# Masculinity and femininity in media representations of party leadership candidates: Men ‘play the gender card’ too

*As men continue to dominate in executive office, male leadership remains the norm and has structured how we see leadership. Yet, current understandings of gender bias in political leadership too often refer to bias against women. To fully understand gender’s role in political leadership it is vital to remember that ‘men have a gender too’. Accordingly, this article provides an inter- and intra-sex comparison of the media coverage both male and female leadership candidates running for party leadership in the UK. The results show how the leadership environment was gendered for both men and women. Gendering is found in nuanced gendered framings which worked for and against both men and women running for party leadership in the UK. Furthermore, both male and female candidates ‘played the gender card’ when negotiating the gendered norms of leadership, using their gender in their campaign imagery. The results beg key questions on the conscious use of gender in candidate strategy and the possible effect on voters.*

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Globally, men continue to dominate in executive office. Although the numbers of women leaders increased faster in the 2010s than any decade so far, 42% of countries are yet to elect or appoint a woman national executive (Jalalzai 2020). Men’s continued dominance in executive office structures how we see leadership: “gender-based norms become embedded in institutions and ideas, and gender provides a lens that filters leadership traits and determine their value” (Sykes 2013, 102). Unpacking the role of gender in political leadership campaigns gives insight into the institution and how women and men negotiate the gendered norms of political office. The prominent way in which scholars have mapped these norms is by examining the news framing of female candidates running for executive office. Yet too often when scholars consider gender bias in the media, this refers to bias towards women. Men and masculinity in most accounts are often overlooked, or simply treated as the norm comparator (Conroy 2015). To fully understand gender’s role in political leadership it is vital to remember that ‘men have a gender too’ (Carver 1996). Therefore, this article provides the first systematic and inter- and intra-sex comparison of the media coverage of both men and women leadership candidates running for party leadership in the UK. It asks not only whether women face a bias when running for political office, but whether (certain types of) men have an advantage. Considering the UK case advances our understandings of, and presents further research tracks on, the complex gendered environment of political leadership and speaks to a body international literature.

The paper begins by setting out an analytical framework based on current understandings of media bias towards female candidates and an examination of what is known to date about masculinity in ideas of political leadership. The framework considers the visibility of candidates, the language used and how, and when, candidate sex is emphasised. The second section sets out the method and the case of the 2015 UK Labour Party leadership election. The subsequent quantitative and qualitative content analysis of over 4,000 news items on the election reveals how the UK leadership environment was gendered for *both* men and women. Three main findings demonstrate how the media, and arguably candidates’ self-presentation, constructed an insider/outsider frame with women outsiders and men insiders in the masculine game of politics. Firstly, masculine metaphors and imagery were frequently used in coverage but less often applied to women. Secondly, the competitive female candidate’s visibility was at the same level as (and sometimes lower than) her more electorally unviable female colleague as opposed to her logical male counterpart. Thirdly, explicit mentions of candidate sex framed women as novelties in, and men as members of, the masculinized political sphere. Furthermore, the analysis reveals how both male and female candidates ‘played the gender card’ in their self-presentation when negotiating the gendered norms of leadership, by using their gender in their campaign imagery. The final discussion section considers how, in the face of these complex gender representations, key questions are begged on the role of gender in candidate strategy.

**1. News Framing: Women and Gendered Representations**

Media analyses identify systematic biases in the news framing of women politicians. “News frames constitute highly orchestrated ways of making sense of social (including gendered) relations which encourage a commitment to share particular interpretations of and ways of seeing the world which are entirely partial and preserve the male-ordered status quo” (Ross 2010, 93). There’s a US focus to this work, with a plethora of literature around the high profile US presidential and vice-presidential bids of Sarah Palin (2008) and Hillary Clinton (2008 and 2016) (e.g., Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Carroll 2009; Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman 2018); additional work examines leadership elections in Canada, New Zealand and Australia (e.g., Gerrits et al. 2017; Gidengil and Everitt 2003; Trimble 2007, 2017; Wagner, Trimble, and Sampert 2019).

