores calculate the agreement between coders about how to label a piece of content beyond chance (McHugh, 2012). During this week, the intercoder reliability score improved significantly and reached an acceptable level towards the end of the week. The Twitter data used for training during the orientation week was excluded from the study (n=500).

Fleiss' Kappa Scores varied for different variables; the general rule according to prior work is that 0.21-0.4 is fair, 0.41-0.6 is moderate, 0.61-0.8 is substantial, and above 0.81 is almost perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012). In the orientation process, we were able to reach a moderate score of coder agreement. We found this to be acceptable for the purpose of the study, due to the subjective nature of understanding cultural aspects of political discussions, what should be deemed abuse (or not), what is clearly mis/disinformation (or not), as well as the large team of coders.

In addition to calculating Fleiss' Kappa scores for intercoder reliability for each variable, researchers and coders had a daily briefing as part of the orientation to discuss any questions about coding or about the codebook, and to move towards a shared understanding of how to interpret the content of this study.

Coding Category	Cohen's Kappa Scores
Related to Candidate	0.560
Stance	0.607
Narrative	0.474
Abuse	0.523
Mis/Disinformation	0.515

▲ **Table B2. Cohen's Kappa Scores.**

Source - CDT

TESTING PHASE

We defined the first week of coding (after the orientation week) as a "testing phase." During this week, every two coders received the same 250 tweets per day, coding a total of 5000 tweets as a team over that week. The goal was to have two coders code each tweet so that we could calculate the intercoder reliability score for a portion of the analyzed data (a total of 5% of the overall data coded in the study). We calculated Cohen's Kappas for the entire dataset used in the testing phase (Cohen's Kappa is a more appropriate analysis for comparing 2 coders per tweet, as opposed to comparing more than two coders, which is best done by calculating Fleiss' Kappa).

In contrast to the data used in orientation, the data during the testing phase was used in our final analysis (as intercoder reliability scores were consistently acceptable). Given our acceptable intercoder reliability scores, and the sense of saturation of codebook definitions and examples we transitioned to single-coding per tweet for the rest of the content analysis, accompanied by weekly discussions. The differences in agreement remained in the margin of personal judgment for specific tweets. Further, we recruited a diverse range of coders to include people with a range of lived experiences, which we anticipated would also result in a range of interpretations to content about race and gender.

For the rest of the content, given the scale of data, each tweet was coded once by a single coder, with an additional 9500 tweets per coder (a total of 10,000 per coder including the testing phase).

Appendix C - Content Analysis Codebook

The codebook included five categories that were essential for answering our research questions: mis- and disinformation, abuse, identity, sentiment and narrative. Most important was whether **mis- and disinformation** and **abuse** were present in a tweet in order to answer our questions regarding the extent to which women of color are subjected to abuse and mis- and disinformation about them on social media. We also coded for **identity**, to better understand which, if any, aspect of a candidate's identity is mentioned, and to better understand when a candidate's race and gender are both mentioned. We also coded for other mentions of identity, such as disability and sexual orientation for future research and analysis on intersectionality of experienced mis- and disinformation and abuse.

To analyze and to better understand the content of the tweet, we also used a top-down approach in which we built on prior work that used **sentiment** and **narrative** as indications of the kinds of conversations that are occurring about political candidates. **Sentiment** gauges the general stance towards a candidate (Zhou et al., 2013; Oh & Kumar, 2017) and **narrative** identifies the aspect that the speaker focuses on when discussing a candidate (this allows, for instance, to understand when the majority of conversation about candidates is about their character or about their identity, as opposed to about their ideology or policy) (Oates et al. 2019).

We followed up with piloting, in which the lead researchers tested and coded a few hundred tweets from our dataset. We set out to learn whether these defined categories comprise the data in our content analysis, and whether they would successfully answer our research question. After several iterations of bottom-up piloting and refining of coding categories, we ensured that the codes in our codebook were suitable for the study, and that they answered our targeted research questions.

Below we discuss each of the categories that we coded for in our analysis, how they were defined and what they attempted to learn about individual tweets.

Related to Candidate: yes, no

After several internal pilots, we learned that many of the tweets mention a political candidate, but the tweet is not necessarily about them. For example, someone may ask for a candidate to respond, or mention them just as a way to inform them about a particular topic of discussion.

