

## Between “Me, Myself, and I” and the “Royal We”: Gender Differences in Personalized Political Discourse on Facebook and User Involvement

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This study focuses on discursive personalism on social media and especially on the differences between female and male politicians. More specifically, we test discursive personalism outside of a campaign period as a predictor of social media involvement (of users). A manual content analysis of posts by female and male politicians in the context of Israeli politics (N = 1,392) shows that higher levels of personalized discourse predict a higher level of user involvement (i.e., likes, comments, shares, and aggregate engagement). Additionally, we demonstrate that, compared with posts authored by male politicians, female politicians' communications exhibit a unique discourse style, with higher levels of discursive personalism, and, as a consequence, draw more involvement on the part of Facebook users.

*Keywords: political personalization, discursive personalism, Facebook, gender, content analysis*

*Political personalization* has become central in political science and political communication literature, as Rahat and Sheafer (2007) stated, this became evident particularly in research on behavior and communication in politics. Extensive evidence points to a dynamic process that is “expressed in a heightened focus on individual politicians (prime minister, president, party leader) and a diminished focus on nations, political parties, organizations and institutions” (Balmas, Rahat, Sheafer, & Shenhav, 2014, p. 37). Although most research on media personalization has been primarily concerned with traditional media, such as TV and newspapers (Langer, 2010; McAllister, 2007), some recent studies have targeted other platforms as well, including social media (e.g., McGregor, 2018; McGregor, Lawrence, & Cardona, 2017).

It has been argued, moreover, that the rise of social media is tied to the increased personalization in political communication (e.g., McGregor et al., 2017). In this connection, Enli and Skogerbø (2013) point out that “[s]ocial media such as Facebook and Twitter place the focus on the individual politician rather than on the political party, thereby expanding the political arena for increased personalized ‘campaigning’” (p. 758). In social media, discursive personalism can be conceptualized as personalized behavior displayed by

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politicians to the extent that it reflects their choices of whether to direct the spotlight on themselves or their respective parties.

Theories of gender expectations and gender roles lead us to believe that gender may be a factor in political communication. This is especially important in understanding that people who identify as females and males are expected to behave differently from one another. For example, Eagly and Karau (2002) discuss social role theory and communal versus agentic characteristics. The first largely refers to the welfare of others (i.e., empathy or kindness) and is associated with women. The second, agentic characteristics, refers to more of an assertive and controlling set of traits (i.e., ambition and independence), and are associated more strongly with men. Thus, in terms of societal expectations, although the above-mentioned theories predict the behavior of individuals identifying as women to be more communal, that of individuals identifying as males is expected to be more agentic and individualized (Kray, Kennedy, & Van Zant, 2014). As personalized communication styles put forth the individual and therefore align with individualized behaviors such as expected from males, female politicians' communications, then, could be expected to be less personalized than those of their male colleagues and more in line with communal and affiliative behavior. In addition, one can also expect differences in the public's reactions to what is perceived as feminine and masculine behaviors. For example, David and Maoz (2015) showed that perceiving outgroups as holding stereotypical feminine traits increased the levels of support for compromise.

Reactions to discursive personalism have also been demonstrated through virtual *reactions* (e.g., *like, love, laugh, sad, amazed, and angry*) and written *comments, shares, and overall engagement* with such discourse depending on the gender of the creator of the post (Lawrence, McGregor, Cardona, & Mourão, 2016). Although the role that candidates' self-personalization plays in digital campaigning and the influences of gender in this regard have been addressed before, it was scoped through the lens of privatization and other related discourse styles and in tandem with campaigning periods (e.g., McGregor et al., 2017; Meeks, 2016). Other researchers studying gender bias in social media engagement have considered the "interplay of gender and language" (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018, p. 982) but excluded discursive personalism issues. Therefore, to the best of our knowledge, no study has analyzed the differences in the public's virtual reactions to personalized posts of female versus male politicians outside of election campaigns. As Heiss, Schmuck, and Matthes (2019) observed, "The majority of the time people live and act in a nonelectoral context, which [. . .] differs from the campaign season" (p. 1489).

Notably, during campaign time, rank-and-file politicians are expected to fall in line with the party leader, support official messages, give interviews, and encourage voters (Abney et al., 2011). Whereas intraparty division is costly during campaign times, during noncampaign periods, rank-and-file politicians can promote their particular political agendas more freely and sometimes also speak against the dominant party line at a relatively low cost in terms of party support (Abney et al., 2011). Even traditional media outlets and the public reinforce the focus on the party and its leader during election time (Otto, Glogger, & Maier, 2019), covering politics by slightly different means and strategies (Aaldering & Van Der Pas, 2018), which may be echoed in social media by the accounts of traditional media on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Thus, studying a noncampaign communication may provide insights into the field

of discursive personalism, especially since decentralized discursive personalism is more likely to thrive during such a period.

Next, we relay relevant theories and previous research and present our research questions. Following the theory section, we identify the unique discourse style formulated by female politicians and discuss the implications of this style on politicians' social media popularity and public opinion. Our analysis strategy of combining simple correlations, t-tests, and mediation analysis, was formulated to answer the broad question of this research, asking about the differences in female and male politicians' communications, and whether they are received differently by the public. In what follows, the analysis indicates female politicians' communication strategies differ from those of males, and by including both the personalized and the communal discursive cues, female politicians are reinstating, to a degree, an equilibrium between "me, myself, and I" and the "royal we."

