

# Users' Engagement with Male and Female Politicians' Instagram Posts – Evidence from Israel's 2021 Election

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In a reality where image and media representations (on both traditional and social media) play a significant role in creating perceptions and influencing the public, it is crucial to examine whether female politicians have equal opportunities to promote themselves and their messages. The current study aims to expand our understanding of gender and politics on social media, while focusing on a popular yet rarely studied platform – Instagram. We examine whether Instagram, a popular visual social network, provides equal opportunities for female politicians compared to male politicians to engage with potential voters. Using Israel's 2021 election campaign, we examined the Instagram posts of 38 politicians (19 women and 19 men) published during the week leading up to the elections (N=238 posts). To investigate differences in male and female politicians' usage and users' engagement on

Instagram, we examined various engagement measurements (likes, shares, and number of views of videos) and the visual aspects of the posts. Even though Instagram's visual nature gives women an advantage, our findings show that female politicians could not generate higher engagement than male politicians on Instagram. Contrary to findings on Facebook, Instagram does not provide female politicians with an advantage, and they receive similar engagement to the posts of their male counterparts. In addition, the findings indicate that when female politicians are seen in visuals and dressed in more formal and professional attire, they receive greater engagement on Instagram.

*Keywords: gender & politics, social media, election campaigns, Instagram, Israel*

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**P**olitics is still considered a masculine field, and female politicians are a minority in most countries. In a reality where image and media representations play a significant role in creating perceptions and influencing the public, examining whether female politicians have equal opportunities to promote themselves is essential. The current study aims to expand our understanding of gender and politics on social media, while focusing on a popular yet rarely studied platform – Instagram.

While examining the coverage of politicians in the traditional media, most studies have shown that male politicians generally receive more prominent coverage than female politicians (e.g., Basow, 2016; Everitt et al., 2016). Studies focused on social media representation and user engagement with politicians' posts (e.g., McGregor and Mourão, 2016; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018), found more optimistic results, indicating that the online realm provides female politicians with more equal opportunities to communicate with potential voters, and in some cases even to gain an advantage over their male counterparts. The current study aims to delve deeper into this issue by focusing on a newer and less-studied platform, Instagram, which, due to its visual character and popularity among younger users, allows politicians a different type of engagement with voters (Towner & Muñoz, 2018).

Using Israel's 2021 election campaign, we examined the Instagram posts of 38 politicians published during the week leading up to the elections. To investigate differences in male and female politicians' usage and users' engagement on Instagram, we examined various engagement measurements and the visual aspects of the posts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Women in Politics**

Gender equality agendas have received support in Western society in recent years, but the trend of equality is reflected less in the political realm (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020). The UN's annual report on women (2021) indicates that although recent years have seen an increase in the number of women holding positions of political power, significant gender inequality still exists. The situation in Israel, which serves as our case study, differs from the global context. The highest number of serving women in all Israeli parliaments (the Knesset) was in 2020 in the 23rd Knesset: 38 women served as Knesset members, constituting 31.6 percent of all Knesset members. In the 24th Knesset, which we examined in the present study, the number of serving women dropped to 35 Knesset members (29 percent). In the current reality, media coverage has a significant impact on public opinion (Cohen, Tsfati & Sheaffer, 2008), and in the context of women's representation in political positions, the media presence of politicians may affect their

chances of being elected; therefore, it is vital to examine the representation of female politicians in the media.

### **Gender and the Representation of Politicians in the Traditional Media**

News media play a crucial role in connecting voters to politicians, as citizens often rely on them to learn about political reality and to receive information about their representatives (Fogarty, 2008; Kedrowski, 1996). One might assume that an ideal democratic society would aspire to a balance and fair representation and coverage. However, women are underrepresented in traditional media coverage (Gerrits, Trimble, Wagner, Raphael, & Sampert, 2017). Female politicians receive approximately 17 percent less media coverage than their male counterparts (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2020). Furthermore, news coverage presents female politicians differently from male politicians, often focusing on the former's physical appearance, as opposed to male politicians' natural and substantive representation (Thomas et al., 2021). Thus, female politicians do not receive equal representation in traditional media platforms, which tend to favor male politicians. Do social media outlets, which today serve as a central hub for political deliberation, provide female politicians with better opportunities for equal representation and engagement with the public?

### **Gender and Politics on Social Media**

Social media content has created unprecedented opportunities for politicians, as they can communicate directly with large audiences and have some control over the content and style of messages conveyed to the public. Politicians can use social media posts to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, allowing them to communicate directly with supporters and potential voters. This is especially important for politicians who receive less exposure on conventional media, as it will enable them to present themselves to the electorate. However, even in social media content, gender differences exist in political contexts.

A 2020 study indicates that even when politicians communicate with the public through social media, they replicate gender stereotypes in content and style (Elsayed, 2020). The results showed that gender stereotypes characterize the differences in texts written by male and female politicians. Female politicians are more likely to use words related to gender and social issues that are stereotypically associated with women,

including patriarchy, feminism, gender-neutral writing, prostitution, LGBTQ-related topics, and health. In contrast, male politicians deal with more classic political and ideological issues such as extremism, multinationalism, and sports. Yarchi and Samuel-Azran (2018) also found differences in the topics and styles of publications between male and female politicians on Facebook during Israel's 2015 election campaign. Female politicians are more likely to use Facebook to attack their opponents and talk about gender issues.

In contrast, male politicians tend to talk about security, the economy, and welfare. Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) found that female politicians deal more with women's issues and male politicians deal with men's issues. Women's problems include "softer" topics such as education, family, health, and art, while male politicians deal with issues such as taxes, weapons, business, and terror (Lee & Lim, 2016). This might suggest that voters perceive women as more competent in dealing with softer political issues like human rights, welfare, and the environment. At the same time, male politicians are seen as more competent when dealing with issues like the economy, foreign affairs, or the military (Lee & Lim, 2016).

