

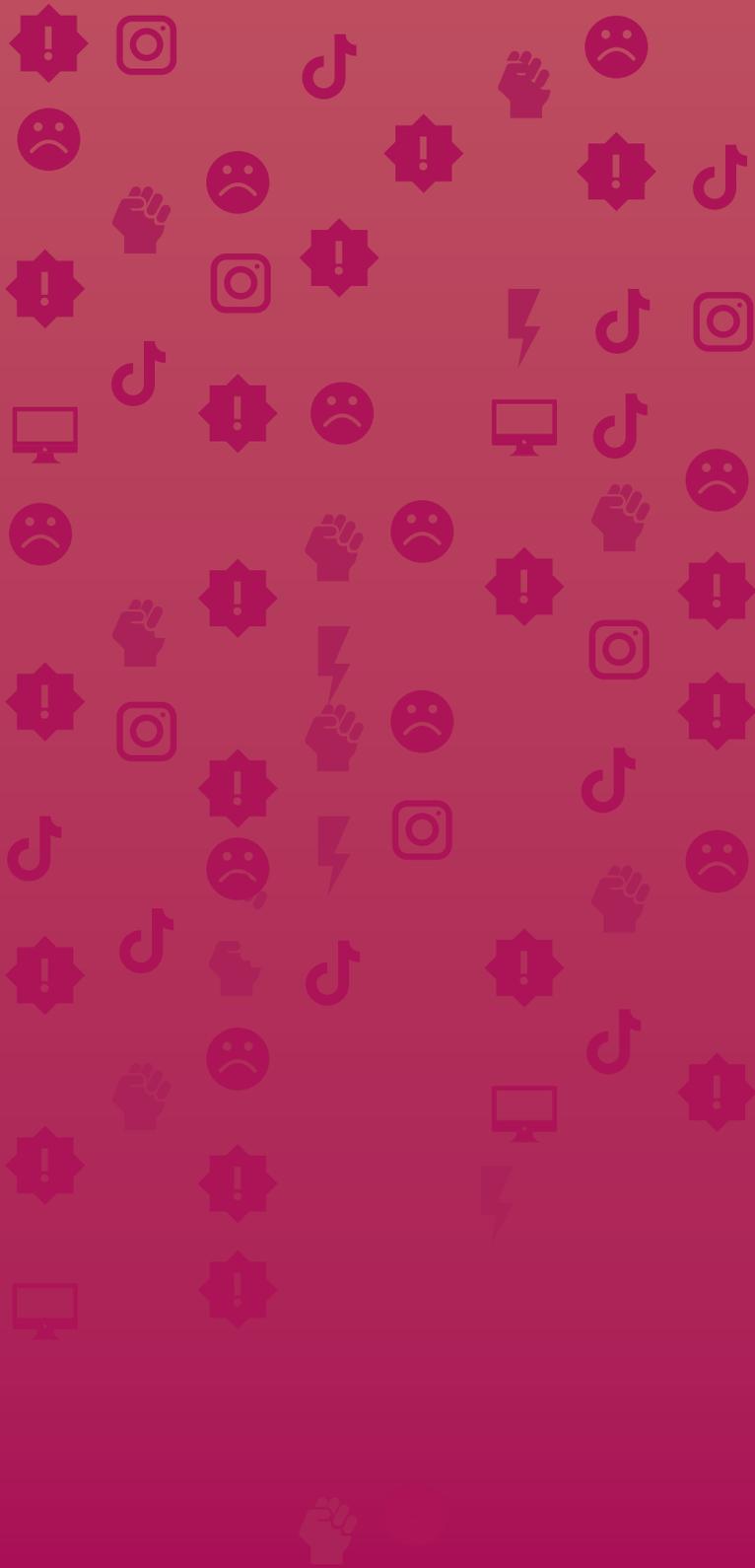


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Hate in Plain Sight

Abuse Targeting
Women Ahead of
the 2022 Midterm
Elections on TikTok
and Instagram

Cécile Simmons and Zoé Fourel



About this publication

Online abuse has a profound impact on the health of democratic societies, threatening progress on diversity and representation in politics. Research has shown that abuse can deter women and individuals from minority groups, especially when facing multiple forms of oppression, from pursuing careers in politics and drive those already engaged to step down from political life.

The 2022 midterm elections in the US saw a growing number of candidates from minority backgrounds running for office. Faced with growing public pressure, social media companies took steps to amend their policies and community standards to address illegal and harmful content and behavior on their platforms. Evidence has shown, however, that abusive image and video-based content can fall through the cracks of content moderation, pointing to a lack of adequate response to abuse from social media platforms.

In the run-up to the November 2022 midterm elections, ISD investigated abusive content targeting prominent women in US politics on Instagram and TikTok. Researchers analyzed hashtag recommendations served to users on both platforms when searching for content related to several key women in US politics in the days before the election. This report finds that platforms recommend abusive hashtags in relation to these women and a broad range of abusive content that violate their terms of service, showing that harmful and abusive content targeting women running for and in office remains in plain sight of the platforms.

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Introduction

A growing body of research has documented how gendered abuse and disinformation have become key political tactics to attack women in the public sphere. ISD's research has shown that women running for office are regularly targeted by abusive content across various geographies,¹ especially during elections. During the 2020 American presidential elections,² ISD found that women candidates were almost twice as likely to face abuse on Twitter as their male counterparts and were often subjected to personalized attacks. This same study found that women from ethnic minority backgrounds faced particularly high levels of abuse.³ Research from the Center for Democracy & Technology has also highlighted this dynamic, finding that women candidates of color are twice as likely to be targeted with mis/disinformation, and are most likely to receive certain forms of online abuse, including violent threats.⁴ Groups such as QAnon have been at the forefront of legitimizing abuse against women in public life.⁵ In fact, ISD found in a previous investigation QAnon adherents led coordinated hate and harassment campaigns with high-volume brigading, targeting high profile women with gender-based violence.

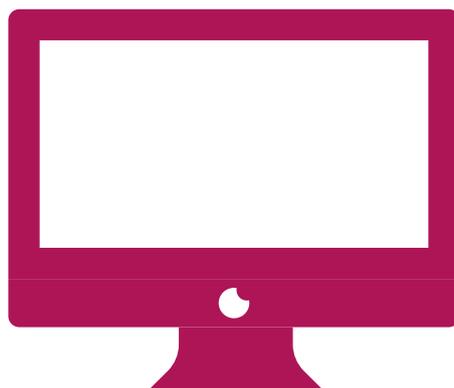
Online abuse has a profound impact on the health of democratic societies, threatening progress on diversity and representation in politics. Research has shown that abuse can deter women and individuals from minority groups, especially when facing multiple forms of oppression, from pursuing careers in politics and drive those already engaged to step down from political life.⁶ The 2022 mid-term elections saw a growing number of candidates from minority backgrounds running for office.⁷ Faced with growing public pressure, social media companies have taken steps to amend their policies and community standards to address illegal and harmful content and behavior on their platforms.⁸ Evidence suggests, however, that harmful content targeting candidates continues to thrive on social media platforms. Previous investigations have also shown that abusive image and video-based content can fall through the cracks of content moderation.⁹ It is clear that while the scale and nature of gendered abuse is receiving more attention, the lack of adequate response from social media platforms is not.

In the run-up to the November 2022 midterm elections, ISD investigated abusive content targeting prominent women in US politics on Instagram and TikTok.



Key findings

- For all candidates analyzed, Instagram and TikTok recommended abusive hashtags among the top ten results in the platforms' search bar. The only exception was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for whom TikTok did not recommend abusive hashtags among the top ten recommendations. Hashtags recommended by the platforms were not reflective of the volume of content associated with them. Thus, Instagram and TikTok recommended abusive hashtags with only a handful of posts/views, often instead of other non-abusive hashtags with more posts/views.
- Top ten recommended posts associated with abusive hashtags contained multiple examples of personalized and misogynistic attacks against women candidates. This included meme-based and photoshopped content attacking women for their looks and perceived lack of competence and ability to hold office as well as highly abusive sexual content.
- ISD also identified treason-based political abuse suggesting that candidates are un-American and traitors to the country. Candidates with intersecting identities were targeted by highly abusive content targeting multiple aspects of their identity, including gender, gender identity, religion, ethnicity and national origin. Muslim candidates were targeted by a specific sub-set of treason-related abuse and implicitly or explicitly compared to Islamist terrorists.
- Recommended posts also included gendered disinformation targeting some candidates and content weaponizing sex-based rumors and candidates' private lives to abuse them. ISD also identified broader disinformation and conspiracy content, including anti-vaccine comments and posts labelled by platforms as potentially containing deceptive information.
- On both Instagram and TikTok, ISD identified multiple instances of suggested posts which potentially violated different platforms' policies including Meta's Hate speech,¹⁰ TikTok's Hateful Behavior policy¹¹ and the bullying and harassment policies of both platforms. Potential violations cut across platform products, including audio content, imagery and hashtags.^{12 13}
- ISD found platforms give greater visibility to extreme views and fringe actors, featuring their content in the first ten posts associated with recommended abusive hashtags. More specifically, platforms suggested content from accounts or posts that the platforms themselves had previously labelled as containing disinformation or sensitive content.
- Researchers identified an example of inauthentic amplification of abusive content targeting Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Twitter, potentially violating Twitter's platform manipulation and spam policy.¹⁴ The same abusive image-based content was shared over 150 times alongside misogynistic hashtags, showing that malign actors can easily weaponize platforms' search recommendations and hashtags to increase the visibility of abusive content.