### **Personalization and Personalized Discourse**

A personalization process in any given domain can proceed along two possible trajectories, centralized and decentralized (Balmas et al., 2014). The first involves the transfer of focus and political privilege from a political group as a whole to specific individuals within it, such as party leaders, prime ministers, or presidents. In the second, decentralized, pattern, focus, and privilege are diffused among several individuals, such as legislators or individual politicians (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007)—crucially, among members of an elite group rather than rank-and-file party members. Most studies have focused on centralized personalization (e.g., Wauters, Thijssen, Van Aelst, & Pilet, 2018), while decentralized personalization has received less attention in the literature (e.g., Rahat & Kenig, 2018).

Within both centralized and decentralized personalization, the literature distinguishes three different types. The first is institutional personalization, which refers to "the adoption of rules, mechanisms, and institutions that put more emphasis on the individual politician and less on political groups and parties" (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007, p. 207). The second is media personalization, where the presentation of politics in the media morphs, expressed in a heightened focus on specific politicians and a diminished focus on parties and institutions (Amsalem, Zoizner, Sheafer, Walgrave, & Loewen, 2020). As Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer (2012), and others defined it, media personalization "concerns a focus on individual politicians as central actors in the political arena, including their ideas, capacities and policies" (p. 204). The third type is behavioral personalization, which can be predicated of two groups, voters and politicians (McAllister, 2007). Among voters, behavioral personalization manifests in a tendency to vote more based on evaluations of and identification with individuals as opposed to parties and party values (Balmas et al., 2014). Among politicians, behavioral personalization entails "an increase in individualized political activities and a decrease in collective partisan activity" (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013, p. 40).

Thus, individual politicians' discourse on Facebook pages can be seen as a derivative of decentralized personalization (Pedersen & Rahat, 2021). Furthermore, posts published on an individual's account are, by nature, decentralized, compared with those published on a political party account. Therefore, this study addresses politicians' *decentralized personalized behaviors*. We note here that since

personalization in its definition happens over time, personalism is used to indicate focusing on individual politicians at a given time point, regardless of fluctuation or changes over periods of time (Pruysers, Cross, & Katz, 2018). We therefore use the term *discursive personalism* to maintain the distinction between personalization that is measured over a period of time and personalism that is measured at a single time point. In doing so, we follow the guidelines by Pedersen and Rahat (2021), suggesting personalism research should identify three dimensions: arena of personalism, source of personalism, and personalism manifestation manner.

At this point, it is imperative to distinguish between personalism and privatization. Although personalization is the focus on individual politicians' political acts, privatization refers to the focus on politicians' families and other personal aspects of their day-to-day lives (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Although privatization and individualization have been introduced as separate, unique structures (Van Aelst et al., 2012), many researchers have addressed all phenomena under the umbrella of personalism (e.g., Lawrence et al., 2016; McGregor, 2018), while some have compared personalism and privatization by slightly different names (Metz, Kruike-meier, & Lecheler, 2020). In this study, personalism is introduced in its fundamental state, represented by one's use of first-person singular pronouns to accentuate their professional acts as politicians, as discussed later.

### **Political Discursive Personalism in Social Media**

Previous literature has pointed to a process in which inexperienced politicians or ones who feel that they attract insufficient media coverage turn to new forms of communication in the hope of facilitating interaction with the public (Livak, Lev-On, & Doron, 2011). No longer having to abide by the rules of journalists, also known as gatekeepers of modern democracy (Livingston & Bennet, 2003), politicians make use of new media in ways not possible through traditional means.

It has also been suggested that significant determinants of individuals' social conduct are self-presentation and motivation to display oneself in a positive light vis-à-vis the public (Macafee, 2013; Yang & Brown, 2013). These goals, or mindsets, are a prominent feature of social media and are conducive to putting forth oneself, wishes, and the day-to-day practices of one's private life (Seidman, 2013).

Facebook and other social media sites have had a direct effect by creating in a user a sense of intimacy and personal connection with the source of a post (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). It has been attested, on several occasions, that the more personalized a politician's message was, thereby projecting authenticity and intimacy, the greater engagement that politician received from the public (Van Aelst et al., 2012). Along with personalism, some media features also induce feelings of intimacy and authenticity. One such example is the feature of "authenticating" official accounts, which adds another dimension of confidence in the messages and the authenticity of the message source (Bossetta, 2018). When a certain level of perceived intimacy is achieved, social media platforms such as Facebook not only allow open-ended communication for politicians and voters but also encourage engagement on the part of the public (Meeks, 2017) because of the compiled power of authenticity and intimacy derived by some media affordances and discursive personalism. Thus, based on the above theoretical framework, since (1) intimacy and authenticity were previously shown to encourage engagement, and (2) personalism on social media

creates a sense of intimacy, it is reasonable to hypothesize that political discursive personalism on Facebook, with its intimate-like nature, will attract more engagement from users.

### ***Social Media Involvement***

Social platforms employ various engagement indicators for content created by users, whether companies, private individuals, or politicians (Sashi, 2012). Content creators are guided by these indices in updating their style, fostering, in a reciprocal process, a distinctive relationship with consumers (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Facebook, in particular, employs three main engagement indicators for a post: *likes*, *comments*, and *shares* (Larsson, 2015; Xenos, Macafee, & Pole, 2017).