Studies show more gender congruence in the topics raised by politicians on social media than in topics that do not match their gender. A study examining posts by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump on Twitter during the 2016 US presidential election campaign showed that Clinton mentioned "female" topics almost twice as much as "male" issues, while Trump's posts dealt with "masculine" topics twice as much as "feminine" issues (Lee & Lim, 2016). Additionally, Bailey and Nawara (2019) found that Clinton was much more likely to post about women's issues, such as abortion, childcare, and family leave, than Trump, who mostly ignored women's issues in his social media publications. This mechanism is known as 'gender issue ownership' (Herrnson, Lay & Stokes, 2003; Lee & Lim, 2016), as politicians develop a political reputation regarding specific issues based on their gender (Meeks & Domke, 2016). Therefore, it was found that female politicians who brand themselves as feminine are more likely to win elections, as they can exploit voters' gender stereotypes (Herrnson, Lay & Stokes, 2003). Social media can strengthen the image of politicians, both professionally and personally, and help them attract attention

and create a significant and ongoing engagement with their audience (Ekman & Widholm, 2014).

### **Social Media's User Engagement and Gender**

The emergence of social media platforms has dramatically changed the role of users from passive viewers to active participants (Lee et al., 2018). The interactive nature of social media allows users to react to content posted by politicians in various ways: commenting or sharing, as well as clicking on emojis expressing emotions (like, love, empathy, laughter, amazement, crying, and anger). These features indicate people's level of engagement with the content (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Moreover, public engagement (such as likes and comments) can indicate public involvement (Metz, Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2020). The goal of politicians is to influence voters through political communication; hence, user involvement is a measure of success in achieving this goal (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Such direct involvement can influence political decision-making, as political actors can understand the prevailing mood and opinion based on user engagement (Bene, 2017).

Studies have shown that social media content, a central component of contemporary society, offers a space where women find and give support to other women (e.g. Joiner et al., 2016), even in political contexts (Samuel-Azran & Yarchi, 2023), which may help female politicians change the rules of the game. According to a recent study by Auxier and Anderson (2021), women use social networks more where there is an emphasis on visual media. In a study examining user involvement in networks, with a focus on gender differences, Joiner, Stewart, Beaney, Moon, Maras, Guiller, and Brosnan (2014) found that women are more likely than men to react with likes, while Wang, Burke and Kraut (2013) found that they publish twice as many comments on a post. Furthermore, in a study examining gender differences in response to Facebook status updates of friends of the same gender, Joiner et al. (2016) found that women respond more to status updates of women than men do to those of men. It was also found that, in their responses to their friends, women's levels of emotional support are higher than those of men to their male friends' status updates. This suggests that the platform supports women, but does this support also manifest in the political field, which is perceived as masculine?

Yarchi and Samuel Azran (2018) examined the ability of female politicians to generate user involvement on Facebook, compared to their male counterparts, during the 2015 election campaign in Israel, and they found that posts by female politicians received more engagement (likes and shares) than posts by male politicians. However, when examining the number of comments and participants in the discussion, no differences were found between posts by male and female politicians (Yarchi & Samuel Azran, 2018). A study examining public discourse on Facebook toward politicians in the 2021 Israeli elections (Samuel-Azran & Yarchi, 2023) found that female politicians receive more support in public discourse than male politicians (with no differences found in terms of likes, comments, and shares between posts about male and female politicians). Additionally, it was found that the gender affinity effect is prominent in political discourse on Facebook, with women tending to support female politicians more. In contrast, men tend to be more supportive of male politicians.

### **The Political Use of Visual Symbols on Social Media**

Since the era when television as a visual medium became the dominant source of political information for the public, visual images have played a significant role in constructing political photos. Due to limited screen time, politicians must condense their messages (Schill, 2009). Therefore, the environment of the shot, the lighting, the set design, the politician's attire, and facial expressions are all considered when choosing the frame (Schill, 2012). This also includes using "visual quotes" –visual symbols – that help convey the message and emphasize the analogy between verbal information and the non-verbal information conveyed through an image (Masters, Frey & Bente, 1991).

Greater understanding of the uniqueness and importance of visual symbols has made them a central component of political communication (Schill, 2012). According to Goffman (1959), people try to control the impression they leave on others by selectively choosing their appearance, speaking style, and perception. Thanks to this, political candidates adapt their attire, speaking style, and various visual symbols that appear visually, aiming to highlight their strengths and downplay their weaknesses (Lee & Lim, 2014).

Over the past two decades, social media content has become integral to communication and the political world in many countries. For politicians, it is a new way

to interact with potential voters and a convenient platform to promote their messages. Political actors have adapted to this change and started using social networks. They exploit the visual element offered by social media to manage a desired image, create a reputation, and convey political messages (Marland, 2012). The desired image is created by using a visual impression, which is expressed both by the candidate's physical presence and by watching their appearances in the media; in any case, imprinting the information in the public's mind (Newman, 1999).

