MASARYK UNIVERSITY

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Gender Aspects of Online Political Expression and Exclusion in the Perspective of Media Studies and Intersectionality

Habilitation Thesis

Kostelec u Nadryb, 2024   PhDr. Lenka Vochocová, Ph.D.

I declare that I have prepared this habilitation thesis independently using only the cited literature, information, and sources and that this thesis has not been submitted for the award of any previous title.

In Kostelec u Nadryb, 25 October 2024   …………………………...

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Abstract

This habilitation thesis examines the persistent marginalization of women and other groups in digital political participation, despite initial hopes that the Internet would foster emancipation and equality. From the perspective of gender media studies, it focuses on expressive forms of political participation, or "e-expression," and highlights that significant inequalities remain, particularly in more visible online spaces. The thesis summarizes findings from seven published interdisciplinary articles that combine the perspectives of political communication, media studies, and gender studies, employing a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, particularly textual analyses of online user discussions and qualitative analyses of in-depth interviews. Central themes include the gender gap in digital political spaces, the impact of online toxicity as an exclusionary discursive practice, and the strategies adopted by women in hostile digital environments. The research also investigates the potential for female-dominated spaces to provide safer platforms for women's political expression. It ultimately concludes that gender serves as a critical exclusionary factor, functioning as a specific "anti-discourse" that shapes online narratives and reinforces particular cultural identities.

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Contents

1. Commentary to habilitation thesis

1.1 Introduction: The aim and structure of the thesis

Despite initial optimism regarding the Internet's potential to enhance emancipation and equality in areas historically marked by exclusivity, including gender, extensive studies reveal that the marginalization of various groups, particularly women, persists in the digital realm (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021; Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021), especially with regard to the more exposed forms of online political expression (Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, & Bimber, 2021; Vochocová, Štětka, & Mazák, 2016). This habilitation thesis concentrates on the expressive forms of political participation in the digital sphere, often referred to as online expression or e-expressive political participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013) in media and communication studies, within the context of gendered digital divide (Küchler et al., 2023). It points out that significant inequalities continue to surface, especially in the more visible online arenas, and highlights the role of exclusionary discursive aspects of e-expression contributing to the deepening of the digital divide (Friz & Gehl, 2016; Polletta & Chen, 2013).

In this thesis, I summarize findings from seven published articles that contribute to the study of online expression, primarily through the lens of intersectional gender media studies. The articles employ a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches, combining various types of data, primarily textual data from online discussions on current political issues and data about online participation (both general surveys and in-depth interviews with active discussion participants). In terms of disciplines, the studies represent an interdisciplinary focus on the borders of political communication, media studies, and gender studies, examining the interplay between social media, political participation, and gender equity within the context of digital democracy.

This collection of articles chronicles a scientific journey exploring the persistent gender gap in digital political spaces (**Study I**) across various polarising political topics, specifically focusing on online toxicity as an exclusionary discursive practice (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Martinsson & Ericson, 2023). It emphasises the uncivil treatment that women and other vulnerable actors, particularly youth, must face in the digital sphere (**Study IV–VII**), while revealing the strategies women employ to navigate the hostile landscape (**Study II**). It further explores whether female-dominated third spaces can offer a more secure platform for women's political expression (**Study III**). Additionally, it suggests that gender serves as a general exclusionary factor in online political discussions, functioning as a meta-language that contributes not only to the exclusion of undesired voices and perspectives but also to the

reproduction of specific worldviews and the reinforcement of collective online identities (**Study VII**).

The structure of the thesis is organized as follows: The subsequent chapters in the Commentary section represent the conceptual and theoretical framework of the studies. They explain the main theories elaborated in the articles and expanded upon within the feminist approach to online political communication. Chapter 1.2 defines e-expression as a form of online political participation from the perspective of media and communication studies, summarizes the general feminist approach to political communication in the digital sphere, and elaborates more specifically on gender as a variable in political expression research. Chapter 1.3 provides an overview of selected psychological explanations of the gendered digital divide. Chapter 1.4 introduces online incivility as another potentially significant factor contributing to the gender gap in online expression. In the middle section of the Commentary, I describe the constituent studies (Chapter 1.5) and their methodology, including their main research questions (Chapter 1.6). The final section (Chapter 1.7) summarizes the key findings in the context of the relatively recent concern within feminist political communication regarding anti-gender discourses and anti-feminism as tools of anti-liberal political discourse, and from the perspective of related studies explaining gendered online toxicity in the context of online community building. It further discusses the limitations of the research and summarizes the contributions to the field. Chapters 2–8 comprise the studies included in this thesis.