The *like* button, which is the most commonly used option among Facebook users (Larsson, 2015; Nave, Shifman, & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018), has been described in the literature as reflecting the least degree of user commitment as compared with other indices (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). The *comment* option is textual and is believed to involve more commitment than a *like* or another similar reaction available on Facebook (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012). Admittedly, articulating one's opinion in writing or tagging others to share content with specific individuals is a more complex response than commenting with an emoji sticker provided by Facebook. We note here that comments may vary in nature and orientation. Although some may be supportive and positive, others present negative sentiments, and the same may apply to the rest of the engagement indicators (Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, & Wolfsfeld, 2018). Finally, *sharing* enables users to repost the content published by another user on their own profiles as an independent post or sometimes as a message to specific people. The above three options are combined into an overall *engagement* indicator, created by Facebook. Thus, moving forward, when referring to the three base indicators together with the fourth aggregate indicator, we use the term *involvement*.

### **Gender and Personalized Discourse**

Although, overall, personalization trends in politics may not be gendered, there are several good reasons to assume that gender does affect politicians' discourse (McGregor et al., 2017). This study anchors its assumptions in two such causes, or rather, aspects of gender theory. First, women's behavior is expected, based on gender expectations and roles, to be more communal, and exhibit a set of traits focused on others, such as empathy and team-oriented behaviors, whereas men's is more agentive and individualized, with a set of traits such as assertiveness and dominance (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kray et al., 2014). These social expectations are instilled through the socialization process and embedded in education and other aspects of day-to-day life (Carter, 2014; Leaper & Ayres, 2007).

Whether female and male politicians act according to these gendered expectations, is debatable. Previous research suggests women tend to link their political activism to private matters, while men are more likely to participate at an institutional level (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). One explanation for this practice may be found in the strategic stereotype theory (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014), which suggests that candidates might choose to strategically emphasize some gender stereotypes and downplay others to aid their candidacy. A factor that may contribute to the choice of aligning behavior with gender expectations is

the "backlash effect," a societal reaction that occurs when one deviates from the course dictated by accepted standards of gender behavior (Schneider, Bos, & DiFilippo, 2022).

To the extent that expressing partisan affiliation emphasizes the importance of the group over the individual, it can be treated as a communal, affiliative behavior. Similarly, first-person singular pronouns attest to a more agentive behavior, as it underscores the importance of the individual over the group. Put together, these all serve as grounds to hypothesize that female politicians would use fewer agentive markers in their messages. This also draws attention to the possibility that female and male politicians may balance their discourse differently. This discourse style, in turn, could offer the underlying cause of the difference in engagement found in previous studies, when at times, female politicians are more engaging; however, on others, males' political posts are more engaging for the public (Samuel-Azran et al., 2018).

Relying on previous literature that found only that more personalized posts attract more involvement specifically during campaign times, we ask:

*RQ1: What is the relationship between decentralized discursive personalism of politicians and involvement in social media postings?*

Next, since this issue received little attention, we aim to answer research question:

*RQ2: How do male and female politicians' posts differ in their personalism levels?*

If those differences do exist, to some extent, it is essential to ask:

*RQ3: Do personalized posts by male and female politicians differ in the level of public engagement they garner?*

Finally, RQ4 asks:

*RQ4: Is the relationship between gender and involvement rates somehow affected by the levels of discursive personalism displayed on social media postings?*

Thus, the following section describes the methodological process used to answer the four main questions presented above.

## **Methods**

This research is based on a quantitative analysis of contents that appeared on Israeli politicians' official public Facebook pages. The focus on Israeli politicians is motivated by previous findings, which showed high levels of personalization and the proliferation of discursive personalism in Israel (e.g., Balmas et al., 2014; Rahat & Kenig, 2018), rendering the Israeli political arena a promising avenue for analyzing this phenomenon. Additionally, the Israeli parliament affords access to a broad range of

political settings on account of mixed electoral systems, and therefore allows a more complex scrutiny of the issue targeted. Finally, Facebook was chosen as it was a very popular platform, where 78% of adults used Facebook daily in 2015 and 80% in 2017, compared with only 7% on Twitter (Bezeq Report, 2017). Similarly, 36% used Facebook as a source for political knowledge according to the Bezeq Report for 2015.

The methods and procedures are described next, while sampling procedures had two parts, one for sampling politicians from the Israeli parliament and the other for sampling posts from Facebook pages of the sampled politicians.

### ***Politicians Sample***

All 120 members of the Israeli Parliament, also known as the Knesset, were categorized in terms of three characteristics: gender, in which the politicians displayed themselves through language and preferences on their publications; seniority (e.g., a minister is senior to a committee member, but less so than a prime minister); and number of years serving as members of the Knesset (hereafter: MKs). The sampling methodology relied on the process of matching 1:1 female and male politicians, based on the combined result of those three criteria. Matching was chosen to make sure each MK from one group had a parallel in the other group, and so the results would be based on a sample of compatible cases (i.e., Selb & Munzert, 2018). Without this method, there was a risk of gathering an imbalanced sample that would not have adequately served the study's purpose.