Politicians often use visual symbols to communicate their policies to the public (Schill, 2009). For example, to convey a warm and benevolent message, they appear with a supporter's baby, their children, family members, or visiting disadvantaged groups. If they choose to present an image of an ordinary person, they opt to appear in casual clothes and sometimes even in sportswear (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). There are many concrete examples of using visual symbols to create visual images. Examples include former President Bill Clinton and former Vice President Al Gore connecting a computer cable in an elementary school, an image that conveys their commitment to technology development and investment in the education system. Another example is the Instagram account of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which illustrates how he reinforced his image as a happily married man, a dedicated and loving father, by using photos of his family accompanying him at various events in Canada and around the world, fitting into Canadian heteronormativity (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Another example is First Lady Michelle Obama planting a vegetable garden at the White House, promoting healthy nutrition (Schill, 2009). A particularly memorable image in Israel is the iconic photo of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon lifting a sheep on his shoulders, portraying his image as a man of the land, connected to the ground and therefore not easily relinquishing his land. In contrast, Golda Meir, Israeli prime minister from 1969–1974, was portrayed and framed in a strikingly gendered manner. For example, in cartoons, Meir was seen as a housewife performing household chores, cooking, and sewing (Lachover, 2017).

### **Instagram as a Platform for Visual Political Communication**

Instagram, which has rapidly gained popularity in recent years, attracts media bodies, political organizations, and politicians who understand its power and integrate the platform into their communication strategy (Towner & Muñoz, 2018). Instagram has

many features that assist in conveying political messages. Instagram posts, including photos, short videos, and text, provide political news. These posts can motivate Instagram users to take actions, such as reacting to a post, liking it, and interacting with the candidates (Parmelee & Roman, 2019). In other words, Instagram serves as a political communication tool that allows politicians to directly convey messages, control and amplify their public image, and even create a desired political image; on the other hand, it helps create a sense of personal connection between citizens and politicians (Harvey, 2013). Partly because it allows politicians to reach a broad audience of voters, especially younger ones, Instagram is becoming increasingly important for political candidates (Bossetta, 2017).

As a visual communication strategy, Instagram is perceived as more authentic than text and is a decisive factor in conveying messages to the public (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017). Instead of writing long messages, one can rely on pictures and videos to convey a clear and concise message (Towner & Muñoz, 2018). For instance, during the 2012 US presidential election, former President Barack Obama and his opponent Mitt Romney used Instagram “to give citizens a different, behind-the-scenes look at what you might not see on other platforms” (Sylvester, 2012). Another example is the campaign of Alexander Van der Bellen, which made strategic use of Instagram during the 2016 Austrian presidential elections. Analysis of the campaign shows how a politician used visual communication on a digital platform to broadcast and manage a desired image (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017), bypassing traditional media and setting the agenda for media coverage. However, it should be noted that not everyone feels comfortable on the platform, as visual communication is not natural for many politicians, and they need to adapt to Instagram's aesthetic conventions to succeed (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). It can be said that Instagram allows politicians to convey messages in a short, transparent, and authentic way using visuals. Still, their success in this task depends significantly on their ability to frame their communicative story visually.

### **User Engagement with Visual Self-Presentation of Male and Female Politicians**

The influence of images is potent, such that a single image can affect voters' perceptions of a candidate's competence, leadership ability, integrity, and likability (Rosenberg et al., 1986). Creating a political image strengthens, sharpens, and maintains

a favorable public perception of the politician to influence their political opinions and decision-making (Strachan & Kendall, 2004). Therefore, it is essential to investigate how voters react to candidates' visual communication on social media (Farkas & Bene, 2021).

A recent study by Brands et al. (2021), which examined whether the use of specific forms of visual self-presentation leads to more audience engagement, found that the examined forms of visual self-presentation, such as attire, proximity or distance from other people in the picture, happy or serious facial expressions, did not affect the level of follower engagement. However, a post in which a politician appeared in a picture received 13% more likes than one in which politicians did not appear. Moreover, images in which politicians appear but their faces are not visible negatively affect the number of likes.

The presence of other people (besides the politicians) in the picture also significantly negatively affected the number of likes and comments, meaning that when politicians were photographed with others (and not alone), the number of likes decreased. Thus, posts in which politicians appear alone generate more engagement. Examining the findings through a gender lens revealed that female politicians receive more likes when they appear in the picture than male politicians. At the same time, the effect was not reflected in the number of comments. Another finding is that when female politicians appear in a full shot (showing the entire body) or a half-shot (upper half of the body) as opposed to a close-up (just the face), they receive more likes and comments.

A study examining the impact of politicians' facial attractiveness on their online users' engagement (Markowitz-Elfassi, Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2019) found that Facebook posts of more attractive politicians, especially those accompanied by a visual image, yielded more shares, more comments, and a larger number of participants in the discussion. These findings emphasize the importance that politicians must give to the pictures they upload on the network to bring about greater involvement in the opinions and ideas they publish online. These findings conclude that an attractive appearance and extensive use of visual images on social networks can greatly help politicians create user engagement, spread their opinions, and significantly shape the agenda.

A recent study by Brands, Kruikemeier, and Trilling (2021) examined how female politicians self-present visually and textually on Instagram compared to their male counterparts, and their impact on audience engagement. The study found that female

politicians receive more likes when present in the picture than male politicians, but this was insignificant in the number of comments. Additionally, the study's findings indicate that female politicians can receive more comments from followers by using visual self-presentation that focuses on authority, such as wearing more formal attire and other visual strategies, like dominance (being in the center of the picture or being part of a group) or using low camera angles to signify authority and power (Messaris, 1997). In addition, physical distance from others and a serious facial expression can help politicians project greater authority, establish legitimacy, and show the electorate that they are 'fit to lead' (Verser & Wicks, 2006).

Users also preferred posts where a politician is photographed alone and from a greater distance (whole body or long shot); these posts received more likes and/or comments (Brands et al., 2021). Therefore, female politicians can use forms of visual self-presentation that may help them project more authority and establish legitimacy (Verser & Wicks, 2006). This reinforces the claim by Yarchi and Samuel-Azran (2018) that social media may offer greater opportunities for female politicians than their male counterparts.