1.2 E-expression as a form of online political participation and its gender aspects

The main focus of this thesis is online user discussions related to critical political or public issues. I approach these contributions as a form of online political participation, drawing on the concept of online expression (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Participation is a cross-disciplinary concept with various meanings, often shaped by the normative definitions of different fields (Švelch & Vochocová, 2015). In my analysis of online deliberative expression or e-expression, I adopt a media and communication studies perspective, viewing these activities as a recent form of civic digital participation (Casteltrione, 2015; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013) that plays a vital role in negotiating public issues and influencing public discourse (Szabo, Kmetty, & Molnár, 2021). I thus draw from the tradition of media studies to examine the mediated communication of political actors, including citizens (or digital media users), and their online

discussions or comments on current issues as a novel form of political participation shaped by new communication technologies and online spaces (Švelch & Vochocová, 2015).

The gender-oriented approach to e-expression, rooted in the feminist epistemology, arises from the feminist concerns regarding how the societal distribution of power, roles, and status impacts women's (and other marginalized individuals in hetero-normative, patriarchal environments) access to the public domain, as well as their representation and ability to express themselves within it. Additionally, feminist intersectionality highlights that the Internet operates within existing systems of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism, which not only mirror these issues but also perpetuate them (Morrow, Hawkins, & Kern, 2015). This perspective thus challenges the earlier idea that the Internet would help overcome the traditional marginalization of women and non-normative gender identities in the public sphere and documents the persisting gendered digital divide (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021; Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021; Lilleker, Koc-Michalska, & Bimber, 2021; Vochocová, Štětka, & Mazák, 2016).

Studies in feminist political communication and gender media studies attribute ongoing inequalities to the intersection of social, institutional, structural, cultural, and economic factors, as well as gendered patterns of online political participation. These studies typically aim to critically challenge such constraints and highlight their combined impact (Morrow, Hawkins, & Kern, 2015). This thesis aims to outline the current trends in online political expression research that employ gender as a variable or reflect feminist epistemology. It introduces recent debates in this field and seeks to address the general ambiguity of findings, which is largely due to the dynamic nature of the subject and the methodological diversity of inquiry (Vochocová, 2025 forthcoming).

1.2.1 Gender as a factor in studying online political expression

The conventional feminist critique of separate spheres highlights that the exclusion of women from the public sphere arises from the modern separation and gendering of 'the private' and 'the public,' which is also relevant to current debates regarding online political participation and expression. Authors document that women's roles as public speakers are generally lower, emphasizing that "most sites of public talk are masculine," leading to a situation favouring men over women (Polletta & Chen, 2013, pp. 292–294). In the early stages of research on online political participation and expression, gender considerations were largely absent (Vochocová et al., 2016), likely reflecting earlier findings that indicated diminishing gender differences in political engagement. Consequently, much of the online participation research from the first

decade of the 21st century did not prioritize gender as a significant variable or address notable disparities in participation between men and women; it even revealed that female participants showed greater activity than male participants on social networking sites (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Strandberg, 2013).

Research results published in **Study I** included in this thesis which revealed in 2016 that women are significantly underrepresented in online political debates in the Czech Republic thus represented a surprising outcome in the international research context (Vochocová et al., 2016). Based on our findings, there was a huge discrepancy between the survey data, in which 10% of women reported that they are commenting on political issues on Facebook compared to 16% of men, and the actual content on Facebook pages of political candidates: women only represented around 27% of the contributors to the discussions (Vochocová et al., 2016). Such results not only draw our attention to the possibly overlooked gendered digital divide but also highlight the likely gender blindness of certain research methods, as suggested by Harrison and Munn (2007). They hypothesize that surveys may contribute to the apparent gender balance in participation, as women may overestimate their activity due to cultural expectations (Harrison & Munn, 2007).

The current state of research does not allow for consensus regarding the gendered digital divide (Vochocová, 2025 forthcoming). Some studies emphasise, based on large surveys from established democracies, that the gender gap in online political engagement is generally small, with only marginal differences identified mainly in the sphere of the most visible online political participation (Lilleker et al., 2021). Slight gender differences manifest in women's preferences for networks with stronger ties and deeper interpersonal support, or in their reluctance to share opinions on more open platforms. The authors also point out that data suggest women strategically engage in less visible political activities that have minimal potential to be perceived as offensive (Bode, 2017; Lilleker et al., 2021). Bode (2017), for example, further concludes that "men are more likely to post political information, and women are slightly more likely to unfriend people for political reasons, but all other specifications of political engagement in social media showed no gender differences" (Bode, 2017, p. 598).

Others, however, emphasise that women are less likely than men to engage in politics or discuss it, both offline and online (Van Duyn et al., 2021, p. 181). Even research employing survey approach confirms that men report significantly greater involvement in online political discussions compared to women (Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021). Similar key findings emerge from studies conducted outside of Western liberal democracies. For instance, Ahmed and Madrid-Morales (2021) demonstrate in their cross-national comparative study within Sub-

Saharan Africa that gender inequality persists in online political engagement, particularly among higher-educated groups. Additionally, content analysis research reinforces the conclusion that the gender digital divide—characterised by women commenting less frequently and exhibiting less incivility than men—remains a notable issue (Küchler et al., 2023).