The process of matching considered several important characteristics. First, previous studies demonstrated that politicians with less authority are covered less regularly by traditional media, which constantly search for sensational, extraordinary, and intriguing events and personnel (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Tsfati, Markowitz Elfassi, & Waismel-Manor, 2010). Another factor that affects the amount of media coverage is a politician's term in office: "Young" politicians are covered less than their more experienced colleagues, and as a result, are on the lookout for alternative ways to interact with the public (Livak et al., 2011). Experienced politicians are also better known and are therefore under a lesser imperative to prove themselves or present themselves in a memorable way to the public (Livak et al., 2011). Thus, "young" or lesser-known politicians are likely to search for ways to stand out, oftentimes leading to more personalized behaviors. Tenure and seniority were measured here based on official information from the Israeli Knesset website, gauged as the number of years in office, and by rating parliament positions to determine seniority. This process produced a sample of 58 MKs of the full 120 MK lists, for whom we collected and sampled Facebook posts, as described below.

### ***Facebook Posts Sample***

The data for this study were collected via Netvizz (Rieder, 2013), a software add-on to Facebook that allows the extraction of posts from open Facebook pages and that draws up all metadata on each post. All data retrieved pertained to a two-year period, between April 1, 2015, when all the newly elected MKs were sworn into their positions, and March 31, 2017. The posts from the 58 Facebook profiles were downloaded on February 25, 2018, and produced a population of 24,480 posts. A sample of 1,392 items

was selected from the general population,<sup>1</sup> about 24 posts per politician, using a mixed sampling method, such that, for each MK, one post was chosen each month via random sampling. Since machine learning for analyzing Hebrew text was close to nonexistent, this sample size was calculated to allow manual, human, content analysis.

### *Sample Characteristics*

In the sample, 53.4% of all posts were written by women MKs and posted on their respective Facebook pages. Of the entire sample, 63.7% of the contents were posted on Facebook pages belonging to MKs from parties holding open, inclusive preelections, and 51.7% appeared on pages of coalition members. Seniority average was 3.31 ( $SD = 2.96$ ), where one indicated the lowest level of seniority (i.e., MKs functioning only as members of committees) and 10 the highest level (prime minister). The average number of years as an MK (tenure) was 6.03 ( $SD = 4.47$ ).

### **Measures**

A coding book was created to implement the content analysis method, incorporating 19 variables. The general characteristics of each post were determined based on five demographic variables, such as gender of the politician and belonging to coalition or opposition, and measured publication date and word count. Additionally, we measured the parameters pertaining to politicians based on these variables: an ID number randomly assigned to each politician and used in lieu of the name, gender, party belonging, seniority within the party, as well as the primaries system in that party.

The degree of discursive personalism was measured here based on previous studies, where frequent use of first-person singular pronouns (hereafter: FPSs) is taken to indicate a high personalization level in discourse, while the proliferation of first-person plural pronouns (hereafter: FPPs) implies group belonging (Balmas et al., 2014; Nave et al., 2018). Thereby, this study captured both ends of the personalized-affiliative scale. To these measures, we added three more indicators of communally oriented behaviors and partisan belonging: the mention of a party name (hereafter: PNMs), of a party leader (hereafter: PLMs), and of party members (hereafter: PMMs). The above three additional measures were deemed necessary insofar as FPPs need not necessarily point to the politician's identification with a political group but could pertain to any other group such as the entire nation, the family, a social milieu, or another collective. Engagement will be measured by the aggregate of *likes*, *comments*, and *shares* ratings. The variables presented below examine (a) the levels of discursive personalism versus partisan affiliative discourse, and (b) users' involvement, with a short description of the coding process and requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> The sample size was determined based on Glenn D. Israel's (1992) work, which showed the sufficient ratio of sample size for different population sizes. For a 25,000 population size, a sample size would be 1,064, about 4% of the general population. This was determined for 95% confidence level and 3% precision levels.

### **Linguistic Styles: Discursive Personalism vs. Partisan Affiliative Pronouns**

To measure the level of personalism in politicians' posts, we used the following indicators. Each one aims to quantify the extent to which the post focuses on the writer, or at their group, in various forms (descriptive statistics for each indicator are available in the online Appendix A: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/a8n3k5b8f1auwil/Supplemental%20materials-%20Appendix%20A.docx?dl=0>).

#### ***Phrases With First-Person Singular Reference (FPSs)***

This variable was expressed as the number of times first-person singular pronouns were used in a post (for example, me, myself, I, mine, my, my own). FPSs attend to the personalized end of the discursive personalism phenomena.

#### ***Phrases With First-Person Plural Reference (FPPs)***

Coders were instructed to count the number of times first-person plural pronouns appeared in a post (for example, our, us, we, ourselves). As mentioned before, this variable had been used in previous studies, but in our view, could not accurately represent partisan belonging and identification. To verify this conjecture, we examined FPPs along with the partisan belonging indicators, as follows:

#### ***Number of Times a Post Mentions the Respective Party (PNM)***

To estimate the strength of partisan belonging, coders recorded the number of times the politician's party was mentioned in a post. For example, if the politician belonged to the Likud Party, a mention of the Likud or an indirect mention such as "my party" or "our party."

#### ***Number of Times a Post Mentions the Respective Party Leader (PLM)***

Coders were instructed to count the number of times a post mentions the leader of the politician's party. For instance, if an MK belonged to the Labor Party, a mention of Hertzog would have been coded as PLM. For this purpose, coders received a list of all sampled parliament members, with details of their party affiliations and seniority statuses. Mentioning the party leader takes some of the focus away from the individual, and therefore is processed here as an affiliative pronoun.