Thus, the first category that each tweet was coded for was **whether or not the tweet is about the candidate, or if it is related to the candidate in some way**. If not, coders were instructed to select "not related"—in such a case, coders did not code for any other category in the codebook for that particular tweet. This is because we set out to focus on tweets about each candidate, and a tweet that only mentions them but does not refer to them was defined as outside the scope of our work.

Mis- and Disinformation: yes, no, unverifiable

In our study, we defined mis- and disinformation as false information that is shared, whether that be information specifically about a candidate, or general false information. Sometimes tweets contained both. This is a complicated variable to code for in a content analysis, as it is difficult to determine which content is or is not mis/disinformation. Previous research had examined the question of mis- and disinformation on social media by relying on lists of news sources and their determined credibility (Guess, et. al., 2018; Grinberg, et. al., 2019). Other research projects have made use of fact-checking websites to determine mis- and disinformation by creating a list of specific false narratives on a particular topic (such as the Trump-Clinton elections (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and the novel coronavirus (Huang & Carley, 2020).

Coders were asked to code for mis- and disinformation if it was evident just from the tweet itself; for example, if the tweet was about a known conspiracy theory, voter fraud or about Covid misinformation. However, frequently it was difficult to determine whether a tweet spreads misinformation solely from the tweet itself. In such a case, coders were instructed to select "unverifiable" for the category of mis/disinformation. These cases were resolved through discussion and fact checking by the lead researchers, as described in Appendix B: Methods.

Abuse: yes, no

To directly answer our research questions, we also coded for abuse (*Does the tweet contain abuse towards the candidate? (Yes / No)*). Initially we also included a "borderline" category, but after piloting and orientation with the team of coders, we learned that a category of "borderline" introduced more subjectivity to the coding process. Instead, we asked participants to code everything that seemed even remotely abusive as "yes"—because we also had a category for the type of abuse, we could determine the severity of abuse based on the abuse type. In other words, what coders initially deemed as "borderline" abuse were tweets that were ultimately categorized as "belittling" or "general offensive language".

ABUSE TYPES

Demeans or belittles
Direct threat
Indirect threat
Doxing
Embarrassing content
Impersonation
General offensive language
Sexism or misogyny
Racism
Homophobia or transphobia
Ethnic or religious slur
Promotes or incites violence
Sexual content
Vandalizing
Other form of harassment

▲ **Table C1. Types of abuse.**

Source - CDT

We attempted to identify as many abuse types as possible, and to make sure to comprise all abuse types that might be found in public tweets. To do so we began with a list of abuse types based on prior work (Waseem et al. 2017; Guerin & Maharasingam-Shah, 2020). Then, we examined the categories of abuse that are listed in reporting tools on Twitter. Finally, through internal piloting and orientation, we continued refining the categories of abuse types bottom-up, and adding categories as needed. We resulted in an extensive list of abuse types that can be found in public tweets (the list excludes other types of abuse that are outside the scope of this research, like spamming or stalking).

The categories of abuse types are not mutually exclusive—coders were instructed to select multiple types of abuse if they seemed to apply to a particular tweet.

Identity Type: race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, other

We coded for identity type to better understand which, if any, aspects of candidates' identity are mentioned in a tweet. In addition to the main focus of this work, which was on race and gender and their intersectionality, we also wanted to learn about any additional intersectionality for candidates who identified as a minority in other identity categories. We thus instructed coders to also code for any mentions of a candidate's disability, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic status, or other form of identity. This too, was a multi-select question. This list was generated using a bottom-up approach during the internal piloting stage.

Identity Stereotypes

To better understand the types of references to identity that are discussed in tweets, we coded for specific identity stereotypes that were expressed in tweets. To do so, we formed a list of common stereotypes based on prior work: gender and race stereotypes (Gordon, 2017; Heldman, 2018; Dovidio, 1986; Gaertner, 1983; Tukachinsky, 2017), and LGBTQ+ (Chung, 2007; Tagudina, 2012) and disability stereotypes (Burns & Haller, 2015). Coders were familiarized with these common stereotypes and were asked to examine whether or not they appear in each tweet that included a particular identity category. A full list of the stereotypes we included and their descriptions can be found in the full codebook for this project.