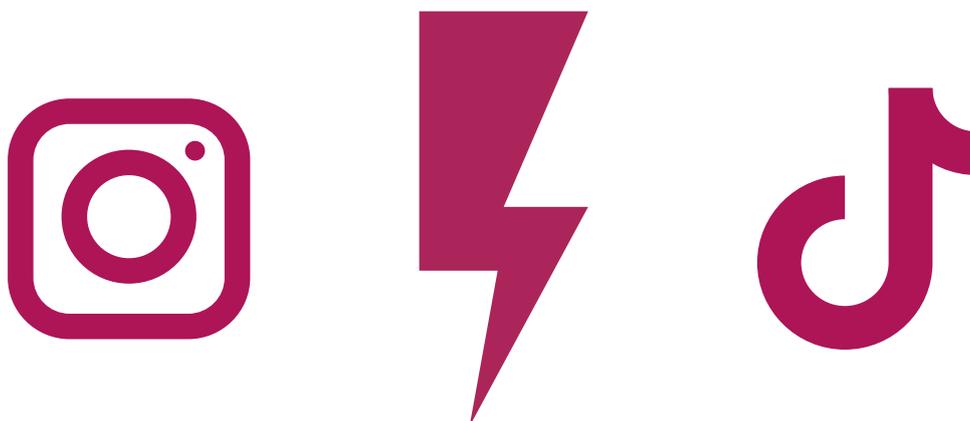
Glossary

Online Abuse: Online abuse can take many forms and encompass a variety of tactics and behaviors. The Women’s Media Center defines online abuse as encompassing “a diversity of tactics and malicious behaviors ranging from sharing embarrassing or cruel content about a person to impersonation, doxing, stalking and electronic surveillance to the non-consensual use of photography and violent threats.”¹⁵ This research examines online abuse primarily through the lens of language and content, adopting a broad definition which does not simply encompass illegal behavior. ISD therefore defined abuse as: content which includes any kind of direct or indirect threat towards or referring to an individual; content which promotes violence against an individual based on any part of their identity (including but not limited to gender, gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion or age, i.e. “protected characteristics”); content which aims to demean or belittle an individual based on any part of their identity.

Deadnaming: Referring to a transgender or non-binary person by their name given at birth or used prior to transitioning. Deadnaming can be done inadvertently or intentionally to abuse and invalidate a gender identity.

Disinformation/Misinformation: Disinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, that is intended to deceive or harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations. Following the definition established by Nina Jankowicz et al in a report by the Wilson Center, ISD defines gendered and sexualized disinformation as “a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere.”¹⁶ Misinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, irrespective of an intent to deceive.

Inauthentic behavior: A set of behaviors suggesting an online entity might be operating under a false or misleading identity. These behaviors might include: a mismatch between geolocation and topic; poor use of stated language (e.g. misspellings and grammar mistakes) in combination with other signals or behaviors; little or no evidence of human activity in photos; profile photos or interactions; stock photographs used for profile photos; sudden dramatic changes in posting volume; topic and/or language without explanation; and/or repetitive posting or sharing patterns.¹⁷ Signals used to detect potential inauthentic behavior are constantly evolving due to the changing tactics of actors using such approaches to deceive audiences online.



Methodology

Researchers analyzed hashtag recommendations served to users on both platforms when searching for content related to several key women in US politics in the days before the election. Instagram and TikTok were chosen due to their popularity among users in the US and to allow researchers to identify potentially illegal and harmful content through both text-based posts and videos.

Using the hashtags, researchers sought to identify potentially illegal and harmful or abusive content targeting candidates on Twitter and Facebook by examining content associated with a list of abusive hashtags related to these candidates. The aim of this complementary approach was to highlight the role of hashtags in increasing the visibility of this type of content on other platforms.

In order to study gendered abuse and disinformation on Instagram and TikTok, analysts selected twelve female politicians and candidates in the 2022 midterm elections according to the following criteria:

- Ethnic diversity;
- Party representation (to ensure both Republicans and Democrats were represented);
- Candidates with similar levels of visibility in the media or who have a substantial number of followers on social media. ISD recognizes that some candidates who are very active on social media or have a particularly visible profile can be greater targets for abuse than those with a smaller online footprint and media presence.

While analysts aimed to select candidates from a range of backgrounds, ISD prioritized party diversity and were not able to include Republican candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds. ISD selected the following political figures (D = Democrat; R = Republican):

Party	Political figure	Current Role/Office race
R	Marsha Blackburn	Senator in Tennessee
R	Lauren Boebert	House Representative in District 3 Colorado
R	Liz Cheney	Candidate for House Representative in Wyoming
D	Kamala Harris	Vice President
D	Rachel Levine	Assistant Secretary of Health
D	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	House Representative in District 14 New York
D	Ilhan Omar	House Representative in District 5 Minnesota
D	Nancy Pelosi	Speaker of the House of Representatives
R	Elise Stefanik	House Representative in District 21 New York
R	Marjorie Taylor Greene	House Representative in District 14 Georgia
D	Rashida Tlaib	House representative in District 13 Michigan
D	Gretchen Whitmer	Governor of Michigan

Table 1: Table summarizing the list of candidates selected for this investigation.

ISD examined the top ten hashtags recommended by Instagram to US-based users of the platform when typing the name of the political figures over a period of 48 hours.¹⁸ Researchers coded the hashtags to determine which hashtags were abusive according to a broad definition of abuse and conducted a qualitative analysis of the first top ten posts recommended by Instagram in association with these hashtags.

Researchers analyzed posts in the light of Meta and TikTok's terms of service and community guidelines.

Meta's terms of service cover a broad range of online harms, including hate speech and bullying and harassment. Meta prohibits hate speech on its platform, defined as "a direct attack against people – rather than concepts or institutions – on the basis of what we call protected characteristics: race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease."¹⁹ Meta prohibits "bullying and harassment" which "come in many different forms, from making threats and releasing personally identifiable information to sending threatening messages and making unwanted malicious contact."²⁰ Meta has adopted specific rules for public figures, acknowledging in a blog post²¹ from 2020 that there is a "distinction" in the implementation of their policies between "public figures" and "private individuals".²²

TikTok's community guidelines prohibit hate speech or content involving hateful behavior. It defines hate speech or behavior as "content that attacks, threatens, incites violence against, or otherwise dehumanizes an individual or a group on the basis of the following protected attributes: Race, Ethnicity, National origin, Religion, Caste, Sexual orientation, Sex, Gender, Gender identity, Serious disease, Disability, Immigration status."²³ The platform also prohibits the use of slurs (unless they are reappropriated "by members of the protected group").²⁴ TikTok also prohibits "hateful ideologies. that demonstrate clear hostility toward people because of their protected attributes."²⁵ Additionally, TikTok's community guidelines include the prohibition of "expressions of abuse, including threats or degrading statements intended to mock, humiliate, embarrass, intimidate, or hurt an individual. This prohibition extends to the use of TikTok features,"²⁶ and sexual harassment, which "involves unwanted or inappropriate sexual behavior directed at another individual," and includes "content that simulates sexual activity with another person, either verbally, in text (including emojis), or through the use of any in-app features."²⁷

ISD also established a detailed list of abusive hashtags related to the political figures, using research by other organizations, ISD's own previous research, as well as ethnographic methods of investigation. Using Beam, a bespoke data analysis capability co-developed with CASM Technology,²⁸ ISD identified all mentions of the abusive hashtags on Twitter and accounts sharing these hashtags and performed a qualitative analysis of the dataset to determine any suspicious patterns of behavior.

Overview of recommended hashtags

On both Instagram and TikTok, abusive hashtags were recommended within the ten first hashtags suggested by the search function. For most candidates at least one abusive hashtag was recommended in the ten first hashtags on both TikTok and Instagram. A detailed overview of the hashtags suggested for each candidate is presented further below. Researchers found that platforms gave greater visibility to abusive hashtags over non-abusive hashtags. In multiple instances abusive hashtags associated with a limited number of posts were ranked higher than non-abusive hashtags. For instance, on Instagram, the transphobic hashtag #rachellevineisaman (25 posts) was ranked third among recommendations, ahead of non-abusive hashtags featured in more posts (e.g. #rachellevinephotography with 183 posts). Similarly, on Tiktok #rachellevineisaman (2,210 views) was ranked ahead of other hashtags with more views (see table below).

Researchers performed a qualitative analysis of top posts associated with abusive hashtags. The type of content encountered is detailed below.

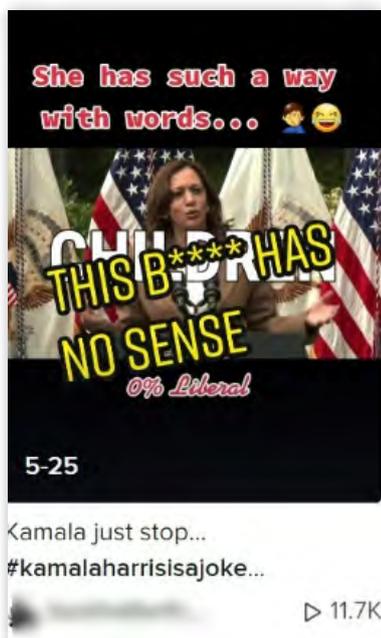
Key trends

Misogynistic and personalized attacks

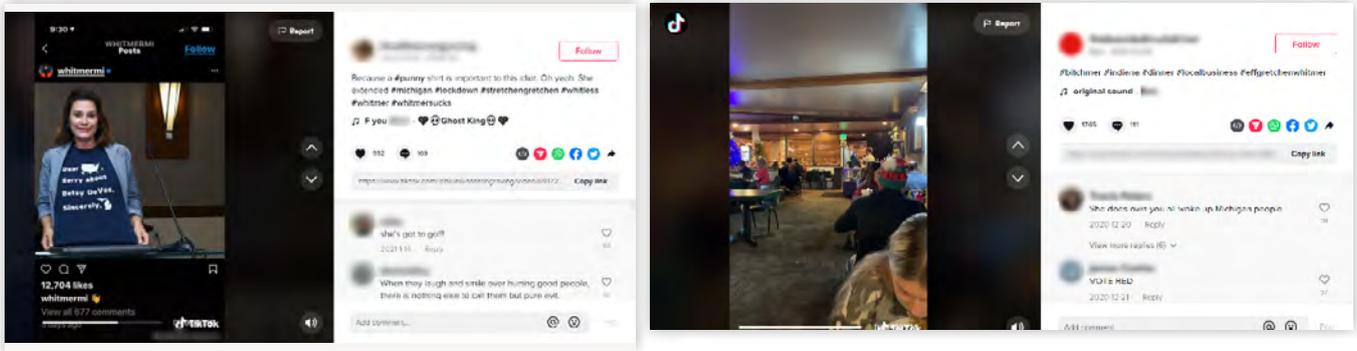
Among the top ten recommended posts associated with abusive hashtags, we identified multiple examples of personalized attacks focusing on the candidates' looks and perceived lack of competence and ability to hold office. On both Instagram and TikTok, content used meme-based and photoshopped content to abuse candidates. These attacks targeted both Democrat and Republican women, and frequently included misogynistic slurs or dehumanizing language. Posts also contained language aimed at belittling the women in question. Abusive content, including misogynistic slurs, was featured in hashtags, memes, captions and sounds (on TikTok).