#### ***The Number of Times a Post Mentions Members of the Respective Party (PMMs)***

The number of times a post mentions other party members, as counted by coders. For example, we counted when an MK who belonged to a certain party (e.g., Likud) mentioned another member of her party. The reasoning behind this is that any mention of another member takes away some of the attention from the writer.

With a view of confirming that FPPs do not accurately reflect partisan affiliation or political group identities, a test was performed to establish the relationship between FPPs and PNMs, or lack thereof. As expected, in 90% of the cases, only a weak correlation emerged ( $r = 0.11, p < .001$ ). A similar result was obtained about correlations between FPPs and PLMs ( $r = 0.06, p < .05$ ) and between FPPs and PMMs ( $r = 0.06, p < .05$ ). Based on these tests, we proceeded on the understanding that FPPs indicate partisan belonging only in conjunction with some reference to the respective party. Such a combination was expected to have a stronger correlation with each of the partisan belonging indicators. For example, the utterance, "I believe in our ability to lead" may not necessarily be predicated of a party, but "I believe in the Likud's ability to lead" or even "I believe in my party's ability to lead" can be conceived of as an indicator of partisan identity and belonging. Thus, the variables that point to partisan belonging more accurately than FPPs are PNMs, PLMs, and PMMs.

### **User Involvement**

The measures presented here target the different interactions with the text (*Likes, Comments, Shares, and Engagement*). These interactions are available for the Facebook users and are all counted and provided automatically, using Netvizz to extract the count of each parameter (Rieder, 2013). We note here that where *engagement* stands for Facebook's combination of *likes, shares, and comments*, involvement is used here to name all four (i.e., *likes, comments, shares, and engagement*).

#### **Likes**

This variable was measured by counting *likes* alone (that is, in isolation from other emotional response options provided by Facebook).

#### **Comments**

The number of verbal comments was measured using a count supplied by Netvizz.

#### **Shares**

The number of times a post was shared by other users, whether on their pages, on someone else's page, or in a private message, was measured using a count supplied by Netvizz.

#### **Engagement**

Included in the analysis to explore the validity of the indicator provided by Facebook. This variable was provided automatically in the raw data scraped from Facebook by Netvizz and is composed of the three other Facebook-based "actions" on posts: *likes, comments, and shares*.

Intercoder reliability tests were performed for every item using a subsample of 10% ( $n = 131$ ), while two coders performed the coding. The resulting scores were no less than 0.79 according to *Krippendorff's Alpha*

reliability test (all scores are available in Appendix B: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/6p7w28jpelwhyq/Supplemental%20materials-%20Appendix%20B.docx?dl=0>).

## Results

First, we asked about the relationship between decentralized discursive personalism of politicians and involvement in social media postings (RQ1). Correlational tests show that involvement indicators are positively and significantly correlated with two forms of pronouns: FPSs and FPPs. FPSs correlated positively with likes ( $r = 0.06, p < .05$ ), comments ( $r = 0.06, p < .05$ ), shares ( $r = 0.06, p < .05$ ), and engagement ( $r = 0.07, p < .05$ ). FPPs positively correlated with likes ( $r = 0.10, p < .05$ ), comments ( $r = 0.14, p < .05$ ), and engagement ( $r = 0.10, p < .05$ ), while shares had an insignificant result ( $r = 0.04, p > .05$ ). Yet, we found no significant correlations between the other discursive parameters and involvement indicators. Furthermore, Table 1 includes the correlations of three involvement measures with the other variables. The first is a textual characteristic: the length of the post, and the other two are the politician's characteristics: years in parliament and seniority. Not surprisingly, we found that the longer the post, the more FPSs ( $r = 0.6, p < .001$ ) and FPPs ( $r = 0.55, p < .001$ ) are used. Additionally, the more experience the parliament member has in years, the more likes ( $r = 0.15, p < .001$ ), comments ( $r = 0.21, p < .001$ ), and engagements ( $r = 0.14, p < .001$ ) the post garners. Finally, there is a positive correlation between seniority and likes ( $r = 0.14, p < .001$ ), comments ( $r = 0.07, p < .001$ ), and engagement ( $r = 0.10, p < .001$ ).

**Table 1. Involvement Variables Correlate With Discursive Personalism and Length of Post.**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Engagement										
2. Comments	0.77**									
3. Shares	0.69**	0.42**								
4. Likes	0.97**	0.73**	0.50**							
5. First-person singular	0.07*	0.06*	0.06*	0.06*						
6. First-person plural	0.10**	0.14**	0.04	0.10**	0.26**					
7. Party mentions	-0.02	0.00	0.01	-0.03	0.18**	0.11**				
8. Party members mentions	-0.01	-0.02	0.03	-0.02	0.12**	0.06*	0.30**			
9. Years served in Knesset	0.14**	0.21**	0.03	0.15**	-0.04	0.01	-0.04	-0.08**		
10. Seniority	0.10**	0.07**	-0.04	0.14**	-0.10**	-0.05*	-0.06*	-0.02	0.53**	
11. Post length	0.16**	0.17**	0.09**	0.15**	0.60**	0.55**	0.15**	0.05	0.00	-0.17**

Note. Ninety-five percent CI for each correlation. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . Statistics were produced with RStudio's "apaTables" package.