1.3 Psychological attributes and online space dynamics as factors explaining gendered digital divide

Whereas data regarding the extent of the gendered digital divide are still rather inconclusive, largely dependent on the methodological approaches, as well as on cultural contexts, research generally suggests that many other variables often intersect with gender as an important influence and weaken the role of gender per se as an explanation of the patterns of online participation (Vochocová, 2025 forthcoming). Scholars typically consider psychological expectations regarding online communication and the related characteristics of the online discussion environments as influential factors correlating with gender differences in participation. Friendly environments and local focus of the debates seem to attract women's online participation. Van Duyn et al (2021), for example, found out that women are less likely than men to comment online on state, national or international topics, but more likely to comment on local news. Lilleker et al (2021) point out that the online engagement of women is significantly lower in more open, broad, public online environments with weaker interpersonal ties.

Abendschön and García-Albacete (2021) connect the gender differences in online participation with psychological traits of the participants. They characterize the gender gap in online political discourse as qualitatively unique, not merely a traditional gender gap but rather "a new gap," asserting that personality factors play a more significant role in online discussions than offline ones, with differential effects based on gender. Their findings reveal that while outgoing and extroverted men are more active in online political debates, such personality traits do not significantly influence women's participation. Moreover, agreeable women exhibit a tendency to avoid these discussions entirely, unlike agreeable men, underscoring the idea that a reluctance to engage in online conflict may be a gender-specific behaviour. Lin and Lu (2011) document women's greater sensitivity to the opinions of others and identify it as a possible source of their tendency to avoid engaging in contentious public online discussions. Studies frequently highlight the importance of published content visibility as a key predictor of gender disparities in online participation, linking these differences to varying Internet usage patterns among

genders. Research indicates that online engagement is gendered, with men more inclined toward public self-presentation, while women prioritize communication and relationship-building (Junco, 2013).

From a feminist standpoint, these distinctions are interpreted as products of gendered socialization processes. Already in 1974, Bourque and Grossholtz concluded that the "narrow and exclusive definition of politics [...] limits political activity to a set of roles which are [...] stereotyped as male" (Bourque & Grossholtz, 1974, p. 225). Their statement is still useful for a deeper understanding of the gender differences in online expression. Polletta and Chen (2013) document that women's activity as public speakers is generally lower and connect it with the gendered character of the online spaces and "the institutional settings in which public talk takes place" (Polletta & Chen, 2013, p. 292). The authors point out that "most sites of public talk are masculine", and that women are often seen as incapable of the kind of talk required in these forums (Polletta & Chen, 2013, p. 294).

Study III included in this thesis aims to reflect feminist epistemology that challenges the division of the public and private spheres in the study of gender aspects of online participation. Our interest in the possible roots of the very low percentage of women participating in political discussions in the more visible online spaces in the Czech Republic (Vochocová et al., 2016) inspired us to search for spaces where women may be represented as active contributors in greater numbers. Scholars explain that women tend to be more active in primarily non-political online spaces, mainly because of the negative nature of discussions in political arenas and the personal, sexist attacks they face there (Jane, 2014; Polletta & Chen, 2013). Moreover, research suggests that the so-called "third spaces," primarily non-political online environments where substantial political talk emerges, may represent digital spaces in which people communicate in a less conflicting manner, thus inviting participants who may be more sensitive to online toxicity (Jackson et al., 2013; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Our research findings reveal a very low amount of incivility in user-to-user interactions within a female-dominated parenting forum, contributing to the theorising of the possible influence of online incivility and toxicity on women's participation (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019).

1.4 Online incivility and its relation to the gender disparity in online expression

The majority of studies included in this thesis either document high levels of incivility and toxic treatment towards women in online public spaces (**Study IV** and **Study V**), explore online

toxicity related to various gender identities or other vulnerable groups, such as youth (**Study VI** and **Study VII**), or reveal how women who are active and influential in online political debates perceive these environments as oppressive, gender-biased, and extremely uncivil towards women (**Study II**).

The relationship between the often-hostile nature of the online spaces and the women's hesitance to engage in online political discussions is a well-established theme in feminist communication research. Friz and Gehl (2016) highlight that numerous online platforms are perceived as sexist, male-dominated, and marked by aggression and competition. Jane (2014) emphasizes the distinctively gendered aspects of online incivility, suggesting that "e-bile" serves as a means to deter women from participating in discussions. Despite these observations, research remains inconclusive. Some studies do reveal a significant relationship between gendered hostility and women's low engagement in political debates online (Jane, 2014). Statistical analyses of survey data have linked both perceived and actual hostility to the challenges women face in online political discussions and concluded that women might refrain from voicing their political opinions due to anticipation of negative reactions (Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021, p. 2070). In contrast, other research indicates that while men tend to post more uncivil comments, women do not receive disproportionately hostile responses compared to men (Küchler et al., 2023). Similarly, regarding the impact of sexist comments on the likelihood of participating in discussions, studies indicate no significant gender differences (Reich & Bachl, 2023), and some argue that perceptions of incivility account for very little of the observed gender disparities in commenting behaviour (Van Duyn et al., 2021, p. 190).