Uploading pictures and videos on Instagram allows politicians to create a desired image by revealing different sides of their personality, skills, understanding, and political perception. Pictures can expose how the candidate wants to be perceived by the public and what policies they advocate.

In sum, while examining the media coverage of male and female politicians on the traditional media, most studies found that male politicians usually receive more salient coverage than female politicians, and the coverage surrounding female politicians tends to promote gender stereotypes (e.g., Basow, 2016; Everitt et al., 2016). Studies focusing on social media representation and users' engagement with male and female politicians' posts (e.g., McGregor & Mourão, 2018) found more optimistic results, suggesting that the online realm provides female politicians with an equal opportunity to engage with potential voters, and in some cases even an advantage in their ability to do so compared to their male counterparts (as found in Yarchi and Samuel-Azran's 2018 study, which examined Facebook). The current study aims to investigate this issue further while focusing on a newer and less studied platform – Instagram – that, due to its visual-based messages and

popularity among younger users, allows politicians a different type of engagement with voters. Based on the literature presented above, our first hypothesis is:

H1: Female politicians' Instagram posts will generate higher user engagement (regarding likes, comments, and views) than male politicians.

While focusing on visual representation, studies found that the presence of politicians in the presented images, as well as a self-presentation that focuses on authority – such as wearing more formal attire, maintaining physical distance from others, serious facial expression, and full-body shots – increases users' engagement (in terms of likes and comments) to politicians' posts (Brands et al., 2021). Thus, our second hypothesis is:

H2: Images focusing on authority (in terms of attire, physical distancing, serious facial expression, and full-body presentation) will increase users' engagement with female politicians' Instagram posts.

## **METHODS**

In line with our goals, and to learn about gender differences in politicians' ability to generate users' engagement (in terms of likes, comments and views) with their Instagram posts during an election campaign, we conducted a content analysis of Israeli politicians' Instagram posts in the week leading to Israel's 2021 elections. The study focused on Instagram, a popular social media platform, but it was less studied than other social media platforms in political contexts. Instagram is the third most popular social media platform in Israel, following Facebook and YouTube (Alexa, 2021). Politicians tend to use Instagram as part of their communication strategy (Towner & Muñoz, 2018), since the character and trends of the platform make their visual publication appear authentic, which is a crucial element in message promotion (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017).

The Israeli election campaign serves as our case study. While the study focuses on the March 24, 2021, elections, it is crucial to understand the country's political system. Israel has a multiparty system, in which Israeli citizens vote for their preferred party. However, due to the tendency in Western democracies to emphasize and personalize candidates, candidates play a significant role in Israeli election campaigns. The 24th Knesset (the Israeli parliament), used as our case study, included representatives of 13

parties. The 2021 elections were held amidst a precarious political situation in Israel. It was the fourth round of elections in two years.

We conducted a content analysis of all the Instagram posts published on the personal profiles of 38 politicians (19 women and 19 men) during the week leading up to Israel's 2021 elections and on Election Day (we examined eight days of the politicians' Instagram posts). The analysis focuses on the users' engagement that each post had generated, in terms of the number of likes, comments and views, and on various visual strategies used by the politicians (as described below). Like previous studies in the field (e.g., Samuel-Azran & Yarchi, 2021) and in line with the structure of Israel's multiparty system, our analysis included all female politicians ranked within the first five places of their party.

To control for the level of popularity among their supporters and the newsworthiness of the politicians, for each female politician examined, we sampled a matching male politician from the same party and in the same political position (the male politician ranked immediately before or after the female politician) on the same party's list (for example, we measured a female politician ranked fourth and a male politician ranked third in the Yesh Atid's list). The notion of this sampling method is not to compare each pair of politicians to one another, but to ensure we have a broad perspective of the users' engagement with politicians' Instagram posts generated in the days leading up to the elections. Table 1 presents the politicians we examined, their party affiliation and ranking, the number of Instagram followers, and the number of posts they published during the week leading up to Election Day. The data (N=238 posts) were retrieved from the politicians' Instagram pages.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In posts in which more than one image was presented, we coded the first image.

Table 1 *Politicians' Instagram information*

Female Politician	Ranking in Party	N of posts	N of followers	Male Politician	Ranking in Party	N of posts	N of followers	Party
Yifat Shasha-Biton	2	9	11.3K	Ze'ev Elkin	3	-	3157	Tikva Hadash
Orna Barbivai	2	13	6846	Yair Lapid	1	45	114K	Yesh Atid
Karine Elharrar	4	13	3625	Meir Cohen	3	5	2001	Yesh Atid
Merav Cohen	4	9	5302	Yoel Razvozov	6	5	3181	Yesh Atid
Tamar Zandberg	2	21	14.3K	Yair Golan	3	6	2284	Meretz
Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi	4	-	-	Esawi Frej	5	-	-	Meretz
Miri Regev	4	8	37.2K	Israel Katz	3	7	15.9K	Likud
Aida Touma-Suleiman	4	-	-	Sami Abu Shehadeh	3	-	-	Hareshima Hameshufefet
Ayelet Shaked	2	10	61.8K	Alon Davidi	3	-	1766	Yamina
Yulia Malinovsky	5	1	362	Eli Avidar	4	-	3344	Israel Biytenu
Pnina Tamano-Shata	2	4	5196	Chili Tropper	3	4	6482	Chacol Lavan
Orit Farkash-Hacohen	5	1	1469	Michael Biton	4	4	1247	Chacol Lavan
Merav Michaeli	1	43	62.5K	Omer Bar-Lev	2	4	3406	Ha'avoda
Emilie Moatti	3	8	2674	Gilad Kariv	4	1	1108	Ha'avoda
Efrat Rayten	5	8	1509	Ram Shefa	6	8	2037	Ha'avoda
Michal Waldiger	2	2	211	Bezalel Smotrich	1	2	8278	Hatziyonut Hadatit
Orit Strock	5	-	-	Simcha Rothman	4	-	-	Hatziyonut Hadatit
Iman Khatib-Yasin	5	-	-	Saeed al-Kharumi	4	-	-	Ra'am
Adva Biton	2	-	-	Itamar Ben-Gvir	1	-	-	Otzma Yehudit

Note: As presented in table 1, some politicians do not have an Instagram account, and others are not using it frequently.