When comparing posts by female and male politicians (see Table 2), to answer RQ2, it is evident that females' posts differ from males' posts by including more FPSs ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 5.77$ ) than males ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 5.21$ ;  $t_{(1388.19)} = 2.937$ ,  $p < .05$ ); more FPPs ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = 3.37$ ) than males ( $M = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 3.18$ ;  $t_{(1380.92)} = 2.124$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and more PLMs ( $M = 0.17$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) than those of male politicians ( $M = 0.05$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ;  $t_{(893.71)} = 3.352$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We found no mean differences between females and males about the number of times their posts mention their parties (females:  $M = 0.11$ ,  $SD = 0.45$ ; males:  $M = 0.13$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ;  $t_{(1258.33)} = -1.46$ ,  $p > .05$ ) or their party's members (females:  $M = 0.10$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ; males:  $M = 0.10$ ,  $SD = 0.39$ ;  $t_{(1390)} = -0.204$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Since we found a significant, positive correlation between the length of the post and measures of involvement (see Table 1), we also analyzed gender differences in this matter. It was found that posts of female politicians had a higher word count ( $M = 133.01$ ,  $SD = 128.54$ ) than those of male politicians ( $M = 88.69$ ,  $SD = 99.94$ ;  $t_{(1314.76)} = 7.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This led us to theorize that the length of a post provides females' socials with more opportunities of creating engaging content. Additionally, as can be seen in Table 2, posts by female politicians garnered more *likes*, *comments*, and *engagement* than those written by males, thus answering RQ3.

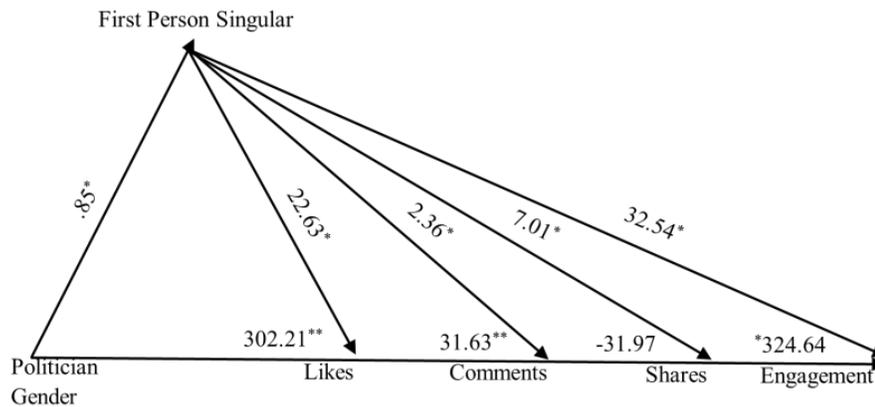
**Table 2. Mean Differences Between Posts by Female and Male Politicians**

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Involvement</b>								
Engagement	1165.83	889.03	-276.79	34.00	519.59	2.24	1377.79	<b>0.03</b>
Shares	94.50	118.60	24.11	-90.36	42.15	-0.71	837.37	0.48
Comments	116.97	88.86	-28.10	6.17	50.04	2.51	1361.43	<b>0.01</b>
Likes	912.33	659.75	-252.58	72.53	432.64	2.75	1389.48	<b>0.01</b>
<b>Discursive personalism</b>								
First-person singular	3.68	2.81	-0.86	0.29	1.44	2.94	1388.20	<b>0.00</b>
First-person plural	2.11	1.74	-0.37	0.03	0.72	2.12	1380.93	<b>0.03</b>
<b>Other parameters</b>								
Post length	133.01	88.69	-44.33	32.02	56.63	7.07	1314.76	<b>0.00</b>

*Note.* All statistics are based on a Welch Two Sample t-test; 95% CI level; Significant differences are in bold. Statistics were produced using RStudio's "report" and "sjPlot" packages.

Nevertheless, as it is possible that involvement indicators are not all positive, we provide Appendix C, presenting differences between female and male politicians (available at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/276qbw6q155le9d/Supplemental%20materials-%20Appendix%20C.docx?dl=0>). As evident, posts by female politicians received more "love," but also more "angry" emotions, compared with males' posts. Since expressing anger from a post might not be directed at the writer but rather at a situation or a person presented by the writer, these differences in favor of female's posts can be interpreted as indicators of the involving nature of female's discursive strategy.

Next, we compared differences within each gender group. It was evident that posts written both by females and males used FPSs (female:  $M = 3.68, SD = 5.77$ ; male:  $M = 2.81, SD = 5.21$ ) more than FPPs (female:  $M = 2.11, SD = 3.37$ ;  $t_{(1197.28)} = 6.41, p < .001$ ; male:  $M = 1.74, SD = 3.18$ ;  $t_{(1071.05)} = 4.46, p < .001$ ). However, as it can be seen, female politicians used both of these linguistic elements more than males, probably because their posts are simply longer. To test the predictive nature of FPSs and FPPs, we conducted regression analyses with post length as a control variable (see Appendix D: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/269g7gc0agfbnhw/Supplemental%20materials-%20Appendix%20D.docx?dl=0>).