Sentiment (i.e., Stance): Negative, positive, neutral

Sentiment was a category that intended to gauge the overall position towards the candidate within a particular tweet. This kind of category is common for content analyses, whether those be automatic NLP studies or manual coding practices (Zhou et al., 2013; Oh & Kumar, 2017; Oates et al. 2019). The goal was, together with the Narrative variable, to gain a general understanding of the kinds of conversations that were occurring about political candidates. Sentiment also provides a broader perspective in showing what proportion of tweets are negative in sentiment but that are legitimate, as opposed to tweets that are abusive.

Narrative: Character, identity, ideology, policy, electability

Participants were asked to code for the type of narrative about the candidate that they identify in the tweet. The goal was to understand the type of conversations that were being had about a particular candidate. For instance, it allowed us to explore whether, for example, the center of public discourse for some candidates was their character or personality, while for others the main topic of discussion was more professional, about their ideology or policy.

We were interested in this aspect of tweets as literature has consistently shown that women politicians' personal life and personality were more likely to be discussed in media and among public discourse, in contrast to men candidates who were represented in reference to their political and professional opinions (Van Zoonen, 2006; Harmer & Wring, 2013; O'Neill, 2016). We were particularly interested in narratives that were focused on candidates' identity, given our research questions. It is important to note that identity, as part of narrative, looked into whether the main discussion topic of a tweet was about an aspect of a candidate's identity. This is different from the variable of "identity type," which coded for whether one or more aspects of a candidate's identity were mentioned in the tweet.

For further details about the different categories that were coded in the study, and how each was defined, see the full codebook here. This codebook was used as a document for coders to refer to when coding the content. It includes detailed explanations of each coding category, what is included and excluded from each definition, along with specific tweet examples.

Appendix D - Content Analysis Platform and Coding Interface

We developed a web interface, used as workflow management for our team of coders to facilitate the manual coding of the Twitter dataset. Primarily, we developed it as a coding tool that would clearly present the dataset (show tweets as they would be presented on the platform), and a quick and easy way to code the content according to our defined categories. Given the scale of this research project, it seemed worthwhile to develop a custom tool to provide an easy way for coders to view and code the content. Lastly, we wanted to make this interface publically available to encourage and support future research and content analyses.

The platform allowed two views, one for users and one for administrators. On the user side, coders saw tweets pulled from the dataset rendered as one might view them on Twitter, where any accompanying media (images, video, or links) are visually accessible and clickable. During a coding session coders were presented with a single tweet on the left side of the screen while codebook categories were displayed on the right (see Figures 12 & 13). Once a tweet was completely categorized coders could submit their selections before moving ahead to the next tweet in their queue (see Figure 13).

The platform was also designed to allow individual coders to log in using a specific set of credentials (see Figure 14). This structure allowed us to distinguish coding decisions made by individual team members and assess intercoder reliability during the testing phase. Later in the process, it allowed us to check on their progress and well-being individually.

The code for the coding interface used in this project is available on our github page:

https://github.com/CDT-Research
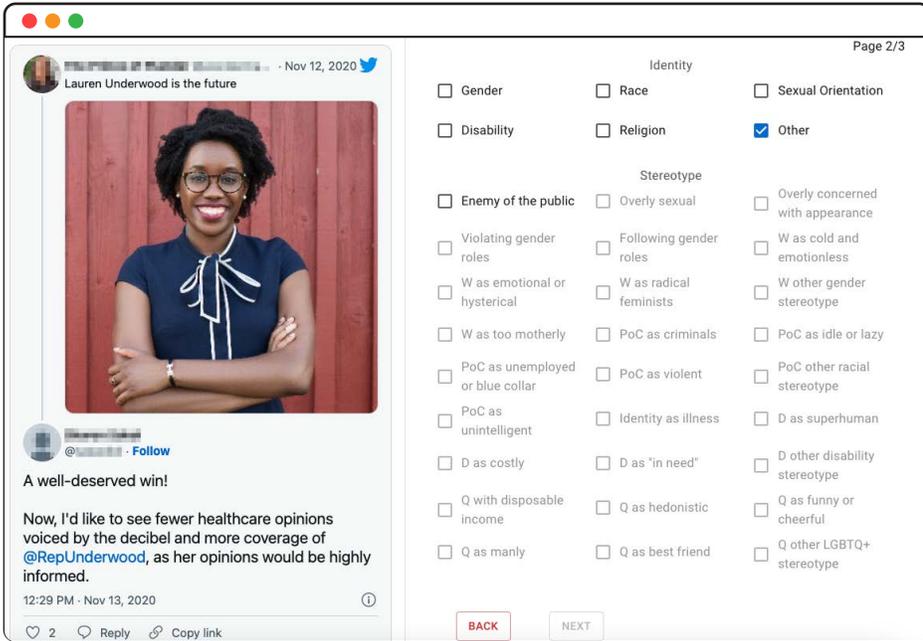
Figure 12. Example of user view, showing Twitter content on the left and codebook categories related to Identity on the right.