Figures 1 and 2: Examples of Instagram posts attacking Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.



Figures 3 and 4: Example of TikTok post attacking Kamala Harris and using misogynistic abuse, and an Instagram post targeting Rashida Tlaib.



Figures 5 and 6: Example of TikTok video which features misogynistic insults in the audio. As indicated in the screenshot above the audio is called "F you Bitch" (left). Example of a video with #bitchmer in the caption targeting Gretchen Whitmer (right).

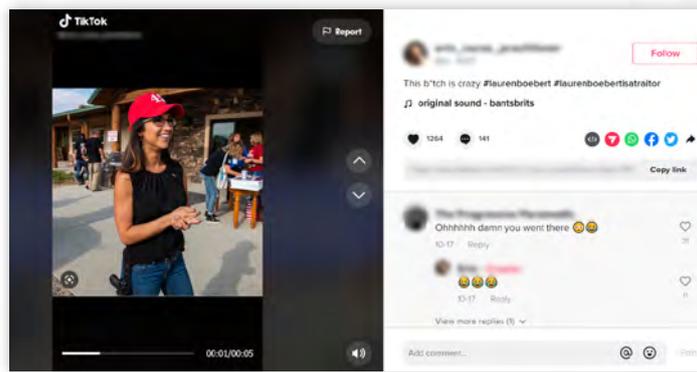


Figure 7: Example of TikTok video featuring a gendered insult targeting Lauren Boebert.



Figure 8: Instagram posts depicting Nancy Pelosi as a witch.

Sexual content and sexual harassment

Women on both sides of the political spectrum were targeted with sexual content on Instagram, including sexual innuendos. Sexual content frequently featured in memes. In several instances, ISD found content that potentially violates both TikTok and Instagram’s policies (see Figures 11, 12 and 14). Meta prohibits in its bullying and harassment policy “making statements of intent to engage in a sexual activity or advocating for them to engage in a sexual activity, making severe sexualized commentary, sharing derogatory sexualized photoshopped imagery or drawings.”²⁹ On TikTok, several videos used the same audio to target Nancy Pelosi, with users lip syncing to a song containing sexual lyrics about Pelosi (the audio is called “Nancy Pelosi is a gilf”³⁰). This potentially violates TikTok’s sexual harassment policy, which supposedly prohibits “content that simulates sexual activity with another person, either verbally, in text (including emojis), or through the use of any in-app features.” The lyrics of this audio explicitly reference sexual activity with Nancy Pelosi and contain ageist language.



Figures 9, 10 and 11: Examples of posts with sexual content on Instagram targeting Kamala Harris.



Figures 12 and 13: Examples of Instagram post targeting Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Marsha Blackburn.

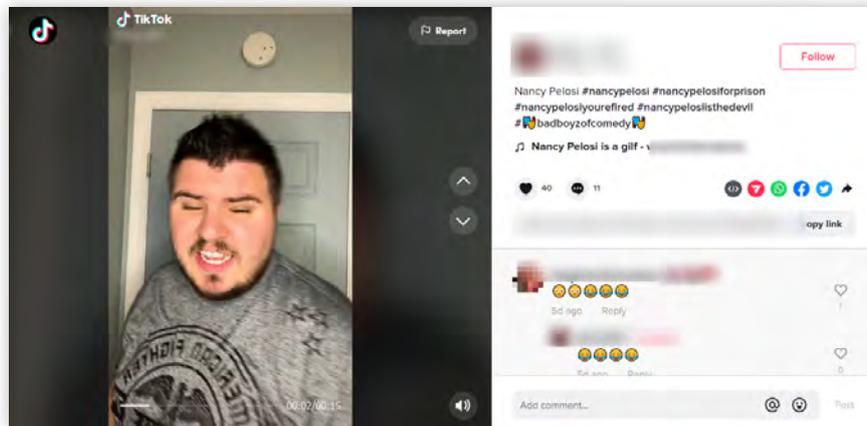


Figure 14: Example of TikTok that uses the audio “Nancy Pelosi is a giff.”

Sexual content frequently attacked women based on different aspects of their identity. For instance, we found ageist memes targeting Nancy Pelosi, Islamophobic and fatphobic memes targeting Rashida Tlaib, and a transphobic meme mocking Rachel Levine’s physical appearance, highlighting the intersectional nature of abusive content and the need to adopt an intersectional lens when examining online abuse.³¹

In multiple instances, ISD identified posts that potentially violated platform policies. The three screenshots below (all from Instagram) potentially violate Meta’s hate speech policy, which prohibits “dehumanizing speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or dismissal”³² on the basis of one or several protected characteristics. It is worth noting Meta considers age as a protected characteristic under its hate speech policy.³³



Figures 15, 16 and 17: Examples of memes targeting Rashida Tlaib, Nancy Pelosi and Rachel Levine.

Narratives about treason and political abuse

On both platforms, researchers identified allegations of treason targeting women, describing them as un-American and pawns of foreign powers. These treason-based narratives differed from political criticism by suggesting that the candidates and women in office are un-American and do not belong in America. These attacks affected both Republican and Democratic women. For instance, Ilhan Omar was accused of treason in multiple instances, with posts framing her as acting against US interests. These accusations are rooted in xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia, with Omar being depicted as a traitor because she is Muslim and of Somali origin.

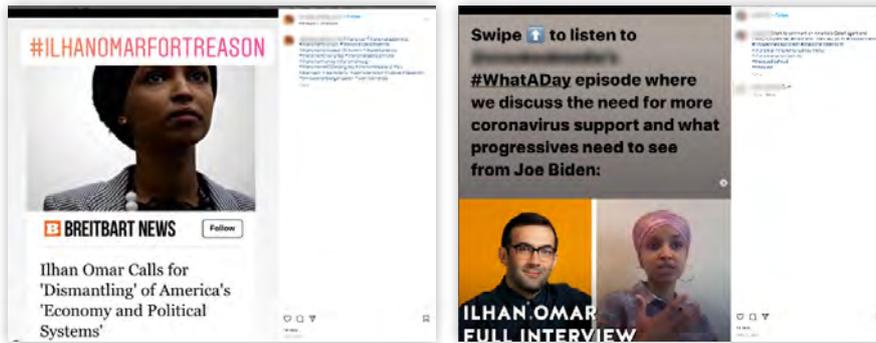


Figure 18 and 19: Examples of Instagram posts targeting Ilhan Omar, the second post calls her a “Qatari agent”.

Republican women were also the subject of narratives about treason. Liz Cheney faced abuse regarding her stance on the events of January 6 and her involvement in the House Select Committee hearing investigating the incident. Multiple posts accused her of being a “traitor” and “sell-out,” sometimes using misogynistic language (in one TikTok video a manipulated photo compared her to Miss Piggy). Some Republican candidates were compared to the Nazis and Hitler. These narratives around treason differ from the xenophobic narratives targeting Muslim candidates. Some of the candidates targeted by these narratives – including Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene – expressed support for the January 6 attack on the Capitol and conspiracy theories about the results of the 2020 presidential election.

ISD identified multiple instances of potential platform policy violations in this category. Figure 24, which compares Liz Cheney to Miss Piggy, potentially violates TikTok’s Hateful Behavior policy which prohibits posting “content claiming individuals or groups with protected attributes are physically, mentally, or morally inferior or referring to them as criminals [or] animals.”³⁴ Figures 20 and 21, which compare Republican Congresswomen to Hitler, potentially violate the same policy.



Figures 20 and 21: Examples of posts comparing Elise Stefanik and Marjorie Taylor Greene to Hitler.

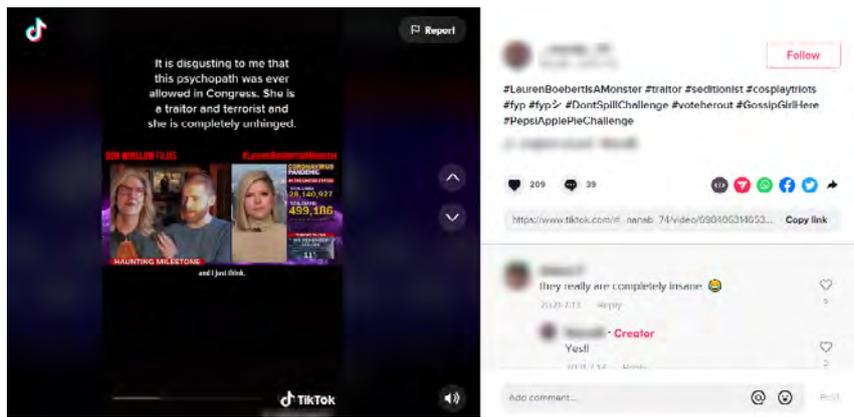


Figure 22: Example of post on TikTok with abusive language, referring to Lauren Boebert as a “psychopath”.

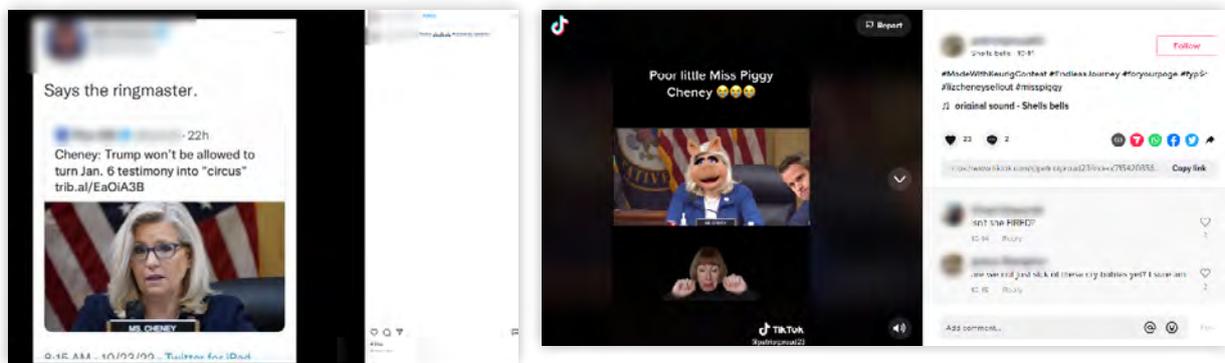


Figure 23 and 24: Examples of posts on Instagram and TikTok accusing Liz Cheney of treason; the second post compares her to Miss Piggy.