We used various measurements in our analysis to gain a broad understanding of politicians' ability to generate user engagement on Instagram. In addition to the politicians' gender, we examined three Instagram users' engagement measurements: the number of likes the post generated, the number of comments it generated, and the number of views (unique users who viewed the video).

In addition to measuring the politicians' gender, we examined other factors that may impact politicians' ability to generate social media engagement. Those factors, which serve as control variables in our analysis, are: (a) the politicians' age, since younger politicians tend to have better social media skills (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015); (b) the politicians' ranking in their party, as it is an indicator of their popularity level within their party (Lev-On, & Haleva-Amir, 2018); (c) the politicians' party affiliation, as parties are different in terms of the popularity they generate on social media (Yarchi, Wolfsfeld,

Samuel-Azran, & Segev, 2017); and (d) the post's timing, as posts published closer to Election Day tend to generate more user engagement (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018).

In addition, due to the visual nature of Instagram, we measured various visual strategies used by the politicians. We used various visual categories in our analysis, many based on previous studies focused on visual content analysis (e.g., Adi, Gerodimos and Lilleker, 2018; Neuendorf, 2002), alongside Instagram-oriented variables. We examined whether the post included a picture or a video; whether the politician appear in the visual or not; whether the politician is dressed formally or casually; whether the politician appears alone or with others; whether the visual focuses on the politicians' face, upper body, or whole body; the visual's distance from the politician (selfie, medium range, or long distance); the location of the visual (office, home, outside, etc.); whether the politician is presented in a professional or a personal activity; and the politician's facial expression in the visual (positive, neutral, or negative).

Two additional relevant variables were measured in our analysis: (1) the representation of national symbols, due to the context of the posts – politicians' publications during an election campaign; and (2) representation of gender issues, as the focus on gender issues was found to help female politicians generate more users' engagement on social media (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018)<sup>2</sup>. The content analysis of the posts was conducted by two trained students using a coding sheet. A reliability test based on a random sample of 15 percent of the posts showed high levels of agreement between the coders (Krippendorff's alpha coefficient no lower than .710).

## RESULTS

The results section examines the user engagement that male and female politicians generated on Instagram during an election campaign. First, we investigated differences in users' engagement generated by male and female politicians, followed by an analysis of the impact of various visual strategies on male and female politicians' ability to create users' engagement on Instagram. The results indicate that female politicians tend to publish more on Instagram: 151 posts were published by female politicians compared to

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, we had examined the topics discussed by male and female politicians in their Instagram publications (elections, security, economics, Covid19 and other topics), but our analysis did not find significant differences between the topics used by politicians from different genders.

only 87 posts by male politicians. The first stage of our analysis focuses on differences in audience engagement that the Instagram posts of male and female politicians generated. The differences in users' engagement (as measured by the number of likes, comments, and views) between male and female politicians' posts on Instagram were calculated using t-tests (Table 2).

Table 2 *Differences in audience engagement between male and female politicians' posts (Test and a multi-level analysis)*

Variables	Gender of politician (posts by)	N	M	SD	T
<b>Likes</b>	Females	150	790.01	1387.16	1.581
	Males	87	1150.00	2113.28	
<b>Comments</b>	Females	150	35.43	71.91	2.153*
	Males	87	70.94	143.75	
<b>Views</b>	Females	150	4848.64	13436.24	.607
	Males	87	6022.20	15814.68	
		Model 1: Likes	Model 2: Comments	Model 3: Views	
Fixed effects					
	Gender (female=1)	-378.24	-40.42	-7524.58	
	Politician's ranking	-496.04**	-30.36**	-5000.73**	
	Politician's Age	-35.97	-2.71	-194.01	
	Days to elections	-110.37**	-1.18	1761*	
	Party 1 – Likud	1856.37	21.90	13254.19	
	Party 2 – Yesh Atid	1502.99	-11.20	6837.81	
	Party 3 – Chacol Lavan	673.130	-68.34	-3017.09	
	Party 4 – Tikva Hadasha	419.96	-62.52	3478.68	
	Party 5 – Ha'avoda	1558.38	-20.46	9580.79	
	Party 6 – Meretz	542.28	-65.55	3245.47	
	Party 7 - Yamina	1607.69	14.73	12556.54	
	Party 8 - Israel Biytenu	1462.28	8.85	-	
	Party 9 - Hatziyonut Hadatit	0	0	0	
Intercept		2699.78	270.60**	17753.53	
Variance of Random Components					
Politician		99461.66	130.70	.00	
-2 Restricted Log Likelihood		3963.00	2523.78	2233.03	
N		237	237	110	

*Note.* The statistical procedure is a multilevel (hierarchical) model (using SPSS MIXED model). The variance type is Variance Component. SPSS uses the Restricted Maximum Likelihood (REML) method for mixed model analysis. Entries are parameter estimates. \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

No significant differences were found between male and female politicians' ability to generate users' engagement in the number of likes and views. Surprisingly, in terms of comments, male politicians' posts generated more comments than those of female politicians. Those initial findings suggest that, unlike our expectations, female politicians are less successful at generating engagement on Instagram, a more female-oriented platform. Next, we wanted to see whether those findings hold while controlling for other variables that may impact users' engagement with politicians' posts, in addition to the politicians' gender. Some of those variables are at the politician's level, such as the politician's age, party, and ranking in the party's list; while others are at the post's level, including how many days before the elections the post was published, and the users' engagement generated.