Source - CDT
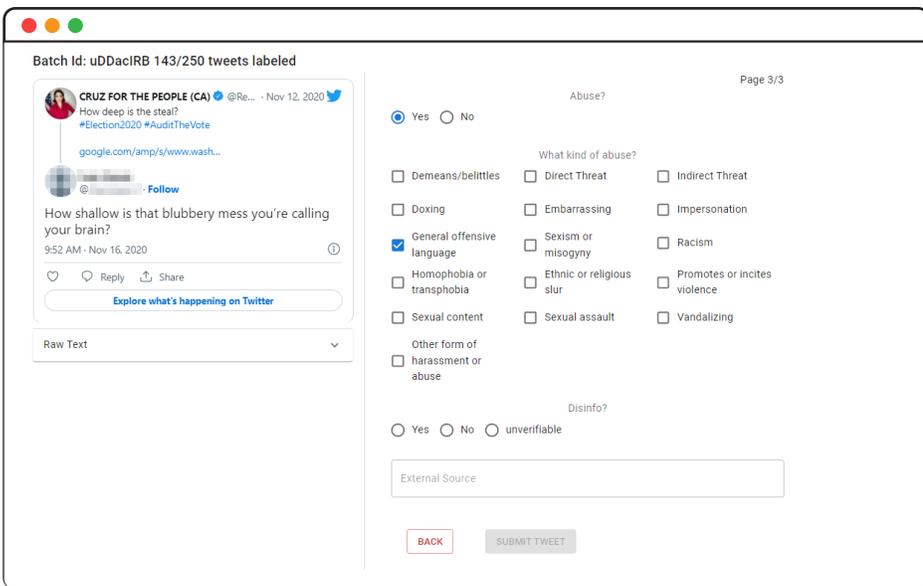
Figure 13. Example showing Twitter content on the left, codebook categories on the right and submission button on the bottom.

Source - CDT
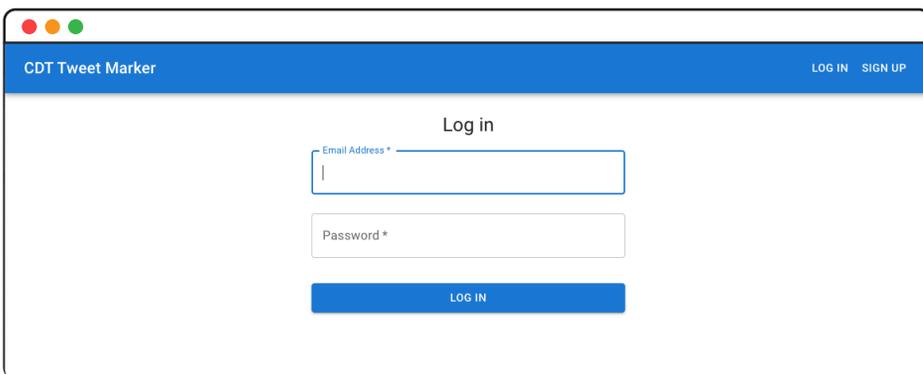
Figure 14. Example of User Login Screen on the 'CDT Tweet Marker' Platform.

Source - CDT

How Disinformation and Online Abuse Hinder Women of Color Political Candidates in the United States

Appendix E - Description of Qualitative Research Methods

The current study employed a snowball sampling technique (Noy, 2008) which began by recruiting individuals known to self-identify with our eligibility criteria:

1. Self-identified as a women of color (WoC) who ran for political office (at any level) during the 2020 general election cycle, OR

2. Was a campaign staffer for a WoC who ran for political office during the 2020 election cycle; AND,

3. Used social media for campaigning during the 2020 election cycle;

Snowball sampling is useful when the phenomenon under consideration is uncommon, underexplored and yet, consequential. Our sample of interest was women of color running for elected office (from both major political parties), a specific and marginal percentage of the American population, but one that saw unprecedented numbers during the 2020 election cycle (Srikanth, 2020).