Racist, Islamophobic and xenophobic abuse

Researchers also identified xenophobic and racist abuse targeting candidates whose identity intersects with multiple protected categories. Muslim candidates were the subject of racist and xenophobic attacks, including calls to deport them, posts describing them as terrorists or jihadists and content featuring pigs to attack their religion. ISD identified a set of posts which potentially violated platform policies. For instance, multiple Instagram posts accused Ilhan Omar of being a terrorist, loving terrorists and supporting terrorist organizations such as Hamas. Several posts and memes suggested that Omar supported 9/11, a potential violation of Meta’s hate speech policy as the platform prohibits “dehumanizing speech or imagery in the form of comparisons,” including to criminals, based on a protected characteristic.



Figures 25 and 26: Instagram posts attacking Rashida Taib as un-American and including anti-Muslim abusive content.



Figures 27 and 28: Examples of posts framing Ilhan Omar as a terrorist.

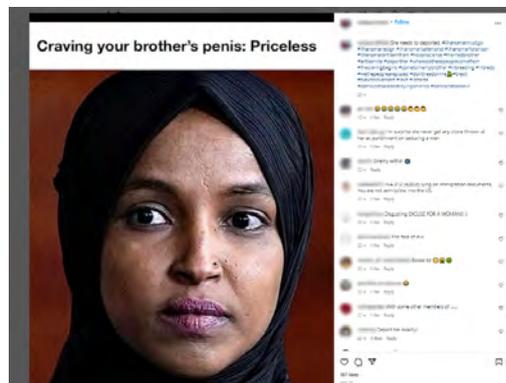


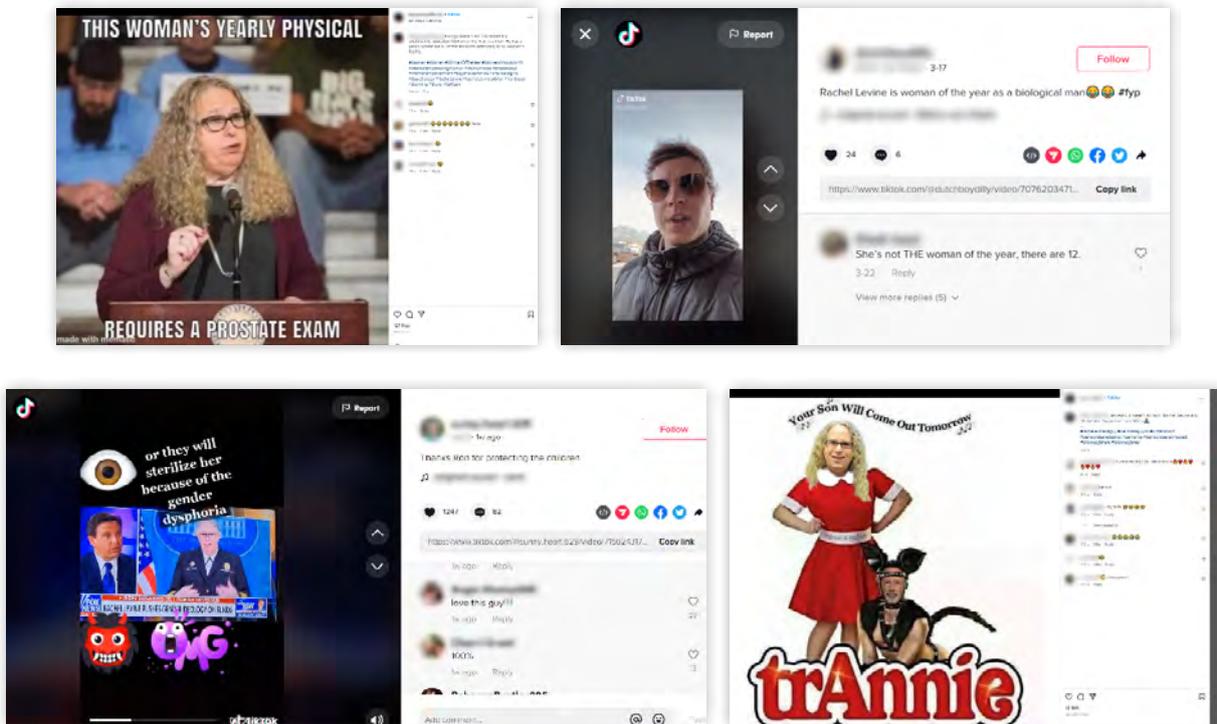
Figure 29: A post with a caption calling for the deportation of Ilhan Omar. This post also contains gendered disinformation by claiming that Omar married her brother, as well as abusive language potentially violating Meta’s bullying and harassment policy. The post above contains “severe sexualized commentary,” which is prohibited by Meta.

Transphobic abuse

Posts featuring Rachel Levine were overwhelmingly transphobic. All hashtags classified as abusive for Levine on Instagram were transphobic in nature, as were most posts recommended by Instagram’s algorithm in association with these hashtags. For example, all the top ten posts under #rachellevineisaman were transphobic.

In multiple instances, posts referred to biology to justify misgendering Rachel Levine and one TikTok video referred to Levine as a “biological man”. Posts contained multiple transphobic slurs and dehumanizing language (one post referred to her as a “monster”). Many posts misgendered Levine and deadnamed her. Other posts contained hateful transphobic narratives and disinformation by framing transwomen as a danger to children and promoting disinformation about gender affirming care.

There are indications that TikTok and Meta have fallen short of enforcing their community guidelines against anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech. The hashtags themselves, as well as multiple associated posts, seem to violate platforms’ policies by including “content that targets transgender or non-binary individuals through misgendering or deadnaming”³⁵ (see Figures 30-33).



Figures 30, 31, 32 and 33: Examples of posts on TikTok and Instagram including transphobic abuse targeting Rachel Levine.

We also found transphobic content in posts targeting other candidates, notably Gretchen Whitmer. A post on Instagram compared Whitmer to Caitlyn Jenner.³⁶ The purpose of this post seemed to be to undermine Whitmer’s credibility and insult her.



Figure 34: Post on Instagram comparing Gretchen Whitmer to Caitlyn Jenner.

Gendered disinformation and weaponization of sex-based narratives

The study also identified examples of gendered disinformation using rumors to build gender- and sex-based narratives against the candidates. The content analyzed included misogynistic posts focusing on Marjorie Taylor Greene’s alleged affairs, claiming that she had “cheated on her husband twice.”

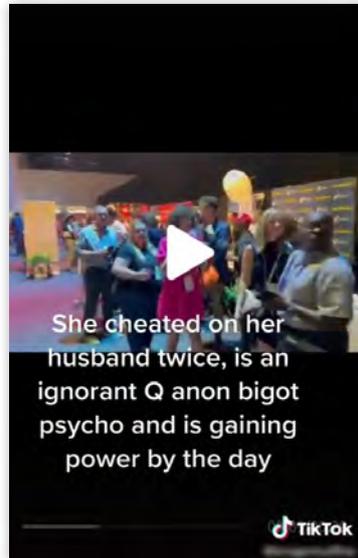
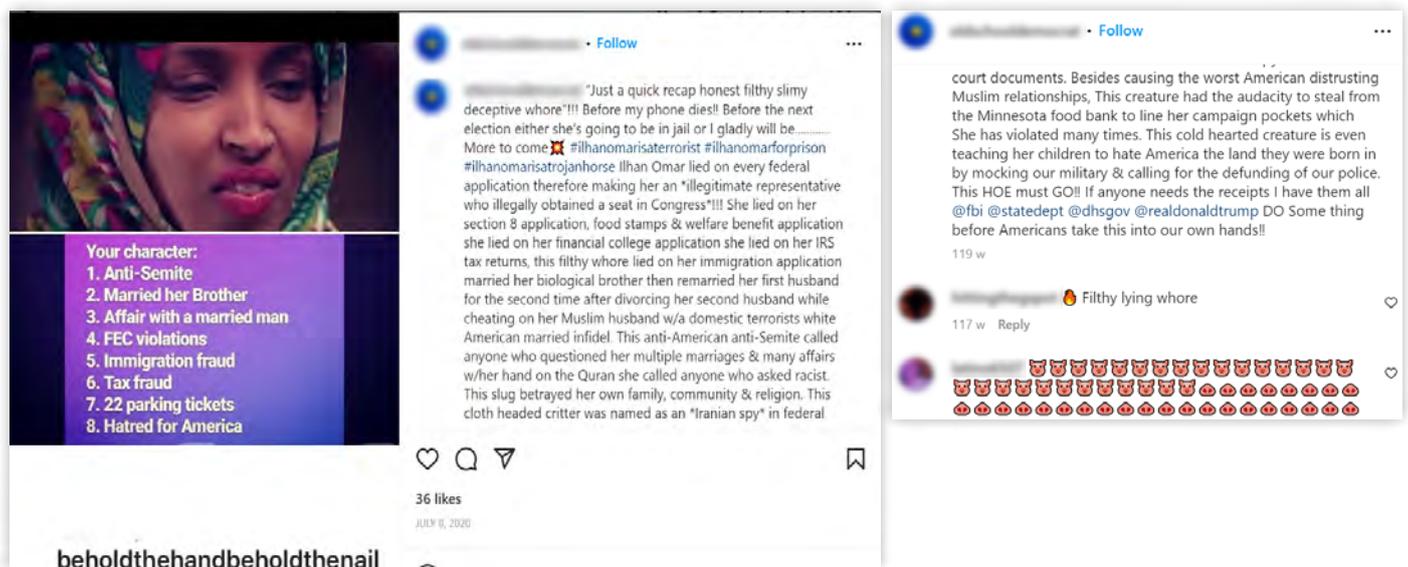


Figure 35: Example of TikTok post targeting Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Multiple posts also targeted Ilhan Omar with gendered disinformation, for instance with claims that she “married her brother.” Posts containing this narrative sometimes included other disinformation narratives (see post below claiming she is an “Iranian spy”), as well as misogynistic and dehumanizing language. ISD also identified references to potential violent action against Omar (see Figures 36 and 37). This post seems violates Meta’s policies, including its Bullying and Harassment policy, which forbids “attacking someone through derogatory terms related to sexual activity (e.g. whore, slut).”