Despite these contrasting findings, scholars in this area stress the need for further investigation to clarify how various online contexts and their affordances shape perceptions of incivility and influence participation levels among different genders (Vochocová, 2025 forthcoming). As I conclude in **Study II** included in this thesis, however, in-depth, inductive investigation of the perceptions of women who frequently participate in online political debates reveals that they consider the online environments extremely hostile, sexist and personally hurtful, and typically mention retreat as a logical reaction to such treatment (Vochocová, 2018; see Jane, 2014 for a similar conclusion).

In addition to examining women's involvement in online discussions, the gendered nature of political dialogue in the online sphere, and the harassment targeted at women and non-normative gender identities, contemporary feminist perspectives on online political expression are increasingly addressing the broader anti-feminist narratives that are permeating various online spaces. Studies have identified anti-gender and anti-feminist viewpoints employed in

discussions on various polarizing topics as specific discursive tools aimed against liberal democracy and other ideological opponents of far-right movements (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Martinsson & Ericson, 2023; White, 2021). In the Discussion and Conclusions chapter, I will explain how selected studies forming the basis of this habilitation thesis demonstrate that anti-gender discourse not only infiltrates far-right discussion platforms but also becomes integrated into mainstream online debates on contentious political issues. Additionally, I will explore potential future research directions that build upon these findings.

1.5 List of Original Publications and Author's Contribution

This habilitation thesis consists of seven articles published in high-ranking international scientific journals indexed in the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. I am the lead author of all included articles and the single author of three studies. I am the lead researcher, writer and corresponding author for all included articles. My contribution to the studies is explained in detail below.

Study I

Vochocová, L., Štětka, V., & Mazák, J. (2015). Good girls don't comment on politics? Gendered character of online political participation in the Czech Republic. *Information, Communication & Society*, *19*(10), 1321–1339. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1088881

Study II

Vochocová, L. (2018). Witty divas, nice mothers and tough girls in a sexist world: experiences and strategies of female influencers in online political debates. *Media, Culture & Society*, *40*(4), 535–550. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717729211

Study III

Vochocová, L., & Rosenfeldová, J. (2019). Ridiculed, but safe: What e-mothers' discussion on migration tells us about the potential of 'third spaces' for the political communication of women. *European Journal of Communication*, *34*(2), 142–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118810865

Study IV

Vochocová, L. (2021). 'Frustrated women invite the immigrants to Europe': Intersection of (xeno-) racism and sexism in online discussions on gender aspects of immigration. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *24*(1), 333–349. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420973207

Study V

Vochocová, L., Numerato, D., & Sedláčková, T. (2022). Opting for Polarizing Emotions: Strategies of Czech Pro-Vaccination Discussants in the Emotionalized Public Sphere and Debate on a Measles Epidemic. *International Journal of Communication, 16*, 21. Retrieved from https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/17642

Study VI

Vochocová, L., Rosenfeldová, J., Vancsó, A., & Neag, A. (2023). Soros's soldiers, slackers, and pioneers with no expertise? Discursive exclusion of environmental youth activists from the digital public sphere in Hungary and Czechia. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, *21*(1), 69–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2023.2220318

Study VII

Vochocová, L. (2023). Singled out and mocked: Intersection of (hetero)sexism and ableism and mobilization of anti-discourses in online hatred towards hypervisibilized youth activists. *Women's Studies in Communication*, *46*(4), 415–432. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2023.2258862

Author's Contribution

Study I: 40% – research design and operationalisation, data interpretation, theoretical framing of the study

Study II: 100% – single author

Study III: 50% – research design and operationalisation, theoretical framing of the study, data coding, data interpretation

Study IV: 100% – single author

Study V: 50% – research design, theoretical framing of the study, data analysis, data interpretation

Study VI: 50% – research design, theoretical framing of the study, Czech data analysis, data interpretation

Study VII: 100% – single author

1.6 Summary of Research Questions and Methods

The thesis is based on seven published studies that combine quantitative content analysis of online user discussions, quantitative analysis of survey data focusing on reported online expressive behaviours, qualitative content analysis of data from various online discussion environments, and qualitative analysis of in-depth interview data. For the qualitative analysis, primarily the coding procedures of Grounded Theory were employed. More details regarding data gathering and analytical tools can be found in the studies that comprise this thesis. Below, I will briefly summarise the general focus of the studies, the research questions posed, the data analysed, and the analytical methods.