After collecting all associated social media handles for eligible candidates, this list was segmented according to social media engagement (high, medium, low) using Twego (2022), an analytics tool for calculating market and engagement value for Twitter user accounts. Outreach to candidates followed in descending order from candidates in the high to low engagement groups. Outreach to eligible members of Congress followed a similar pattern for members where there was no pre-existing relationship (cold outreach.) Additional methods used to reach sitting members included outreach to candidate training organizations and political digital analytics organizations, including those working specifically with women and candidates of color. This strategy aimed to reduce gatekeeper effects in government offices.

Respondents who completed the interview were asked to recommend others they knew who identified as WoC and ran during the 2020 general election, as well as to recommend one or more persons from their campaign who might share with us about their social media experience. The final set of respondents comprised 13 candidates and seven staffers. There were no age or geographic eligibility criteria for this study: respondent ages ranged from mid-twenties (20s) to early sixties (60s) and comprised a variety of states across the United States. Out of respect for our respondent's stories, we do not disclose the state, city, county, or outcome of their electoral bids.

The political candidate interview guide and the staff interview guide can be found in Appendix F. Each interview was conducted one on one with 2 research team members present: 1 team member took notes during the interview while the other conducted the interview. Across respondent groups, each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Following each interview, the two-member interview team met to debrief and assess developing themes.

Each interview was conducted via Zoom (2022) via a private meeting room accessible only by those with the link. Each interview was recorded, and the audio file sent via encrypted file transfer for transcription by the Rev transcription service (2022). Upon transcription, the resultant encrypted pdf was uploaded to the Dedoose qualitative software package for analysis (Dedoose Version 9.0.17). Within Dedoose, the same interviewing team coded the resultant transcripts for themes, following the methodological approach outlined below.

Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic content analysis is a rigorous qualitative method for identifying themes and categorizing them into domains (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a minimally invasive method that allows the researcher to identify, analyze, and report patterns within a dataset with or without a priori assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 79). In the current study, we employ thematic content analysis in its realist vein, using the method to identify the experiences, meanings, and realities of study participants, clearly indicating where we have chosen to interpret meaning and where participants have provided meaning themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pg. 81).

The study team engaged in one round of analytic coding, where each interview transcript was coded once for themes. We coded through once for two reasons: 1) the coding team was also the interviewing team, thus the data was gathered and analyzed by the same individuals; and 2) the interviewing team debriefed each interview together and recorded the debrief, which served to build the codebook inductively and in real time following each piece of data collection. Themes were categorized into substantive themes, such as "coping" and "resources," as well as exemplary themes, such as "blocking" and "community support," respectively.

Appendix F - Interview Guides for Candidates and Staffers

I. Candidate Interview Guide

Beginning Remarks BEFORE RECORDING:

Thanks so much for taking the time to meet with us. We're here to learn about how you experienced social media during your 2020 general election campaign. We're particularly interested in learning more about any instances of harmful or abusive content you may have encountered on social media platforms. Please remember that we will not share your name, affiliation, etc. at any point with anyone not explicitly listed on the consent form.

To make sure we don't use your name during the interview, would you like to choose an alias to refer to yourself by?

I'm going to start the recording now.

PRESS RECORD HERE

ALIAS, Have you read the consent form?

- If no: review informed consent together

- If yes: Do you consent to proceeding with the interview?

1. Would you please share with me your racial, ethnic, and gender identities?

2. Please tell me about how you used social media during your campaign (5 minutes).
    a. Active listening prompts:
        i. What platforms did you use for your campaign? (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.)
        ii. What did you and/or your team have to learn to accomplish that?
        iii. Who wrote your posts? On which platforms?

3. Tell me about the worst social media post you saw/heard about yourself during your campaign. (10 minutes)
    a. Active listening prompts:
        i. How did you feel, seeing that post?
        ii. Tell me about how, if at all, you thought to deal with the post?
        iii. Were there any offline actions that came from this post?
        iv. How did this impact your resolve to be in politics, if at all?