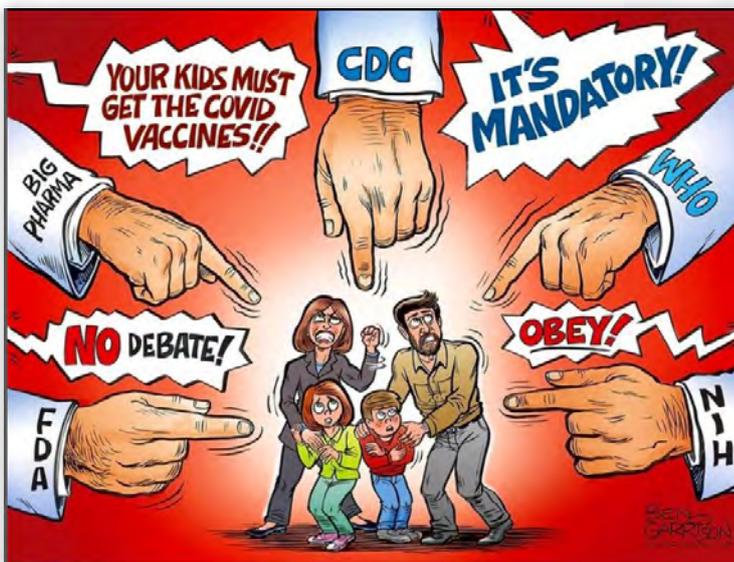


Figures 36 and 37: Captions of the same Instagram post targeting Ilhan Omar.

False and misleading content and conspiracy theories

Some of the content recommended by Instagram in relation to the candidates had been labelled as containing disinformation, though most had not. Abusive hashtags mentioning the candidates were thus used to boost the visibility of problematic content not directly related to candidates, including anti-vaccine content.

In multiple instances, ISD found posts promoting conspiracy theories alongside the hashtags, including COVID-19, New World Order and QAnon-related conspiracies. A post recommended in relation to Nancy Pelosi was a video openly promoting disinformation and conspiracy theories about the COVID vaccine, discouraging views from vaccination. This potentially violates Instagram’s COVID-19 and Vaccine Policy Updates & Protections, which prohibit “claims about COVID-19 vaccines that contribute to vaccine rejection.”³⁷



Figures 38 and 39: Example of Instagram post aiming to discourage people from vaccinating their children (associated with #kamalaharrissucks hashtag).

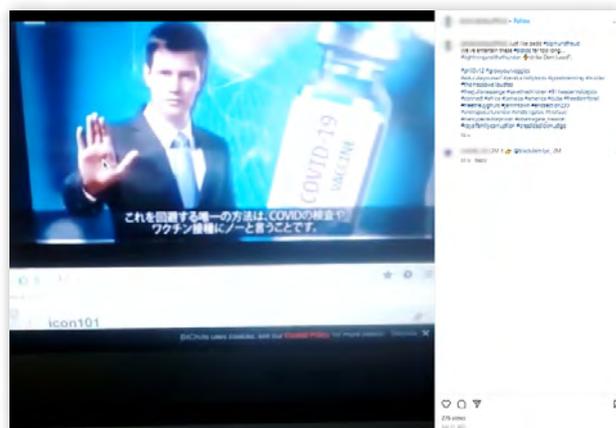


Figure 40: Example of an Instagram video which features disinformation and conspiracy theories on COVID-19 and vaccination. This post was not labelled by Instagram as sharing COVID-19 information.

Recommended posts also promoted disinformation about the outcome of the 2020 elections. On Instagram, posts related to Democratic candidates claimed that the 2020 elections were rigged (#the2020electionwasrigged) and promoted disinformation about the January 6 riot at the Capitol. Some posts asked for a recount of the vote, potentially breaching Meta’s mis-/disinformation policies.³⁸



Figures 41 and 42: The first post is a flyer for a rally in Michigan demanding a “Forensic audit” of the 2020 election. This post was recommended on Instagram in relation to the hashtag #gretchenwhitmerisatyrant. The post on the right contains the hashtag #fakeinsurrection, referencing the events of January 6, and was recommended on Instagram under #NancyPelosifakenews.

Finally, recommended posts on both Instagram and TikTok featured anti-abortion rhetoric and narratives depicting abortion as “murder.” Anti-abortion narratives only featured in posts about Democratic candidates.

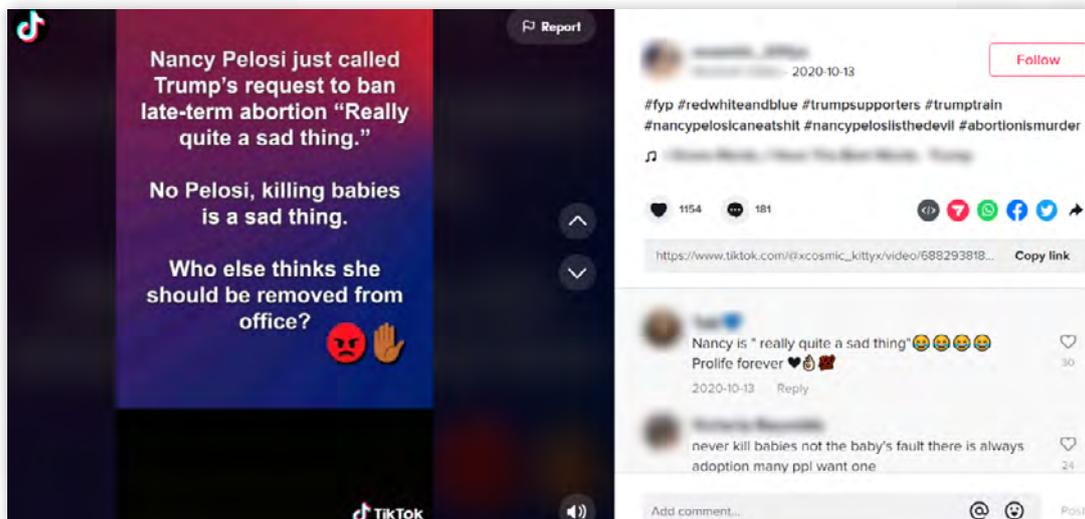


Figure 43: Example of TikTok video including anti-abortion rhetoric.

Case study 1: Promotion of abusive content

ISD’s research found that accounts whose posts were recommended by Instagram’s algorithms promoted abusive content. For instance, the first post under the hashtag #rachellevineisaman came from an account that self-identifies as “TERF” (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) and posts a wide range of transphobic content. Not only has Instagram failed to remove this account for posting content that violates its community guidelines on X and Y, but the platform’s algorithms are also actively recommending content from the account to users after searching for the name of a politician.

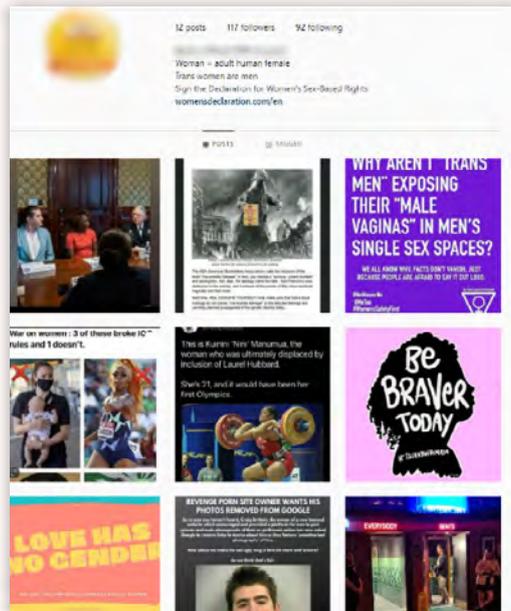


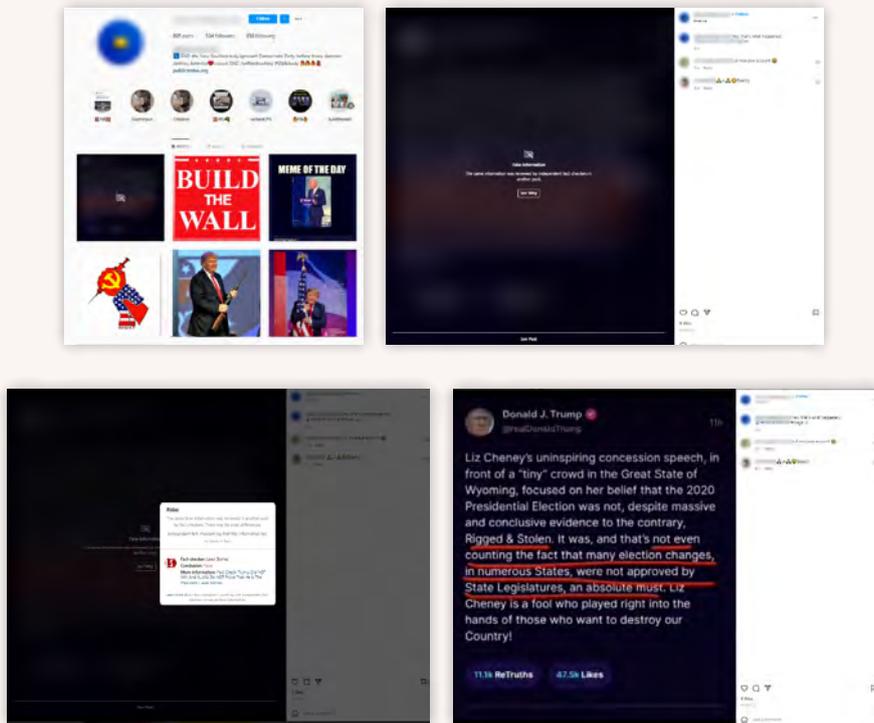
Figure 44: Screenshot of the Instagram profile of the first post recommended for #rachellevineisaman. This account self-identifies as a “TERF Account.”