Due to the nature of our data and the different posts published by each politician, we used a multilevel analysis (using an SPSS mixed model) to examine differences in the engagement male and female politicians' posts generated while controlling for the other variables in the model (Table 2). The findings of the multi-level analysis indicate that gender does not play a role in politicians' ability to generate user engagement on Instagram. While controlling for other variables, such as the politician's age, party, ranking in the party's list, and how many days before the elections the post was published, no gender differences were found in the number of likes, comments, or views. Factors that were found helpful in explaining politicians' ability to generate audience engagement on Instagram were the politicians' ranking, while politicians with higher rankings were able to create more engagement. The publication date (for likes and views), while closer to Election Day, users tend to like more posts, but in contrast, they are less likely to view politicians' videos. Here, too, while controlling for other variables, the evidence suggests that Instagram does not give female politicians an advantage in generating engagement, despite the feminine and visual nature of the platform. One possible explanation could be that since it is a platform with female dominance, male politicians' presence is more unusual (and less common) and receives more attention than expected. This may lead to more traditional perceptions of politics as a more masculine field.

Due to the visual nature of Instagram, we were trying to examine the usage of various visual strategies by male and female politicians and their ability to generate user

engagement. Regarding publishing pictures or videos, no significant differences were found for either female or male politicians in terms of their ability to create users' engagement.<sup>3</sup> It appears that, for both genders, Instagram posts that use pictures or videos receive similar likes and comments.<sup>4</sup> As for the politicians' appearance in the visual, the findings are presented in Table 3 (while the analysis was conducted separately for male and female politicians).

Table 3 *Differences in audience engagement between various visual variables (for male and female politicians)*

Variables	Politicians' gender		N	M	SD	T
<b>Appearance in visual</b>						
<b>Likes</b>	Females	No	33	491.03	883.19	-1.406
		Yes	117	874.33	1491.26	
	Males	No	20	894.75	1499.74	-.613
		Yes	67	1226.19	2268.51	
<b>Comments</b>	Females	No	33	14.88	28.85	-2.970*
		Yes	117	41.23	79.12	
	Males	No	20	55.85	88.72	-.533
		Yes	67	75.45	156.75	
<b>Views</b>	Females	No	33	2051.48	4835.11	-1.358
		Yes	117	5637.58	14919.38	
	Males	No	20	2323.30	4034.90	-1.195*
		Yes	67	7126.34	17771.40	
<b>Dress code</b>						
<b>Likes</b>	Females	Casual	41	285.49	285.49	4.525***
		Formal	75	1241.36	1792.21	
	Males	Casual	17	577.71	868.59	1.374
		Formal	50	1446.68	2547.48	
<b>Comments</b>	Females	Casual	41	14.85	23.33	3.681***
		Formal	75	57.39	94.96	
	Males	Casual	17	23.12	31.39	1.612
		Formal	50	93.24	177.49	
<b>Views</b>	Females	Casual	41	1013.15	2198.27	3.559**
		Formal	75	8578.61	18168.11	
	Males	Casual	17	78.76	255.93	3.329**
		Formal	50	9522.52	20056.96	

<sup>3</sup> For female politicians, likes [ $T_{148} = -.214; N.S.$ ], and comments [ $T_{148} = .038; N.S.$ ]. For male politicians, likes [ $T_{85} = -1.586; N.S.$ ], and comments [ $T_{85} = -.597; N.S.$ ]

<sup>4</sup> Views were not examined because they are measured only for videos.

Users' engagement with male and female politicians' Instagram posts

National symbols						
<b>Likes</b>	Females	No	85	720.29	1072.95	-.909
		Yes	60	935.98	1777.97	
	Males	No	41	472.49	728.06	-3.089*
		Yes	45	1775.02	2723.42	
<b>Comments</b>	Females	No	85	32.00	59.44	-.861
		Yes	60	42.60	88.84	
	Males	No	41	25.32	44.63	-2.889**
		Yes	45	107.27	184.46	
<b>Views</b>	Females	No	85	6473.74	17237.39	1.845*
		Yes	60	2835.30	4856.90	
	Males	No	41	627.39	2238.02	-3.275***
		Yes	45	10851.87	20808.02	
Gender issues						
<b>Likes</b>	Females	No	121	696.36	1255.72	-2.022*
		Yes	20	1642.20	2028.79	
	Males	No	84	1180.33	2143.71	.489
		Yes	2	434.00	545.88	
<b>Comments</b>	Females	No	121	33.40	70.28	-1.532
		Yes	20	60.55	90.91	
	Males	No	84	73.31	145.76	.644
		Yes	2	6.50	4.95	
<b>Views</b>	Females	No	121	4085.08	12002.62	-1.524*
		Yes	20	11475.40	21128.78	
	Males	No	84	6226.38	16059.81	.516
		Yes	2	336.50	475.88	

\*P < .05; \*\*P < .01; \*\*\*P < .001.

There are no significant differences in the number of likes that both female and male politicians' posts generated, whether they appear in the published visual or not. Female politicians' posts generate more comments when they appear in the visual, and male politicians' posts generate more views when they appear in the visual.