4. How do you think social media users responded to your race, ethnicity and gender during this campaign? (10 minutes)

   a. Active listening prompts:

      i. Why do you think that was the response?

      ii. Did you see similar social media responses to other women in politics during this time? Please tell me about what you saw.

5. Tell me about any social media posts you saw about yourself that were flat out untrue. (5 minutes)

   a. Active listening prompts:

      i. Tell me about how, if at all, you thought to deal with the post?

      ii. How did you feel, seeing that post?

      iii. How did other users respond to the post?

      iv. How did the platform respond to this post, if at all?

6. To what extent do you think these false posts were related to your identity(s): race, gender, religion, etc. ?

   a. Do you have any screenshots of the posts that you feel comfortable sharing with me, for the purposes of this work? I would not share these posts in any writing, and can provide a secure ftp link via dropbox.

   b. If on Twitter: May I have your permission to collect your campaign's twitter timeline? Can you share the handle of the twitter profile you used?

7. What do you think would have helped you deal with this post/posts? (5 minutes)

   a. Active listening prompts:

      i. What, if anything, do you wish the platform would have done differently?

      ii. What do you wish your staff would have done differently? (if applicable)

      iii. What do you feel would be the fairest way to deal with this? How do we stop the behavior? (looking to solicit survivor-centered responses)

      iv. What kind of social media landscape would you like to see for young girls interested in pursuing politics?

8. Can you share the names of anyone on your current/former staff who you think I should talk to, to learn more about how your campaign was perceived by social media users? (1-2 minute)

9. Can you share the names of WoC political candidates/incumbents you think might have had similar experiences on social media, who would also be important for me to talk to? (1-2 minute)

10. Can I talk to you again if I have any more questions?

II. Staff Interview Guide

Beginning Remarks BEFORE RECORDING:

Thanks so much for taking the time to meet with us. We're here to learn about the 2020 general election campaign you were part of and your experiences with social media. We're particularly interested in learning more about any instances of harmful or abusive content you may have encountered on social media platforms directed at the campaign and/or candidate. Please remember that we will not share your name, affiliation, etc. at any point with anyone not explicitly listed on the consent form.

To make sure we don't use your name during the interview, would you like to choose an alias to refer to yourself by?

I'm going to start the recording now.

PRESS RECORD HERE

ALIAS, Have you read the consent form?

- If no: review informed consent together

- If yes: Do you consent to proceeding with the interview?

1. Would you please share with me your racial, ethnic, and gender identities?

2. Please tell me about how the campaign used social media in 2020 (5 minutes).

    a. Active listening prompts:

        i. What platforms did the campaign use? (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.)

        ii. What did you and/the team have to learn to accomplish that?

        iii. Who wrote the posts? On which platforms?

3. Please tell me about the worst social media post you saw/heard about the candidate/campaign during the 2020 election cycle. (10 minutes)

    a. Active listening prompts:

        i. How did you feel, seeing that post?

        ii. Tell me about how, if at all, you thought to deal with the post?

        iii. Were there any offline actions that came from this post?

        iv. How did this impact your resolve to be in political communication, if at all?

4. How did social media users engage with your candidate(s)' race, ethnicity, and/or gender on social media ?

   a. Active listening prompts:

      i. What stands out about engagement across platforms? On Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp?

      ii. Did you see similar social media responses to other women in politics during this time? Please tell me about what you saw

5. Tell me about any social media posts you saw about your candidate that were flat out untrue. (5 minutes)

   a. Active listening prompts:

      i. Tell me about how, if at all, the campaign sought to deal with these posts?

      ii. How did you feel, personally, seeing that post(s)?

      iii. How did other users respond to the post?

      iv. How did the platform respond to this post, if at all?

6. To what extent do you think these false posts were related to your candidate's identity(s): race, gender, religion, etc. ?

   a. Do you have any screenshots of the posts that you feel comfortable sharing with me, for the purposes of this work? I would not share these posts in any writing, and can provide a secure ftp link via dropbox.

7. What do you think would have helped the campaign deal with this post/posts? (5 minutes)

   a. Active listening prompts:

      i. What, if anything, do you wish the platform would have done differently?

      ii. What do you wish your staff would have done differently? (if applicable)

      iii. What do you feel would be the fairest way to deal with this? How do we stop the behavior? (looking to solicit survivor-centered responses)

      iv. What kind of social media landscape would you like to see for young girls interested in pursuing politics?