Study I, which reveals significant underrepresentation of women in online political discussions, is based on methodological triangulation (Benoit & Holbert, 2008; Denzin, 1978) employing content analysis of communication on the selected Czech political parties' Facebook profiles during the 2013 election campaign related to parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic and quantitative analysis of data from a representative survey of the adult Czech population. Our decision was motivated by the fact that the usual approach to measuring online participation, based on survey data, only provides information about the respondents' declared behaviour, whereas content analysis represents an insight into the actual activities of online users in the digital environment. We tested four hypotheses in Study I, investigating possible gender differences in online political expression, the role of mediating factors, specifically age, education and income, the proportion of men and women among the most active commenters, and the gender patterns of the comments' valency during the 2013 election campaign. The survey data were obtained by means of a quota sample (N = 1,653) representative of the adult Czech population with regards to region (NUTS 3), size of residence, gender, age and education. The survey was administered using face-to-face interviews conducted by 289 interviewers between 28 October and 11 November 2013, following the pre-term Parliamentary Elections which took place on 25–26 October 2013. Content analysis employed data collected from the official Facebook pages of seven Czech political parties during the last week before the elections (21 October to 26 October 2013), selected to represent three distinguished party types and to include the majority of the relevant Czech political parties. Only the first 30 responses

(comments and replies) to each party status posted within that period were selected for analysis, resulting in a sample of 278 party statuses, 3436 comments and 3392 replies.

Study II aims to explore the reasons behind the persistent gender gap in online political communication identified in Study I. To achieve this, I conducted 11 in-depth interviews with women aged 26–47, who consider themselves or are considered by others influential and active participants in online political discussions. The participants represented a range of political perspectives and occupations, and they were recruited using the snowball sampling method (Noy, 2008). The interviews focused on several key areas: the motivations driving these women to engage in discussions, their evaluations of the discussion environments, and their coping strategies for addressing gender discrimination within the debates. To analyse the interview data, I employed open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and developed a typology of active female participants in online political debates related to the research focus.

Study III investigates a discussion community of the so-called third space – a parenting forum considered primarily apolitical but providing space for a significant amount of political talk among the forum users. The investigation was motivated by previous research findings that, generally, women tend to avoid negativity, conflict, and e-bile more than men (Vochocová, 2018), as well as the conclusion connecting interest forums with the potential to overcome the typical polarization of online politics (Wright, 2012; Wright et al., 2017). Based on such expectations, we formulated four research questions aiming to reveal the amount of incivility among the participants in the forum compared to the amount of incivility toward third parties, the extent to which cross-cutting discussion, i.e., debate between contrasting positions, emerges in the forum, the level of rationality of the debate, and the level of support among the discussion participants. Data were gathered from one of the most frequently visited Czech parenting forums, 'eMimino.cz' ('eBaby') – we selected data from all discussions related to the European migration crisis, published in 2015–2016, and containing at least one of the keywords ('migration', 'Islam', 'refugee'), resulting in a total of 14 discussions constituting the basis for sample selection. Fifty consecutive comments from different parts of each discussion thread were coded, resulting in a total sample of 700 comments (out of 4,500). The individual comment was selected as the unit of analysis.

Quantitative content analysis was employed to analyse the data. Incivility, as one of the important variables, was operationalized as name-calling and vulgarities, as well as a summarizing category including any kind of expression of disrespect. Data were further coded

as anti-migrant, pro-migrant, ambivalent, or neutral, for the interactivity (isolated comments/replies), rationality (rational claim/assertion), and valency (positive/negative/neutral) variables. All the data were coded for the participants' gender as well.

Study IV represents an investigation of online misogyny, the toxic treatment of women and non-normative gender identities (or those identified as non-normative) in online political discourses. It documents the intersection of sexism and racism in online hatred and interprets both, from an intersectional perspective, as "oppressive belief systems" with a long history of mutual co-existence (Aosved & Long, 2006). The aim of the article is to identify the types of othering related to gender and sexuality aimed at excluding European, non-immigrant actors from the online immigration discourse. In order to answer this question and related questions, such as the intersection of racism and sexism in user comments or the reproduction of sexual and gender norms within the discourse, I analysed user comments related to 29 articles on gendered aspects of the so-called European refugee crisis. The articles were published on the two most visited mainstream online news servers in the Czech Republic – Novinky.cz (5 articles) and iDnes.cz (24 articles) – from 2016 to 2018. The sample size (380 relevant comments in total) was determined by theoretical saturation of the sample, and the data were analysed employing coding procedures of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Study V illustrates, from the perspective of intersectionality, how women of specific characteristics, mainly mothers identified as promoting alternative lifestyle, are targets of online hatred in the vaccination discourse in online discussion sections of daily news. The study is generally interested in emotionalization strategies in the pro-vaccination argumentation of the online discussants, the discursive construction of the position of the non-vaccinating and the vaccine-hesitant actors, and the role of emotions in online public debates. Qualitative analysis of comments supporting vaccination in discussions related to online news articles thematising the measles epidemic in the Czech Republic was conducted on data from the period of January to June 2019. Comments were selected from the discussions on iDnes.cz (18 articles), a mainstream online daily, on Aktuálně.cz (18 articles, 10 with comments), a liberally oriented online daily, and Blesk.cz (48 articles, 28 with comments), an online version of a popular tabloid daily. The total number of 2,724 relevant comments were subjected to an inductive qualitative analysis inspired by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data was coded manually

by two coders who (1) identified each of the main categories and their relations separately and (2) intersubjectively compared and systematized the data into a set of categories.