In multiples instances, ISD found Instagram suggested several posts from the same account using an abusive hashtag. This trend was notable for several candidates: for example, all ten first suggested posts by Instagram for #gretchenwhitmerisatyrant were shared by a single account. This account produced multiple posts containing transphobic content and promoting hateful and conspiratorial narratives targeting the LGBTQ+ community, potentially violating Meta’s Hate speech policy. This demonstrates how active individual accounts and a lax approach to policy enforcement can allow abusive content to spread to broad audiences.



Figure 45: Example of an Instagram post which includes a transphobic slur in the caption. The first ten suggested posts for the hashtag #gretchenwhitmerisatyrant were all posted by this account.

In multiple instances, ISD found that accounts sharing far-right views seemed to be given greater visibility by Instagram. For example, for the #ilhanomaristerrorist hashtag, the same account was behind three of the top ten suggested posts, two of which contained abusive language targeting Ilhan Omar (see Figures 36 and 37 above), potentially violating Meta’s policy as mentioned previously. This account shared multiple pro-Trump posts in its feed, with one even labelled by the platform as sharing “false information.” This included a screenshot of a post by Trump stating that the 2020 election was “rigged and stolen.” Despite the label, multiple posts from this account were suggested by Instagram.



Figures 46, 47, 48 and 49: The first figure is a screenshot of the pro-Trump account described in the section above, the two following screenshots show the account’s last post (flagged by Instagram for sharing “false information”). The final screenshot is the post in question which states the 2020 election was ‘rigged and stolen’.

On TikTok, posts labelled by the platform as containing “sensitive content” appeared in top ten recommendations associated with abusive hashtags. One video (see screenshot below) labelled by TikTok was recommended to ISD analysts in the top ten posts associated with two abusive hashtags targeting Whitmer. The video in question was a campaign clip from Whitmer’s opponent Tudor Dixon denouncing alleged “children indoctrination” by the LGBTQ+ community, tapping into common narratives used by right wing actors. This content potentially violates TikTok’s hateful ideology policy, which prohibits “content that praises, promotes, glorifies, or supports any hateful ideology” including anti-LGBTQ+ hate. The platform nonetheless recommended this video to ISD analysts.

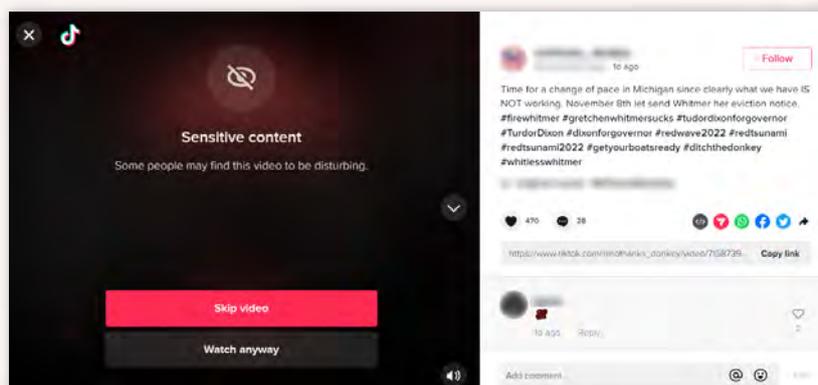


Figure 50: One of the ten first posts suggested by TikTok for both #gretchenwhitmersucks and #gretchenwhitmerisajoke

Case study 2: Inauthentic abusive activity

As part of this study, ISD also sought to identify potential coordinated or suspicious behavior in abuse targeting candidates on Twitter and Facebook. On Twitter ISD found signs of inauthentic activity promoting abusive content targeting Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

The same account posted the same abusive meme 172 times (see Figure X) on October 14 between 23:29:47 and 00:55:40 (EDT time). This account includes the word “red pill” in its self-description and shares a wide range of pro-Trump content. The user appears to have shared this meme in response to anti-Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweets from various conservative actors (e.g., BlazeMedia, Fox News), and posted directly in response to tweets from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s official Twitter account. This type of behavior should violate Twitter’s platform manipulation and spam policy, which prohibits “repeatedly posting identical or nearly identical Tweets.”³⁹

This example highlights how social media users resort to inauthentic tactics and weaponize platform features and functionalities to increase the visibility of abusive and misogynistic content targeting candidates.



Figures 51 and 52: Examples of posts published by the same account with abusive language targeting Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Overview of recommended hashtags and content

The section below provides insights into the top ten hashtags recommended in relation to each candidate on TikTok and Instagram, and the top recommended posts associated with each abusive hashtag.

Marsha Blackburn

Top 10 (Instagram)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#marshablackburn	2,506	No	#marshablackburn	7.0M views	No
#marshablackburnforsenate	104	No	#marshallblackburn	30.4k views	No
#marshablackburnisafailure	11	Yes	#mrsablackburn	221 views	No
#marshablackburnistheworst	16	Yes	#marthablackburn	13.0M views	No
#marshablackburnisanidiot	2	No	#blackburn	128.9M views	No
#marshablackburnmustgo	12	No	#marshablackburnedits	8500 views	No
#marshablackburnisthedevil	9	Yes	#marshablackburnisracist	2878k views	Yes
#marshablackburnswhenipee	5	No	#marsha_kilburn	81 views	No
#marshablackburnfuckyou	4	Yes	#marshablackburnisadisgrace	47.7k views	Yes
#marshablackburnisatraitor	3	Yes	#marshaburn	1572 views	No

Table 2: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

Half the recommended hashtags for Marsha Blackburn were abusive and a quarter of top recommended posts associated with these hashtags also contained abuse directly targeting the candidate. Abusive posts used misogynistic rhetoric, attacking Blackburn for her looks. Most remaining posts contained non-abusive anti-Republican comments and encouraged voters to turn up to vote against Republicans.

On TikTok, two hashtags were deemed to be abusive. Most videos were critical of Blackburn, but not abusive, and featured various clips showing Blackburn’s support for anti-immigration policies and restrictions of abortion rights. Posts also documented her criticism of transgender activist Dylan Mulvaney.

Lauren Boebert

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#laurenboebert	6,873	No	#laurenboebert	92.7M views	No
#laurenboebertissodumb	641	No	#laurenboebert?	398 views	No
#laurenboebertforcongress	49	No	#laurenboebertisamonster	431.1k views	Yes
#laurenboebertmustresign	103	No	#laurenboebertisatraitor	7.9M views	Yes
#laurenboebert4prison	68	Yes	#laurenboebertguilty	4323 views	No
#laurenboebertisatraitor	137	Yes	#laurenboebertissodumb	1.7M views	Yes
#laurenboebertisamonster	52	Yes	#laurenboebertisdumb	270.2k views	No
#laurenboebertisaterrorist	29	Yes	#remouvelaurenboebert	22.2k views	No
#laurenboebertisanidiot	33	No	#arrestlaurenboebert	16.9k views	Yes
#laurenboebertforprison	17	Yes	#laurenboebertdiarrhea	39.3k views	Yes

Table 3: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

On Instagram, half of the hashtags were classified as abusive for Lauren Boebert. Over half of the ten first posts for each hashtag combined themselves were not directly abusive towards Boebert, but used abusive hashtags. ISD found examples of misogynistic content language describing Boebert as unfit for office.

On TikTok, half of the first ten hashtags were classified as abusive. Most posts associated with each hashtag were not classified as abusive. The posts classified as abusive mostly featured misogynistic or generic insults, mirroring trends on Instagram.

Liz Cheney

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#lizcheney	8,259	No	#lizcheney	57.0M views	No
#lizcheney speakstruth	62	No	#lizcheney?	1706views	No
#lizcheney sucks	171	Yes	#lizcheney rocks	595.3k views	No
#lizcheney isatraitor	28	Yes	#lizcheney fanpage	37.0k views	No
#lizcheney forpresident	16	No	#lizcheney sellout	1.0M views	Yes
#lizcheney 2024	15	No	#lizcheney rino	3251 views	No
#lizcheney wyoming	22	No	#teamlizcheney	1830 views	No
#lizcheney photography	21	No	#lizcheney 2022	3079 views	No
#lizcheney hasbiggerballsthanalltherepublicans	15	No	#speakerlizcheney	192 views	No
#lizcheney impeached	6	No	#lizcheney heartemoji	60 views	No

Table 4: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

Two of the top ten recommended hashtags for Liz Cheney on Instagram were classified as abusive. Beyond the abusive nature of the language used in these hashtags, most top posts associated with the hashtag did not directly target Liz Cheney with abusive content. Abusive posts mocked Liz Cheney for losing the primary of the 2022 midterms, and attacked her for her controversial stance on the January 6 hearings.

On TikTok, one hashtag was classified as abusive, though most posts under this hashtag were not abusive. Abusive posts focused on Cheney’s comments about the January 6 hearings, similar to Instagram.

Kamala Harris

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#kamalaharris	893,582	No	#kamalaharris	1.8Bviews	No
#kamalaharris2020	70,615	No	#kamalaharrisedit	370.4kviews	No
#kamalaharrissucks	6,791	Yes	#kamalaharrisisajoke	34.6M views	Yes
#kamalaharrisday	10,883	No	#kamalaharris2020	39.1M views	No
#kamalaharrisforthepeople	6,717	No	#kamalaharrisspeech	2.0M views	No
#kamalaharrisvp	5,352	No	#kamalaharris2020(USflagheartemoji)	410.2k views	No
#kamalaharrisforpresident	3,962	No	#kamalaharis	3.9M views	No
#kamalaharrisisa fraud	1,983	Yes	#kamalaharrisslander	1.2M views	No
#kamalaharrisisacop	1,876	No	#kamalaharris	2.9Mviews	No
#kamalaharrisforvp	1,762	No	#kamala_harris	46.7k views	No

Table 5: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

Out of the top ten recommended hashtags on Instagram, two were classified as abusive. The top ten recommended posts for #kamalaharrissucks included several anti-Joe Biden posts that used a wide range of hashtags to attack Democrats and the Vice President. Two posts were highly abusive, and one used sexual content. The hashtags were also used alongside disinformative anti-vaccine posts, attacking Democrats for allegedly lying about vaccine efficacy and restricting individual freedoms. The top ten posts associated with #kamalaharrisisa fraud contained a broad range of anti-Biden and anti-Democrat content, including one directly abusive sexualized post.