8. Are there any instances in which a social media issue moved offline?

9. What did you learn about how social media companies deal with offensive content?

   a. Active listening prompts:

      i. What kinds of conversations, if any, did you have with the platform about the post?

10. What do you think would have helped you deal with these posts?

    a.   Active listening prompts:

        i.   What, if anything, do you wish the platform would have done differently?

        ii.   What, if anything, do you wish you had done differently?

11. Can you share the names of any other campaign staff who you think we should talk to, to learn more about how WoC political campaigns are perceived by social media users?

12. Can you share the names of other WoC political candidates/incumbents you think might have had similar experiences on social media, who would also be important for us to talk to?

13. Transition out of interview
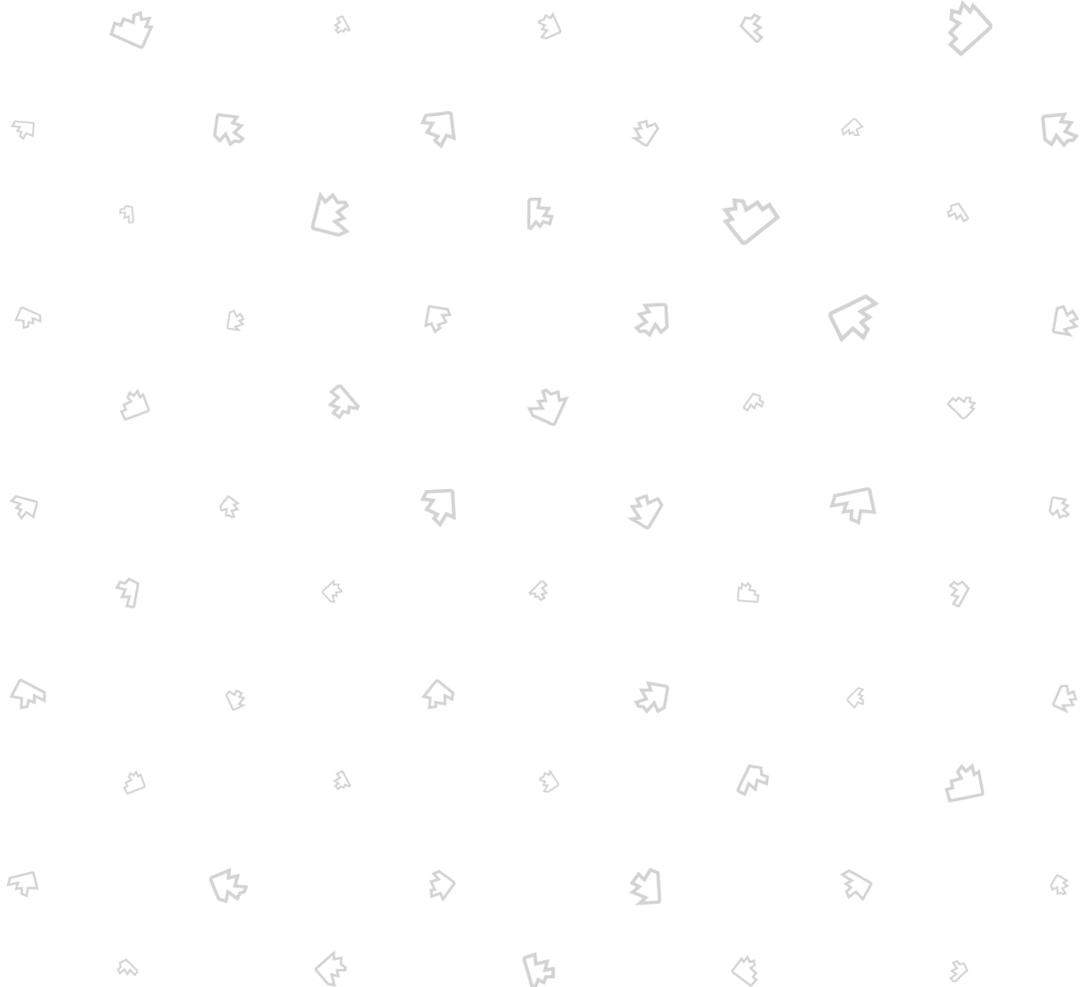
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