Study VI is a comparative, intersectional insight in the patterns of discursive exclusion of politically active youth from the online public sphere on principles similar to the exclusion of other vulnerable groups, such as women, both in the history and in current times. Based on data from user discussions related to the comment sections of mainstream online daily news and weeklies or their Facebook pages in Czechia and Hungary in 2019 and 2021, it aims at identifying strategies employed and arguments offered by the online discussants to exclude the activists of Fridays for Future in both countries from the public sphere and to reveal national specifics and similarities in the online representations of the politically active youth. The sample was obtained using a social listening tool, Sentione, and predefined keywords ("Fridays for Future," "FFF," "Greta Thunberg," "climate strike," "strike for climate") in Czech and Hungarian during three separate two-month periods representing the peak activities of Fridays for Future in the region: March–April 2019, following the first Global Climate Strike on March 15; September–October 2019, related to the Global Week for Climate Action; and March–April 2021, concerning the online Global Climate Strike.

In the second step, a diverse sample of 14 media outlets was selected (7 from Hungary and 7 from Czechia), combining mainstream dailies and weeklies, alternative media platforms focusing on environmental issues, and popular tabloids. Where user discussions were not allowed on news websites, discussions on the medium's Facebook pages were followed. A total of 1,200 comments in Czechia and 900 comments in Hungary reacting to the selected articles were coded in the last step of the sample selection until saturation point was reached. To inductively identify the patterns of online exclusion of youth and children from political participation, open and axial coding procedures from grounded theory were employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), along with constant comparison of the emerging categories and their relations.

Study VII is an exploratory examination of the online treatment of very young women and men who either choose not to conform to, or are perceived as not conforming to, normative expectations regarding gender identity and sexuality. Furthermore, it reveals how these normative expectations are employed to exclude politically active youth from the online political sphere. Specifically, the study illustrates how Czech online discussants combine various identity attributes and ideological frameworks to discredit the role of youth actors in the online public sphere, and how age intersects as a discriminatory factor with other influences,

primarily gender, sexuality, disability, lifestyle, mental health, and socio-economic status. The analysis is based on user discussion contributions related to 44 online news articles published in mainstream Czech dailies and weeklies in the Czech Republic referring about the civic and political activities of youth. Five different cases of youth activism are involved, creating a diverse sample related to various political topics: Czech protagonists of the Fridays for Future movement (coverage in the years 2019–2021, 16 articles with discussions) and a non-binary person called Alžbětko from Extinction Rebellion (2021, 7 articles with discussions) as representatives of climate crisis activism; two teenage sibling environmental influencers – "Sisters in Action" (2020, 3 articles with discussions) as activists for environmental reponsiblity; a high-school movement "Get Us Out" engaged in COVID-pandemic-related collective youth action (2021, 5 articles with discussions); and Jakub Čech as an example of an individual youth activist with his own agenda (2015–2016, 13 articles with discussions). All selected actors were teenagers when their cases received media attention. Only negative user representations imposing categories or labels were selected for analysis. The theoretical saturation was reached by the total number of 460 relevant comments. The systematic categorisation of the data is based on open and axial coding from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

1.7 General Conclusions and Discussion

1.7.1 Gendered digital divide – a persisting problem

This thesis summarizes nearly a decade-long research journey in which my colleagues and I have investigated the online political expression of media users, focusing on how vulnerable groups—particularly women and youth—are discursively excluded from the digital public sphere. Our quest began with the finding that the gendered digital divide remains a significant issue in the Czech Republic (Study I, Vochocová et al., 2015), revealing notable differences in how men and women engage with politics on social networking sites. A key conclusion of our research is that gender differences become more pronounced in online activities that require greater effort and exposure than merely liking, sharing, or becoming a fan of a political page. When it comes to commenting on political content, women are significantly less active than men and post negative comments less frequently. These findings lead to important methodological implications: different expressive activities must be examined separately to uncover nuanced patterns of the gendered digital divide, which often emerge only in specific,

more visible forms of participation. We also emphasize the need to consider that gender patterns of online expression may vary across different contexts and platforms, as evidenced by the surprising disparity between our survey data and content analysis results. This discrepancy highlights that research should not solely rely on survey responses; there can be a notable difference between what individuals claim they do online and what content analysis reveals.

To interpret our unexpected findings, we explored structural explanations such as gendered socialization and lifestyle. Additionally, we referenced studies that highlight psychological factors contributing to women's lower participation in public political commenting on social networking sites. Specifically, the notion that women are more inclined to provide emotional support (Joiner et al., 2014) and that they tend to be more sensitive to others' opinions (Lin & Lu, 2011) may explain their reluctance to engage in often controversial political discussions.

Thus, my subsequent research was particularly informed by studies that illuminated the gendered character of public discourse and its impact on women's online expression and provided valuable insights into how societal norms and expectations, as well as experience in the (online) public sphere, shape women's participation in digital spaces (Norris et al., 2004; Polletta & Chen, 2013).