One out of the top ten recommended hashtags on TikTok was classified as abusive. The videos under the hashtag included different non-abusive clips of Kamala Harris meant to depict her, the Biden administration and Democrats as incompetent. Abusive videos and text included personalized attacks describing Harris as stupid alongside misogynistic language.

Rachel Levine

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#rachellevine	1,802	No	#rachellevine	1.7M views	No
#rachellevinephotography	985	No	#rachellevinedit	25.6k views	No
#rachellevineisaman	25	Yes	#rachellivine	1622 views	No
#rachellevinephoto	183	No	#rachellevin	2.1M views	No
#rachellevinedit	21	No	#rachellavine	56.4k views	No
#rachellevineisaguy	9	Yes	#rachellevineisaman	2210 views	Yes
#rachellevinephotography	3	No	#rachellevinisahottie	1574 views	Yes
#rachellevinestyle	3	No	#drachellevine	302.9k views	No
#rachellevineisnotawoman	2	Yes	#rachellivian	738 views	No
#rachellevinedits	13	No	#rachelelivian	353 views	No

Table 6: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

On Instagram, three out of ten hashtags were abusive and transphobic in nature. An overwhelming majority of associated posts were openly transphobic. All top posts using #rachellevineisaman directly targeted Levine with transphobic abuse.

On TikTok, two out of the top ten suggested hashtags were abusive. Numerous posts contained transphobic content targeting Levine.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#alexandriaocasiocortez	71,589	No	#alexandriaocasiocortez	177.0M views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortez2018	683	No	#alexandraocasiocortez	10.9M views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortezedit	326	No	#alexandriaocasiocortez2020	913 views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortezmemes	313	No	#alexadriaocasiocortezexposed	437 views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortezidiot	66	No	#alexadriaocasiocortez	226.8k views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortezmeme	27	No	#alexandriaocasiocortezedit	928 views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortezmollett	371	No	#alexandriaocasiocortez?	548 views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortez4president	124	No	#alexandriaocasiocortezblueheartwaveemoji	357 views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortezedits	124	No	#alexandriaocasiocortez2024	212.2k views	No
#alexandriaocasiocortezismentiallyill	29	Yes	#alexandriaocasiocortezmemes	1250 views	No

Table 7: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

One among the top ten hashtags suggested for Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Instagram was classified as abusive. Over three quarters of top posts associated with this hashtag included abusive and misogynistic content targeting the candidate. These included posts focusing on her past work experience as a bartender to suggest she is unfit for office. There were no abusive hashtags among the top ten recommended on TikTok.

Ilhan Omar

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#ilhanomar	36,303	No	#ilhanomar	26.4Mviews	No
#ilhanomarforcongress	464	No	#ilhan_omar	6071 views	No
#ilhanomarmustgo	803	No	#ilhanomar(USflagemoji)	9.3M views	No
#ilhanomarisaterrorist	270	Yes	#ilhanomar(USflagemojiSomaliflag)	764.6kviews	No
#ilhanomarresign	201	No	#ilhanomar2022	32.8kviews	No
#ilhanomarlovers	142	No	#ilhanomar2020	190.9kviews	No
#ilhanomar	100	No	ilhanomar(somaliflagheartemoji)	4.8Mviews	No
#ilhanomarforprison	155	Yes	#ilhanomar	658.5k views	No
#ilhanomarantisemitism	893	Yes	#ilhaan_omar	223 views	No
#ilhanomarantisemite	24	Yes	#cancelilhanomar	1265 views	Yes

Table 8: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

On Instagram, four out of the top ten suggested hashtags were abusive. Over half of the associated content was abusive towards the candidate. These included multiple examples of racist, Islamophobic and xenophobic content, such as posts calling Omar a terrorist and/or blaming her for 9/11. ISD also found posts promoting gendered disinformation narratives (including the claim that Omar married her brother), sexual content and misogynistic slurs. Some posts also referenced a broad range of conspiracy theories (including QAnon).

On TikTok, one hashtag out of ten was classified as abusive. Most of the associated videos were not abusive.

Nancy Pelosi

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#nancypelosi	158,121	No	#nancypelosi	564.1Mviews	No
#nancypelosiifakenews	1,618	Yes	#nancypelosi	4209 views	No
#nancypelosiisretarded	2,790	Yes	#nancypelosi	13.8M views	No
#nancypelosisucks	2,886	Yes	#nancypelosiisthedevel	2.5Mviews	Yes
#nancypelosimemes	1,569	No	#nancy_pelosi	717.2kviews	No
#nancypelosiisforprison	436	Yes	#nancypelosi2020	34.5k views	No
#nancypelosiisadisgrace	371	Yes	#nancypelosichallenge	14 views	No
#nancypelosiisrocks	315	No	#nancypelosi?	582 views	No
#nancypelosiisaniidiot	309	No	#nancipelosi	1.6M views	No
#nancypelosiisadrunk	186	Yes	#nancypelosicaneatshit	71.0k views	Yes

Table 9: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

On Instagram, six out of the top ten recommended hashtags for Nancy Pelosi were classified as abusive. ISD found multiple examples of misogynistic and ageist content targeting Pelosi as well as posts mocking Pelosi’s physical appearance, including posts using misogynistic slurs and generic insults. In several instances, top posts referenced a range of conspiracy theories (e.g., QAnon, COVID-related conspiracy theories etc.) and disinformation about the results the 2020 elections.

On TikTok, two out of ten recommended hashtags were classified as abusive. Videos using abusive hashtags in their captions frequently sexualized Pelosi; the lyrics in one of the audios, for instance, described hypothetical sexual intercourse with her (see Figure 14).

Elise Stefanik

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#elisestefanik	1,008	No	#elisestefanik	3.7M views	No
#elisestefanikisabeast	4	Yes	#elisestefanikforcongress	59 views	No
#elisestefanikforcongress	3	No	#elizestefanik	4028 views	No
#elisestefanik2022	2	No	#elisestefanikisanidiot	2988 views	No
#elisestefaniktreasonoustraitor	17	Yes	#elisestefanikresign	25.5k views	No
#elisestefanikcorrupt	15	Yes	#elisestefanikdoesntgetanopinion	167 views	No
#elisestefanikhatesbrownbabies	13	Yes	#elisestephanik	73.2k views	No
#elisestefanikisatool	7	Yes	#estefanik	1627 views	No
#elisestefanikisaracist	8	Yes	#ielizestefanick	543 views	No
#elisestefanikisfullofshit	3	Yes	#elisestefanikmassacre	801k views	Yes

Table 10: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

Six out of the top ten recommended hashtags for Elise Stefanik were classified as abusive. Most of the associated posts were not abusive towards Stefanik – beyond the use of the hashtag – but included political criticism and attacks on Stefanik’s record, including her defense of Donald Trump’s comments about the January 6 2021 Capitol riots. All top posts under the hashtag #elisestefanikhatesbrownbabies and #elisestefanikisaracist included criticism of her stance on immigration and her support for the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory.

On TikTok, one hashtag was coded as abusive. A small proportion of videos associated with these hashtags were targeted Stefanik with misogynistic language, often describing her as stupid and unfit for office.

Marjorie Taylor Greene

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#marjorietaйлorgreene	18,653	No	#marjorietaйлorgreene	222M views	No
#marjorietaйлorgreeneiscrazy	1,189	Yes	#marjorietaйлorgreeneiscrazyaf	9.1M views	Yes
#marjorietaйлorgreeneisatraitor	296	Yes	#marjorietaйлorgreene?	67.2k views	No
#marjorietaйлorgreenesucks	159	Yes	#marjorietaйлorgreeneisatraitor	578.1k views	Yes
#marjorietaйлorgreeneisunfit	251	Yes	#marjorietaйлorgreen	3.4M views	No
#marjorietaйлorgreeneisaterrorist	100	Yes	#arrestmarjorietaйлorgreene	183k views	Yes
#marjorietaйлorgreeneisapsycho	43	Yes	#majorietaйлorgreene	15.5M views	No
#marjorietaйлorgreenemustresign	65	No	#marjorietaйлorgreenepsycho	1310 views	Yes
#marjorietaйлorgreeneisaclown	44	Yes	#margorietaйлorgreene	4.5M views	No
#marjorietaйлorgreene 🖐️🗿😂	14	Yes	#rmarjorietaйлorgreene	316 views	No

Table 11: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

Eight out of the top ten recommended hashtags on Instagram were coded as abusive. The first three abusive hashtags in order of recommendation included mostly non-abusive content attacking Taylor Greene for her support for Donald Trump, anti-vaccine comments and support for white nationalist ideas. The rest of the hashtags showed a similar trend: associated posts were broadly critical of Taylor Greene and the right wing of the Republican Party without attacking the candidate herself specifically.

On TikTok, four out of ten hashtags were abusive. Most recommended posts included criticism of Taylor Greene and described her as incompetent, unfit for office and stupid. Videos frequently used clips featuring speeches by Taylor Greene and her public appearances and included mocking and belittling commentary.