	Likes	Shares	Comments	Engagement
	Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)	Effect (SE)
Path	(LLCI, ULCI)	(LLCI, ULCI)	(LLCI, ULCI)	(LLCI, ULCI)
Direct X→Y	302.21 (95.01) (115.84, 488.58)	-31.96 (37.74) (-105.99, 42.07)	31.64 (10.84) (10.37, 52.90)	324.64 (131.57) (94.22, 620.41)
IV→ M → DV	19.25 (11.64) (4.45, 59.37)	5.95 (3.49) (1.40, 17.11)	2.01 (1.40) (.29, 6.19)	27.67 (16.53) (5.75, 75.73)
Total effect	321.46 (96.98) (131.21, 511.71)	-25.99 (38.02) (-100.59, 48.60)	33.65 (11.01) (12.05, 55.24)	352.32 (131.56) (94.22, 610.41)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.02	0.09	0.07

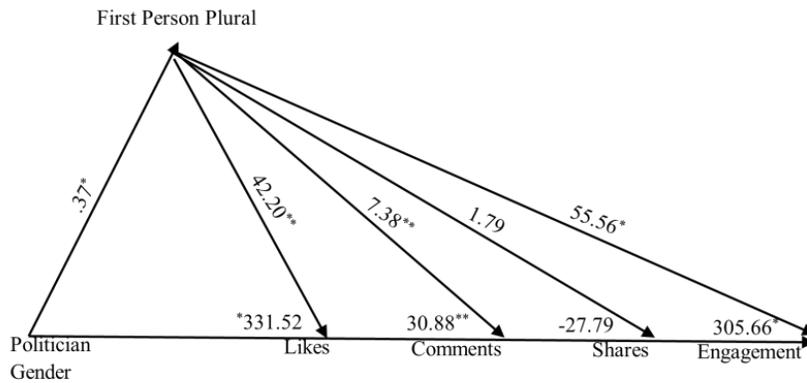
**Figure 1. Indirect effect of gender on engagement parameters mediated by FPSs.**

Note. Models were estimated using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017), an SPSS macro that uses an OLS regression to probe interactive effects. The regression models were conducted with control for background measures (party preelections, seniority, tenure, and coalition or opposition belonging). All mediators and outcome variables are on a numeric scale. The gender variable was coded: female politician = 1, male politician = 0. Indirect paths in italics are significant. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

So far, we have demonstrated that (a) there are correlative relationships between FPSs and FPPs and involvement parameters, and (b) more than males, female politicians use personalized linguistic elements in their posts more than partisan affiliative pronouns. It has also been shown that (c) female politicians' posts garner more involvement than those posted by males. These results led to the next step of the analysis, which is answering RQ4. We did so by performing the mediating effect of the above discourse elements (e.g., FPSs and FPPs), on the relationship between gender and users' involvement. We use FPSs and FPPs exclusively since the other discourse elements did not correlate with any of the involvement indicators to begin with (see Table 1). Two models were produced using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017) and are presented in Figure 1.<sup>2</sup> The results indicate a mediation effect for both FPSs (see Figure 1) and FPPs (see Figure 2). Female politicians' posts exhibit higher personalism levels (FPSs), and were thus more likely to receive more *comments*, *likes*, and also scored higher on the *overall engagement* scale, when the indirect effect for these involvement outcomes was also significant. The same pattern emerged for FPPs, such that the more FPPs were included in a female politician's post, the more engaging it proved to be on all counts, excluding the indirect effect of gender on *shares* through FPPs.

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<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that the data is based on count data and therefore fitted negative binomial regression models. This analysis is custom for count data, for its ability to account for overdispersion, and data that is highly right-skewed (e.g., Blassnig, Udris, Staender, & Vogler, 2021; Jost, Maurer, & Hassler, 2020). The negative binomial models gave the same patterns of results as the linear models traditionally used in mediation analysis, and their results are available at the online supplementary materials, appendices E-H (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/pvlsea7lkcbjtqk/Supplemental%20materials-%20Appendices%20E-H.doc.docx?dl=0>).



Path	Likes Effect (SE) (LLCI, ULCI)	Shares Effect (SE) (LLCI, ULCI)	Comments Effect (SE) (LLCI, ULCI)	Engagement Effect (SE) (LLCI, ULCI)
Direct X→Y	331.52 (128.65) (79.15, 583.89)	30.89 (10.71) (9.88, 51.89)	-27.79 (37.17) (-100.72, 45.13)	305.66 (95.10) (119.09, 492.24)
IV→ M → DV	20.79 (14.05) (2.29, 62.02)	2.76 (1.67) (.40, 7.44)	1.79 (4.28) (-.71, 7.95)	15.79 (10.40) (1.96, 44.69)
Total effect	352.32 (131.56) (94.22, 610.41)	33.65 (11.01) (12.05, 55.24)	-25.99 (38.02) (-100.59, 48.60)	321.46 (96.98) (131.21, 511.70)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.07	0.01	0.10	0.07

**Figure 2. Indirect effect of gender on engagement parameters mediated by FPPs.**

Note. Models were estimated using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017), an SPSS macro that uses an OLS regression to probe interactive effects. The regression models were conducted with control for background measures (party preelections, seniority, tenure, and coalition or opposition belonging). All mediators and outcome variables are on a numeric scale. The gender variable was coded: female politician = 1, male politician = 0. Indirect paths in italics are significant. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.

Below, we discuss the findings, their meanings, and the possible next steps starting with the practical meaning of behavioral personalism for politics and public opinion. Second, we raise some normative questions following the findings and briefly discuss how the findings align with previous research and stress the unique contribution of the research. Third, we consider the research limitations and their potential of widening knowledge about social media strategies of political actors.