As presented in Table 3, female politicians' posts generate more engagement (likes, comments, and views) when the visual presents them dressed formally. For male politicians, those differences were found only in the number of views – when the visual presents them dressed formally, their posts generate more views, while no differences

were found in likes and comments. In terms of social media success, the findings regarding the advantage of a professional and formal appearance for female politicians fit those of previous studies (Brands et al., 2021; Verser & Wicks, 2006). An experienced, assertive visual look works well for female politicians on Instagram.

Other politicians' appearance factors that were examined in terms of ability to generate users' engagement are:<sup>5</sup> whether the politician appears alone or with others; whether the visual focuses on the politicians' face, upper body or whole body; the visual's distance from the politician (selfie, medium range, or long distance); the location of the visual (office, home, outside, etc.); whether the politician is presented in a professional vs. personal activity; and the politician's facial expression in the visual (positive, neutral or negative). No significant differences were found in any of those factors in terms of both female and male politicians' ability to generate likes, comments, and views.

As presented in Table 3, the representation of national symbols works well for male politicians in terms of their ability to generate likes, comments, and views for their Instagram posts. In analyzing female politicians' posts, those differences were found only for the number of views, while no differences were found for likes and comments. It appears that, on Instagram, politics is a masculine field, and male politicians benefit from the traditional representation of politics, such as the usage of national symbols. Table 3 presents the findings regarding the representation of gender issues in politicians' posts. The findings suggest that dealing with gender issues contributes to female politicians' ability to generate engagement (in terms of likes and views, but not for comments). Those differences are unique for female politicians and were not found in the analysis of male politicians' posts. Female politicians' focus on gender issues helps them engage with their audience better.

In the last stage of our analysis, we examined the shared impact of the various strategies presented above and the politician's gender on their ability to generate users' engagement with their Instagram posts during an election campaign, using a two-way ANOVA. In all but one of the analyses, the interaction between the various strategies and the politician's gender did not impact the engagement measurements significantly. The

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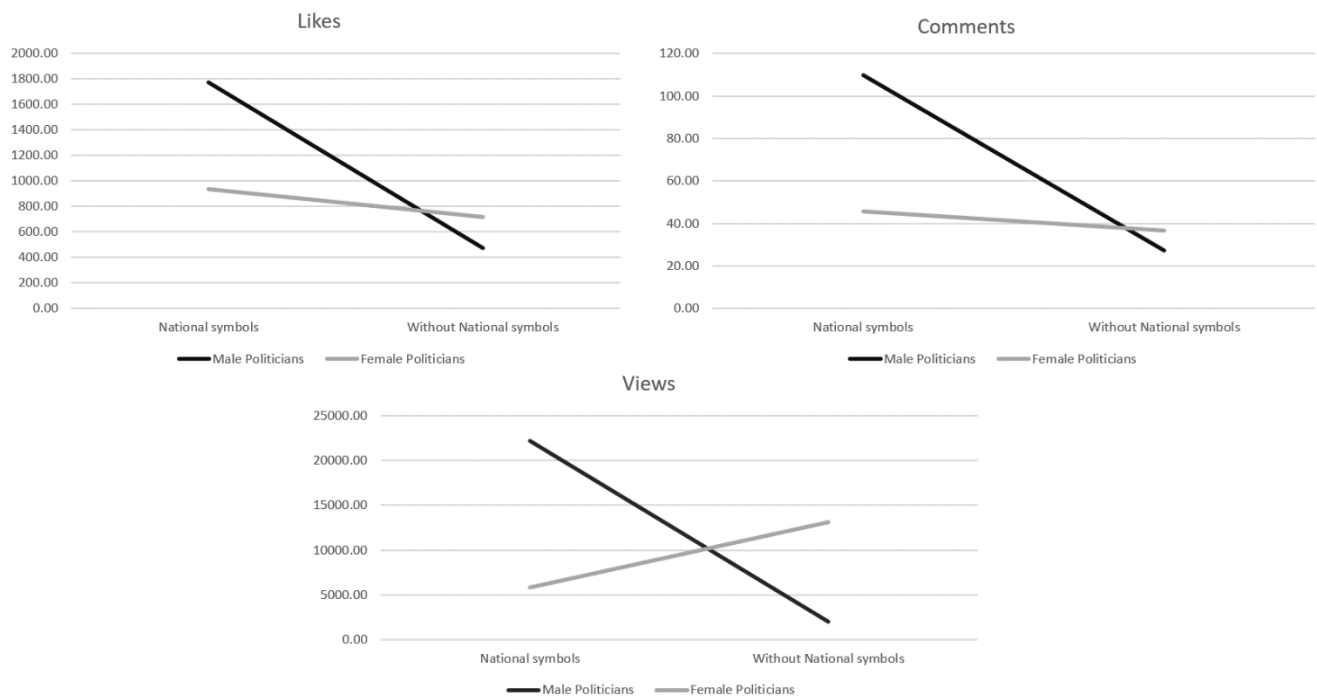
<sup>5</sup> Differences in those factors were examined using T tests and one way ANOVA, according to the number of categories measured.

only significant interaction was found between the usage of national symbols and gender. As presented in Table 4 and Figure 1 (which presents the interaction effect), the usage of national symbols contributes to male politicians' ability to generate users' engagement.