1.7.2 Gendered incivility, group style and digital environment purpose as possible influences in the gendered patterns of online expression

Motivated by a need to better understand the broader circumstances of the persisting gendered digital divide in online political expression, I decided to explore the perspectives and experiences of women who were active in online political discussions (Study II), as well as to analyse the gender aspects of online expression in various spaces (Studies III–V). My findings challenge the belief that women generally tend to avoid conflictual communication; among a sample of highly active women noted for their influence in public debates, many engage robustly in contentious discussions, indicating that the confrontational nature of online debates does not inherently deter them from expressing their views (Vochocová, 2018). Similarly, in a discussion forum clearly dominated by women, the group style did not avoid incivility and hatred towards various groups in society, showing that women do not necessarily create more consensual, civil discussion spaces (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019). However, one of my studies also uncovered a heightened sensitivity among women to attacks on their appearance and other personal attributes, reinforcing the notion that these forms of trivialisation are commonplace in their online experiences (Vochocová, 2018). Research results also document

the avoidance of such user-to-user attacks in a female-dominated online discussion environment (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019).

Based on the interviews, I can conclude that operating in online debates on political and public issues in mainstream spaces requires specific strategies that the women feel they must employ to reduce emotional harm, such as carefully selecting the people they surround themselves with, including blocking those who are too offensive, or strategically subordinating to the gendered expectations and traditional patriarchal norms in various ways described in Study II (Vochocová, 2018). These findings reveal the complicated struggles and negative experiences faced by women in online debates, even as they perceive themselves as privileged within their social contexts. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as they highlight the challenges that less privileged women may encounter, likely contributing to their hesitance in engaging in such environments.

The influence of the discussion environment on women's online expression, particularly regarding the level of incivility they face, is further supported by an analysis conducted by my colleague and me on political discussions in a female-dominated third space: a parenting forum (Study III, Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019). While incivility, including vulgarity, was a significant aspect of the debate in the forum, discussants rarely posted uncivil reactions to one another, even on the controversial topic of mass immigration to Europe, thus collectively shielding themselves from harmful personal attacks. However, our findings challenge the conclusions of other authors who suggest that gender itself is a key factor in promoting more civil discourse in female-dominated online spaces (Kenski et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2017). The overall incivility, mainly the level of vulgarity towards third parties was very high in the forum and women were even more likely to post vulgar comments than the minority of participating men. Nonetheless, it is clear that 'e-mothers' cultivate a discussion environment where political topics can be addressed more safely, free from humiliation about their appearance and targeted sexist comments. In this context, their gender-specific experiences in typically more polarised and male-dominated online environments likely play a significant role. Overall, we propose that the collaborative and supportive nature of the parenting forum (or third spaces in general) is a key factor contributing to the rarity of verbal harassment among discussants (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2019).

1.7.3. Gender-based hatred intersecting with other intolerant belief systems in online user discussions

In the analyses my colleagues and I conducted on data across online discussion environments and various polarising political issues, we noticed that gender-based hatred often intersects with other hateful stances based on ethnicity/race (Study IV, Vochocová, 2021), lifestyle preferences (Study V, Vochocová et al., 2022) or age (Study VI, Vochocová et al., 2023; Study VII, Vochocová, 2023).

During the European immigration crisis that began in 2015, the intersection of sexism and racism—or xenophobia—was a common feature in online debates about immigration (Vochocová, 2021), employed not only to express negative sentiments towards immigrants but also to exclude domestic European actors identified as ideologically incompatible, primarily women, through sexist remarks. Xenophobia towards immigrants intersects with sexism towards domestic women, including survivors of violence by immigrants, who are blamed as responsible for the immigration wave. While doing so, the discussants, both men and women, promote traditional gender and sexual norms and treat European women as inferior, while simultaneously expressing concerns about the gender freedom in Europe allegedly endangered by immigrants.

Similarly, in the analysis of emotional aspects of pro-vaccination discussants' argumentation, me and my colleagues (Vochocová et al., 2023) revealed that one of the Othering strategies against vaccine-hesitant people is significantly gendered and targeted specifically at mothers with distinctive lifestyle preferences (referred to as "alternative"). Moreover, such mothers were associated with irrationality and lack of intelligence in openly sexist comments and compared to other humiliated groups ("uneducated African women" or "Ukrainian workers"), revealing a broader pattern of intersection of multiple oppressive belief systems, mainly sexism, racism and classism (Vochocová et al., 2023).