### Discussion

Literature has demonstrated that discursive personalism creates a higher sense of intimacy, and therefore leads to higher involvement with political Facebook posts, scarcely delving into differences between men’s and women’s communications (e.g., Nave et al., 2018). This study theorized that the more

personalized a politician's post, the more involvement it would propel, as measured by the number of *likes*, *comments*, *shares*, and the *engagement* index. In line with the extensive literature on likability and engagement on social media (Kabadayi & Price, 2014; Larsson, 2015), this was confirmed: FPSs were found to be positively correlated with three of the four involvement indicators employed.

If indeed politicians writing in a personalized manner (i.e., frequently using FPSs) receive better involvement ratings, this can create a positive reinforcement feed that justifies more personalized language in later posts and public notices on social media. As a result, the more personalized the language becomes, the more the public might base their decision-making process on elements related to the personality of a politician. Thus, discursive personalism is enhanced in a loop of events, from politicians' discourse to the public's reaction, which leads again to politicians' even more personalized discourse.

Additionally, we found that female politicians' posts exhibit a unique style, different from males' posts. Female politicians' posts were even more personalized than those of their male colleagues and included both personalized and affiliative pronouns. By writing more and using both discourse elements, female politicians created a unique discourse style, one that is positively linked with more involvement by the public. This raises the possibility that this discourse style is considered at this point as communal by the public, or that gender expectations shifted just enough to allow for mixed discourse styles on female politicians' postings.

Furthermore, contrary to FPPs, FPSs had a significant effect on social media engagement, even when controlling for the length of the post. Implementing the suggestions made by Pedersen and Rahat (2021), we can now identify some of the unconditional effects personalism, in the form of FPSs, has on social media engagement, contrary to the other side of collectivism discourse in the form of FPPs.

In addition to understanding the public's perspective, our findings may raise normative arguments. Female politicians seem to be as adept at playing the political game as their male colleagues. At the same time, some would argue that increased personalization of female political discourse is not necessarily positive, as it may suggest that female politicians are adopting current political norms and practices instead of challenging and reforming the traditionally male-oriented political spheres.

Finally, female politicians' posts were found to exhibit more personalized discourse and as a result, garnered more involvement than posts authored by male politicians. These findings can be added to the results of studies accounting for humor, tonality, personal traits of politicians, and calls for mobilization (Amsalem et al., 2020; Heiss et al., 2019) and reveal another layer of the forces at play.

Thus, female politicians are combining and balancing out what, according to societal dictates, should be dichotomous and mutually contradictory. This could also be why female politicians' public communications and behavior nowadays draw more involvement. Furthermore, people seem to engage more with agentive behaviors on the part of female politicians. So, when a female politician speaks of the self and of communal belonging in longer texts, there is more attention, for better or worse, and a balance between "me, myself, and I" and the "royal we" is reinstated, to a degree, enhancing the importance and meaningfulness of the content for the audience.

Finally, we add to the current knowledge base by focusing on two components that so far received less attention: noncampaign times and decentralized personalized behaviors on the part of politicians. As stated before, communication between parliament members and the public occurs every day in different forms. Concentrating on these two components allowed the broadening of the current perspective when dealing with personalization and discursive personalism. By highlighting the more often occurring noncampaign times and the communications of many politicians instead of just a few, we reveal some of the mechanisms behind the day-to-day communications between politicians and the public. Through this, we take a step forward in the ability to understand the public's reaction to politicians and their communications on social media.

This research was conducted under several methodological constraints. First, data were collected from Facebook before Twitter became popular in Israel. This limits the applicability of the findings to countries where Twitter is more dominant. However, Facebook was the most popular social media platform in Israel at the time of the study and is still used by a significant portion of the population. Therefore, it was the most representative choice for this study.

Because of the mixed electoral system in the Israeli parliament, the findings we discussed and their implications could apply to other western democracies with some modifications to the specific context, such as language characteristics and political culture. For example, in majoritarian or plurality systems that focus on individual politicians shifts from originating in the public to originating in electorates, findings may differ from those seen in the Israeli case. Additionally, in countries where women meet less prejudice and gender roles are less accentuated, female politicians' communications may exhibit even more unique characteristics than those found in the Israeli context. In other contexts that have rarely been the focus of personalization research (e.g., Darwin & Haryanto, 2021), combining research of noncampaign time periods to the classic personalization research could contribute to a better understanding of the political arena and the strategies of political actors.

Furthermore, there is reason to suspect that the discursive style of female politicians within the Israeli context has evolved even further than indicated by our results. This further evolution could have resulted from political events such as the multiple election campaigns Israel experienced in 2019–2020 and other societal processes naturally occurring during a long period of time.

Further research should identify and classify the various phrases referencing FPPs and account for their different uses in political discourse, and the impact of the social media management teams, their composition, and their level of involvement, on the different outcomes of social media engagement. Moreover, this study has investigated the phenomena at issue only in one country, but personalization, in general, and decentralized personalized discourse and behavior, in particular, are cross-national trends. Multinational comparative research is bound to provide more insights into gender and personalization patterns in discourse, revealing additional aspects of the trends identified here. Additionally, machine learning methods and sentiment analysis of the reactions to personalized political posts may contribute to the knowledge about personalized political discourse on Facebook and their effect on users, seeing as the number of comments, shares, and likes cannot attest to the tone of the public's reactions. These comments shed light on the effect of discursive personalism on engagement but also on the public sphere and public

opinion. Last but not least, the findings of the present study must be ascertained using an experimental design, with an emphasis on reproducing the sense of authenticity that social media fosters between politicians and their audience.

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