Table 4  
*The shared impact of the politicians' gender and the usage of national symbols in Instagram posts on users' engagement*

	<i>Model 1: Likes</i>				<i>Model 2: comments</i>			
	<i>SS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>SS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>Politicians gender (female = 1)</i>	4658023.43	1.67	1	.007	37100.92	3.35	1	.016
<i>National symbols (=1)</i>	30715419.68	11.05**	1	.046	103602.96	9.35**	1	.043
<i>Interaction</i>	15740565.95	5.66*	1	.024	67185.55	6.06*	1	.028
<i>Total</i>	675206910.83				2493928.43			
	<i>Model 3: views</i>							
	<i>SS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	$\eta^2$				
<i>Politicians gender (female = 1)</i>	150122348.38	0.43	1	.001				
<i>National symbols (=1)</i>	932937813.16	2.65	1	.001				
<i>Interaction</i>	4171754674.71	11.86***	1	.004				
<i>Total</i>	40585884818.73							

\*P<0.05; \*\* P<0.01; \*\*\* P<0.001



*Figure 1.* The interaction effect of the politicians' gender and the usage of national symbols in Instagram posts on users' engagement

In sum, in contrast to our hypothesis (H1), we did not find differences in the ability of male and female politicians to generate user engagement for their Instagram posts. It appears that politicians, regardless of their gender, were able to create a similar number of likes, comments, and views. While examining strategies that may contribute to their ability, we found that male politicians generate better engagement when they use national symbols (in all engagement factors), appear in the visual, and are dressed formally (both were found for the number of views). Female politicians were more successful at generating users' engagement in visuals in which they were dressed officially, received more comments when they appeared in the visual, and received more views when they used national symbols. In addition, it was found that dealing with gender issues contributes to female politicians' ability to better engage with their audience (significant for likes and views).

## DISCUSSION

The current study examines whether Instagram, a popular visual social network, provides equal opportunities for female politicians compared to male politicians to engage

Users' engagement with male and female politicians' Instagram posts with potential voters. It focuses on the most significant period in politics, the days leading up to elections, using Israel's March 2021 elections as our case study.

Instagram is a rich visual platform that can be used for self-presentation and branding, thus providing politicians with an ideal political marketing platform (Muñoz & Towner, 2017). Therefore, female politicians should receive equal opportunities on Instagram. Unlike findings for other platforms, even though Instagram's visual nature gives women an advantage, our findings show that female politicians could not generate higher engagement than male politicians on Instagram.

Furthermore, posts by male politicians received more engagement in comments than by female politicians. These findings do not align with those of previous studies (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran, 2018; Joiner et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2013), which, as mentioned, found that social media serve as a more supportive environment for female politicians than for male politicians. Contrary to findings on Facebook (Yarchi and Samuel-Azran, 2018), Instagram does not provide female politicians with an advantage, and they receive similar engagement to the posts of their male counterparts.

These results remained the same when controlling for their age, party affiliation, party ranking, and the number of days before the elections when the post was published. Therefore, despite the absence of gatekeepers on social media, politicians maintain traditional role divisions on Instagram, thereby preserving the perception that politics is a masculine topic. Moreover, contrary to conventional media, where male politicians usually receive more extensive and prominent coverage (Basow, 2016; Braden, 1996; Bystrom et al., 2001; Everitt et al., 2016), on Instagram men are an exception, their gender representation is lower than that of women, and their engagement in topics such as security and economics differs from the salient social discourse on Instagram. It makes sense that male stereotypes as 'effective' leaders presenting authority, assertiveness, competitiveness, and being task-focused and goal-oriented (Bass, 1998) would be foreign to the Instagram discourse, which is characterized by lightness and informality (Pereira Caldeira, 2021). This is likely why male politicians stand out on Instagram and receive equal or even higher audience engagement than female politicians.

Considering the findings, where it emerged that men and women receive similar user' engagement in terms of likes and views, and the understanding that male politicians

even receive more engagement in comments, we wanted to get a better understanding of the circumstances in which politicians can generate more user' engagement. Based on previous studies, we examined several variables: the visual presented, the effect of the politician's presence in the visual, the activity presented in the visual, the facial expression of the politician, the politician's attire, and whether the post deals with gender-related issues.

Study findings indicate that when female politicians are seen in visuals and dressed in more formal and professional attire, they receive greater engagement on Instagram. These findings are compatible with those of previous studies (Brands et al., 2021) and reinforce our statement that since Instagram usually works for women visually, when female politicians present themselves in a more assertive, formal, and professional manner they receive more engagement than when they are dressed and convey a more casual appearance. Thus, it makes sense for female politicians to use forms of visual self-presentation that may help them project greater authority and establish legitimacy (Verser & Wicks, 2006).

Like the findings of other studies (e.g., Bailey & Nawara, 2019; Elsayed, Van der Pas & Aldering, 2020), on Instagram, we found that dealing with gender-related issues contributes to female politicians' ability to generate more engagement. Therefore, female politicians who brand themselves as women are more likely to receive greater support during an election campaign, as they can leverage voters' gender stereotypes (Herrnson, Lay & Stokes, 2003).

Examining the circumstances in which male politicians succeed in generating engagement shows that when national symbols are visible alongside the politician in the visual, they receive significantly more engagement in all engagement parameters. Further findings showed that when male politicians are seen in a video, they receive considerably more views. In addition, male politicians received more views in videos in which they are dressed formally.

One of the study's limitations is its sample size, and more precisely, the minority of female politicians with a reasonable chance of entering the Knesset. Hopefully, the number of female politicians will continue to rise and give us a wider understanding of the topic. In addition, coding visual variables is more challenging. To deal with this limitation,

the content analysis was conducted by coders who underwent training, and the reliability test showed high levels of agreement between the coders (as described in the method section).

Future studies could examine the advantages of social media for politicians and female politicians in other political contexts, countries, and visual platforms (such as TikTok). Finally, most studies in the field focus on content and less on visual aspects that are highly important for politicians' ability to garner support. Further examination of the role of visual elements could widen our understanding regarding politicians' usage of social media and their ability to better engage with potential voters.

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