Studies VI and VII extend the conclusions about the intertwining of sexism with other intolerant systems by including the factor of age. A comparative analysis of Czech and Hungarian discussions related to news about the activities of Fridays for Future (FFF) youth movement (Study VI) documents how youth are discursively delegitimated as public actors not only based on their age, but also their association with global liberal movements refused as dangerous or ridiculous by the discussants, such as feminisms and LGBTQ+ or more generally the liberal-left positions. More specifically, online discussants speculate about the supposedly "abnormal" gender and sexual identities of the FFF youth participants and ridicule their allegedly non-

normative masculinity or femininity. A significant proportion of the comments even expresses sexist evaluation of the appearance of female activists, homophobic stances, or fantasies involving sexual violence (Vochocová et al., 2023). Politically active youth thus have to face similar treatment as women whose exclusion from the public sphere has been described in more detail (Kulynych, 2001; Wall, 2019), as illustrated also in Study VII (Vochocová, 2023). I argue in it that the exclusionary strategies, mainly attacks on physical appearance including misgendering or body shaming, cis- and heteronormativity and related discriminatory approaches, such as sanism and ableism are employed to discredit youth as valid political actors by politicising their individual (often completely made-up) identities (Dergić et al., 2022) in cases unrelated to those identities (Vochocová, 2023). Such mockery related to sensitive identity attributes acts as a disciplining factor similarly as in the case of politically active women (Jane, 2014) and can significantly complicate youth public and political involvement (Vochocová, 2023).

Regarding the topic of this thesis, I consider the sexist and heteronormative discussion environments documented in Studies IV–VII a result of multiple intersecting factors. Firstly, cultural tolerance for aggression against women (Aosved & Long, 2006), a generally low sensitivity of Czechs towards sexism, and the normalization of symbolic violence against women and other vulnerable groups in the country (Social Watch Czech Republic, 2019) are influencing the situation. Furthermore, the hateful discourses can be perceived as symptoms of the growing anti-liberal tendencies in Europe and the strongly polarised societies, particularly in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). Kenski et al. (2017) also suggest that gendered incivility and other related behaviours may arise from a process of emotional and psychological desensitisation of participants in online discussions, caused by repeated exposure to mediated acts of violence. Thus, the normalisation of intolerant expressions may result from discursive practices that involve uncivil comments and a general toxicity of the online discussion environments.

1.7.4 Future research directions: Anti-feminism and anti-gender discourses as concern of intersectional feminist political communication

Recent feminist perspectives on online participation address several critical issues, including women's visibility in discussions, the gendered dynamics of online political discourse, and the prevalence of online incivility targeting women. However, a growing concern is the rise of anti-feminist narratives, which serve as powerful tools against liberal democracy among its

ideological opponents, particularly among far-right groups. Similar tendencies are noticeable in studies constituting this thesis. Research indicates that anti-feminist and anti-gender expressions manifest as recurring themes in online debates, contributing to ideological mobilisation (Martinsson & Ericson, 2023; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). These expressive acts are described by some authors as performative practices aimed at creating imagined online collective identities. By expressing emotions and feelings in aggressive and intolerant debates, participants recognise each other as members of the same moral community and as connected (Martinsson & Ericson, 2023; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022). In this context, anti-feminist and anti-gender discourses, often intersecting with other intolerant expressions or anti-discourses, can be seen as symbolically connecting online users and providing them with a sense of belonging at the expense of other groups, primarily proponents of more inclusive approaches (Martinsson & Ericson, 2023).

Political communication scholarship identifies these anti-liberal discourses in civic online debates as indicators of a significant right-wing backlash, sensitive to deviations from conservative norms (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Vowles & Hultman, 2021). My research indicates that such content is no longer confined to extreme right-wing spaces (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2022) but has permeated mainstream online discourse (Vochocová, 2023).

To fully understand the complexities of online harassment targeting women and other marginalised groups, including youth, and their related exclusion from the online mediated public sphere, an intersectional approach (Terriquez et al., 2018) is essential. My research journey started with comparing online expressive activities of women and men and their broader context; however, the findings discussed in this thesis underscore the need for a broader perspective on gender marginalisation that surpasses mere quantitative assessments or "counting bodies". Future studies should adopt exploratory and interpretive methodologies, incorporating intersectional analyses and contextual factors.

Except for one study (Vochocová, 2018), the research presented in this thesis relies on the manifest content of online user discussions, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the possible motivations of the discussants or their general perceptions of gendered online incivility. Therefore, future ethnographic research should delve into the perspectives of discussants who produce various anti-discourses, aiming to illuminate the wider social dynamics influencing these troubling phenomena.

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3. Study II: Witty divas, nice mothers and tough girls in a sexist world: experiences and strategies of female influencers in online political debates

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4. Study III: Ridiculed, but safe: What e-mothers' discussion on migration tells us about the potential of 'third spaces' for the political communication of women

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5. Study IV: 'Frustrated women invite the immigrants to Europe': Intersection of (xeno-)racism and sexism in online discussions on gender aspects of immigration

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6. Study V: Opting for polarizing emotions: Strategies of Czech pro-vaccination discussants in the emotionalized public sphere and debate on measles epidemic

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7. Study VI: Soros's soldiers, slackers, and pioneers with no expertise? Discursive exclusion of environmental youth activists from the digital public sphere in Hungary and Czechia

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8. Study VII: Singled out and mocked: Intersection of (hetero)sexism and ableism and mobilization of anti-discourses in online hatred towards hypervisibilized youth activists

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