The extant literature demonstrates that political leadership is aligned with stereotypically ‘masculine’ traits and competencies, such as strength and assertiveness. Demonstrating ‘masculinity’ through these traits is thought beneficial for leadership candidates of both sexes (although women can face backlash for doing so) (Fridkin and Kenney 2009; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kittilson and Fridkin 2008). Yet, a male body can be sufficient to signal these traits whereby women’s may be questioned or less easily demonstrable (Dignam et al. 2019). Women continue to be outsiders in a masculine realm of leadership. Women are often less visible than men, treated as a novelty, face more scrutiny than their male counterparts and are represented in stereotypical, gendered frames (Jamieson 1995; Murray 2010). Meanwhile, the language used in politics emphasises the masculinity of the political realm. The focus in this work is primarily on identifying the bias towards female candidates, male candidates are the norm comparator with little discussion of the role of gender in representations of male candidates and their masculinity. In this paper, I consider how both masculinity and femininity are constructed in leadership and how we may move towards thinking about different types of masculinity and femininity.

There are multiple ways that gendered representations that may present in the media, in this paper the focus is on three elements which centre in on this contention of the masculine norm of leadership and women as outsiders in the political sphere: (i) visibility; (ii) women’s novelty; (iii) masculine sports and military imagery. For each, an empirical expectation about the coverage of female candidates in the 2015 Labour leadership election is made.

**1.1 Visibility**

The first empirical expectation concerns the visibility of women running for leadership. Given this was the first time for a UK mainstream party that two women ran for leadership, as well as the first time a viable female candidate had run (Cooper) it is expected that, at least for the viable female candidate the women’s visibility will be in line with the men’s. Current evidence is conflicted on women’s visibility relative to their male counterparts and it may be dependent on context. Although traditionally it is thought women are less visible in political media coverage (Ross 2010), there is emerging US evidence that the coverage of women is improving and sex differences lessening (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Furthermore, given women’s ongoing underrepresentation in politics - especially in executive office (Jalalzai 2020) – women are frequently presented as a novelty in the masculine world of politics. This may enhance their visibility, especially when running for high political office. Trimble (2007), for example, found that novelty gave Canadian female leadership candidates more prominence in the media coverage. When the women were a first, media interest increased.

**1.2 The ‘novelty’ frame**

It is expected that the women will be presented as a novelty, especially given this was the first time two women had run for leadership. The ‘novelty’ frame, frequently finds women framed as the ‘first woman’, even when not factually true (Gidengil and Everitt, 2003). Women’s difference can also be presented through using sex as a primary descriptor: women in public office are not just politicians but *woman* politician (Ross 2010). These ‘gender markers’ politicise gender by reinforcing a public man/private woman dichotomy as women’s presence is presented as unusual. It makes explicit the default of male politician and can essentialise female politicians’ gendered attitudes by linking women and bodies. Novelty framing may include accusations that these women candidates for high office are playing the ‘gender card’ by the media, or indeed female candidates themselves explicitly running ‘as women’ for instance in discussing the symbolic importance of women being represented, or the sexist nature of attacks on themselves (Johnson 2015)

Yet, these ‘novelty’ frames may also work to challenge gendered assumptions by highlighting women’s underrepresentation and the ‘male-politician-norm’ (Childs 2004). Highlighting women’s path-breaking roles (even if often exaggerated or inaccurate) could draw attention to their previous absence from leadership positions (Trimble 2017). In this way, women’s outsider status can both enhance their visibility even whilst depreciating it (Hall and Donaghue, 2013).

**1.3 Playing the (battle)field**

The gendered mediation thesis contends that the images and language used, such as sports and military metaphors, perpetrate the masculinity of politics working further to place women as outsiders and ‘space invaders’ (Puwar 2004) in a masculine sphere (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). Sports and military metaphors abound to such an extent that how the “media discuss[es] politics … reinforces political activities as masculine activities” (Gerrits et al. 2017, 1089). It is expected that such language will be used in this UK case, and work to present women as outside of the masculine world of politics. Gidengill and Everitt (2003, 573) found that in Canadian leadership debates this sports imagery was used less towards female candidates, “implying that the women were somehow perceived as not really belonging to the “game” of politics”. Trimble (2017) similarly found battle metaphors were used in media descriptions of the behaviour of four female Prime Ministers from Canada, New Zealand and Australia. She argues such language limits the parameters of acceptable electoral performance to these masculine spheres of sport and war. The use of this language can be context dependent. Over thirty years of leadership elections in Canada, Gerrits et al (2017) found aggressive metaphors were used more for women the closer the woman’s proximity to power and likelihood of success; women were presented as more aggressive when they challenged gendered norms. That said, and once again, the unusualness of women in the masculine sphere and their unexpected ‘masculine’ behaviour may enhance their visibility. Indeed, Gidengil and Everitt (2003) found that female leadership candidates were more frequently portrayed as attacking than their male colleagues in Canadian TV debates, even if her actual behaviour was not more combative. As Trimble (2017) suggests, representations of women on the ‘battlefield’ of politics can work to disrupt the public man/private woman dichotomy, showing women’s power and agency.