Rashida Tlaib

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#rashidatlaib	16,680	No	#rashidatlaib	6.6M views	No
#rashidatlaibforcongress	101	No	#rashida_tlaib	7977 views	No
#rashidatlaibmustgo	21	No	#rashidatlaib	289.1k views	No
#rashidatlaibisaterrorist	17	Yes	#rashidatlaib	543 views	No
#rashidatlaibisaracist	10	Yes	#rashidatlaibshouldresign	137.1k views	No
#rashidatlaibwithuaw	10	No	#rashidatlaib	657 views	No
#rashidatlaibisanidiot	5	Yes	#rashidatlaib	122.9k views	No
#rashidatlaibisanantisemite	5	Yes	#rashidatlaib	4482 views	No
#rashidatlaibisdangerous	3	Yes	#rashidatlaib	6 views	No
#rashidatlaibisrael	2	No	#fuckrashidatlaib	457 views	Yes

Table 12: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

For Rashida Tlaib, half of the top recommended hashtags on Instagram were found to be abusive. Over half of the top associated posts contained highly abusive content targeting Tlaib, including misogynistic, Islamophobic and xenophobic language. Posts depicted Tlaib as un-American (as a result of her Muslim faith) and a danger to national security. Multiple posts included anti-Tlaib memes attacking the candidate for her looks and religion as well as photoshopped images of the candidate and sexual content.

On TikTok, one of the top ten recommended hashtags (#fuckrashidatlaib) was categorized as abusive. All the videos associated with this hashtag included clips of Tlaib talking about various issues (e.g. border control) but did not include any further direct abusive language.

Gretchen Whitmer

Instagram (Top 10)	# of posts	Abusive?	TikTok (Top 10)	# of views	Abusive?
#gretchenwhitmer	7,859	No	#gretchenwhitmer	27.4M views	No
#gretchenwhitmerforgovernor	200	No	#governorgretchenwhitmer	76.1k views	No
#gretchenwhitmersucks	30	Yes	#grechenwhitmer	3335 views	No
#gretchenwhitmertyrant	237	Yes	#gretchenwitmer	206.2k views	No
#gretchenwhitmermistakes	222	No	#grethenwhitmer	26.6k views	No
#gretchenwhitmerforprison	32	Yes	#fuckgretchenwhitmer	30.7k views	Yes
#gretchenwhitmer2018	11	No	#gretchenwhitmersucks	119.7k views	Yes
#gretchenwhitmerispowerhungry	8	Yes	#gretchenwhitmerisajoke	1161 views	Yes
#gretchenwhitmerismyhero	2	No	#gretchenwhitmerisahero	23.2k views	No
#gretchenwhitmerisabitch	2	Yes	#gretchenwhitmer<3	332 views	No

Table 13: Summary of top 10 hashtags on Instagram and TikTok.

On Instagram, half of the top ten recommended hashtags returned for searches of ‘Gretchen Whitmer’ were found to be abusive. Posts associated with these hashtags included misogynistic and/or generic slurs targeting Whitmer, especially in response to COVID-19 restrictions she implemented as Governor of Michigan. Multiple posts also spread disinformation about the results of the 2020 election, during which Whitmer was found to be the target of a kidnapping lot. Other posts promoted anti-restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic rhetoric, and anti-vaxx conspiracy theories referencing the vaccine would be unsafe.

On TikTok, three of the top ten suggested hashtags were classified as abusive, though most top videos under these hashtags were not abusive towards the candidate. Abuse mostly featured in audio content and included misogynistic slurs targeting Whitmer.

Conclusion and recommendations

This investigation highlights the responsibility of platforms in prohibiting the multiple forms of abuse targeting women in the US political arena. Both Instagram and TikTok recommended abusive hashtags to users searching for content related to women candidates or political figures in the 2022 midterm elections. These abusive hashtags promoted hateful content targeting candidates, usually in direct violation of platform policies.

Those posting and spreading this content used different format and platform features (such as images, hashtags, audio, and video). Users frequently used memes or manipulated images to share sexual content targeting several candidates, which was readily available on both platforms, highlighting gaps in the enforcement of platforms' policies. The research also found that those posting abusive content are exploiting platforms features and deploying inauthentic tactics in order to garner engagement.

This investigation found that candidates with intersecting identities were targeted with abuse that highlighted several protected characteristics. For instance, Rachel Levine - one of the few transwomen in public office - received a particular high level of abuse and was the target of specific forms of abuse (such as deadnaming and misgendering), highlighting the need for an intersectional understanding of online abuse.^{40 41}

Based on these findings, ISD proposes the following recommendations for consideration by social media platforms.

- Platforms need to ensure better implementation of their terms of service in relation to abuse and harassment policies. This investigation found that platforms recommended multiple examples of abusive and sexualized content in relation to prominent women in US politics that violate their own terms of service.
- Social media platforms need to provide greater transparency about their content moderation policies, processes and enforcement outcomes relating to harassment and abuse, including the financial, human and technical resources allocated to content moderation. These companies also need to provide regular reporting on the type of content removed for harassment, bullying and abuse, including the proportion of content that is removed under these policies that is image-based or video-based, as well as providing greater transparency about decisions underpinning algorithmic recommendations.
- Platforms need to design and deploy content moderation systems that are reflective of how different platform features (image, video, audio etc.) are used for harassment and abuse. This investigation found a significant amount of highly abusive and sexualized content targeting women in politics that relied on imagery and sound, demonstrating the need for a more comprehensive moderation strategy that incorporates these content types.
- Platforms need to do more to prevent the amplification of abusive content targeting women in office by reviewing recommended hashtags associated with prominent public figures. This investigation found that platforms routinely recommended abusive hashtags in association with the names of women candidates and politicians. Platforms should be working to actively mitigate the risks of inauthentic amplification of abuse targeting women running for or in office. ISD's research identified examples of inauthentic amplification of abusive memes targeting candidates, showing that malign actors are adept at exploiting platform functionalities to amplify abusive content.

- Platforms need to regularly review and update their content moderation policies to reflect new patterns of abusive, harmful and illegal content, and ensure that human moderators receive appropriate and up-to-date training on detecting and assessing abusive content targeting high-profile women. Staff need to be trained in identifying content that targets women based on different aspects of their identity and that deploys hybrid tactics – combining abusive narratives with gendered disinformation – to attack public figures. This investigation has shown that public figures with intersecting identities, including transgender individuals and individuals from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, are more likely to be targeted by highly egregious content. Training for content moderation needs to build an understanding about evolving tactics and narratives targeting women in public life.
- Social media platforms need to put in place enhanced measures to address abusive and sexualized content aimed at candidates and women in office during electoral cycles. Platforms should develop new features and options in consultation with women in public life and informed by new research into the evolving tactics of online abuse. Platforms also need to remove the burden of reporting abuse from candidates and their teams.⁴² Meta’s current terms of service, for instance, state that the company’s content moderation teams examine abusive content when reported by the candidate’s teams, a time-intensive effort, particularly during election campaigns.⁴³ ISD research has shown that platforms are allowing abusive content to feature prominently in hashtags and content recommendations and increasing the risk of social media users being exposed to this content.

Endnotes

- 1 La campagne de l'intimidation : étude de cas des violences numériques envers les candidats aux élections de 2022, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 16 August 2022 La campagne de l'intimidation : étude de cas des violences numériques envers les candidats aux élections de 2022 - ISD (isdglobal.org)
- 2 Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 5th October 2020, Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media - ISD (isdglobal.org)
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- 6 For female candidates, harassment and threats come every day, Maggie Astor, New York Times, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/us/politics/women-harassment-elections.html>
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- 8 Strengthening our policies to promote safety, security, and well-being on TikTok | TikTok Newsroom
- 9 Report: Hateful Content Is 'Pervasive' on TikTok (dot.la)
- 10 Hate speech | Transparency Centre (fb.com)
- 11 Community Guidelines (tiktok.com)
- 12 Community Guidelines (tiktok.com)
- 13 Bullying and harassment | Transparency Centre (fb.com)
- 14 Twitter's platform manipulation and spam policy | Twitter Help
- 15 Women's Media Center, 'Online Abuse 101', <https://www.womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/online-abuse-101/>
- 16 Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online, Wilson Center, January 2021, Report Malign Creativity How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online_0.pdf (wilsoncenter.org)
- 17 The 101 of Disinformation Detection, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013 August 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-101-of-disinformation-detection/>
- 18 Data was collected over a 48-hour period on 28th October 2022
- 19 Hate speech | Transparency Centre (fb.com); Moreover, Meta states as part of this policy "we define attacks as violent or dehumanising speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or dismissal, cursing and calls for exclusion or segregation. We also prohibit the use of harmful stereotypes, which we define as dehumanising comparisons that have historically been used to attack, intimidate or exclude specific groups, and that are often linked with offline violence". One should note Meta also considers age as a protected characteristics under its hate speech policy.
- 20 Bullying and harassment | Transparency Centre (fb.com)
- 21 Safety Tools and Policies for Elected Officials and Candidates (facebook.com)
- 22 Safety Tools and Policies for Elected Officials and Candidates (facebook.com); Meta states "for public figures, we remove attacks that are severe as well as certain attacks where the public figure is directly tagged in the post or comment. For example, gendered cursing will now be removed for public figures if they are purposefully exposed to this. We will also remove posts which include this language and the name of a public figure, when reported to us by the target, even where they are not purposefully exposed."
- 23 Community Guidelines (tiktok.com)
- 24 Community Guidelines (tiktok.com) Tiktok defines slurs "as derogatory terms that are intended to disparage groups or individuals based on any protected attributes". This includes content that "targets transgender or non-binary individuals through misgendering or deadnaming".
- 25 Community Guidelines (tiktok.com)
- 26 Community Guidelines (tiktok.com)

- 27 Community Guidelines (tiktok.com)
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 - 39 Twitter's platform manipulation and spam policy | Twitter Help
 - 40 Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 5 October 2020, Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media - ISD (isdglobal.org)
 - 41 An Unrepresentative Democracy: How Disinformation and Online Abuse Hinder Women of Color Political Candidates in the United States, Center for Democracy & Technology, 27 October 2022, An Unrepresentative Democracy: How Disinformation and Online Abuse Hinder Women of Color Political Candidates in the United States - Center for Democracy and Technology (cdt.org)
 - 42 In relation to public figures, Meta states: "we remove attacks that are severe as well as certain attacks where the public figure is directly tagged in the post or comment. For example, gendered cursing will now be removed for public figures if they are purposefully exposed to this. We will also remove posts which include this language and the name of a public figure, when reported to us by the target, even where they are not purposefully exposed": Bullying and harassment | Transparency Centre (fb.com)
 - 43 <https://transparency.fb.com/de-de/policies/community-standards/bullying-harassment/>
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