**1.4 The possible null effect of sex**

International case studies have shown persuasive evidence of systematic bias in media portrayals of women leaders. Yet, a body of evidence points to an alternative, or null, hypothesis that gender’s effect could be declining, or even non-existent. Recent US work suggests the media may be becoming more equitable in its coverage. Hayes and Lawless’s (2016) study of US House races found that a better explanation of differences in coverage between candidates was electoral competitiveness and incumbency rather than sex. Yet, gender’s role varies across different spaces and over time. Hayes and Lawless (2016) specifically note that their conclusions may not apply to the high profile 2016 presidential race when Hillary Clinton was the first female presidential candidate from a major party. Evidence suggests that this was the case as Clinton received less coverage than Trump and the media framed her as unlikable, crooked and frail and disproportionately focused on her scandals and fitness for office (Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman 2018).

**1.5 Masculinities in Politics**

Primarily, the understandings above derive from the idea of the male being the ‘norm’ in political leadership. To date, much of what we know on gender and leadership in the media focuses on bias towards women by studying only female cases (e.g., Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Murray 2010; Nee and De Maio 2019) or using male as a norm comparator (e.g., Trimble 2017; Wagner, Trimble, and Sampert 2019). Less attention – and I would contend insufficient attention – has been paid to problematizing this male norm. Women and men both have and perform gender (Carver 1996). In the words of Bjarnegård (2013, 1), “we must take seriously the fact that a gendered analysis is as much about men and masculinity as it is about women and femininity”. In recent studies, greater attention is beginning to be paid to masculinity in gender and political leadership, primarily in the US context, arguably as it has never been clearer that men ‘play the gender card’ too. How can it not be said, given Donald Trump’s talk about penis size in a presidential election (CAWP 2016). In this paper, the role of men and masculinity will also be considered in the examination of the media coverage of leadership candidates.

Prior to Trump’s 2018 campaign, Conroy (2015) examined masculinity in US presidential races. Conroy finds a ‘gender conflict framing’ in all male races where “one candidate is framed as more masculine and the other is framed as more feminine” (Conroy 2015, 75). Thus, to say that ‘politics is masculine’ does not mean that all men will inevitably benefit. The male advantage in politics may only be reserved for ‘masculine’ men, and/or the most masculine candidate (indeed, Conroy notes that women often also compete to be the ‘most masculine’). In this way, the gender politics amongst men is laid bare. Similarly, hegemonic masculinity theory contends the configuration of gender practice provides an idealised reference point of masculinity. Most men benefit from this hegemony, and the resulting subordination of women, and some men, to this patriarchal hegemony. Subordinate masculinities include, notably the effeminate or homosexual men (Connell 2005; MacKinnon 2003). Admittedly, hegemonic masculinity is a “slippery notion” determined by what it excludes and what it seeks to dominate – namely women and certain men. It can change over time amid shifting contexts. As Mackinnon (2003, 11) argues, that the discourse of masculinity is subject to change means that masculinity, subordinated and dominant/hegemonic alike change “and is of necessity plural”.

In the study of political leadership, several types of masculinities have been identified, with traditional masculinity and the ‘new man’ masculinity predominant (MacKinnon 2003; A. Smith 2016). Traditional masculinity aligns with ideas of needing physical power as underpinning dominance and success in politics. For example George W. Bush cultivated a masculine cowboy persona and staged a landing on an aircraft carrier to announce ‘mission accomplished’ in Iraq (Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman 2018). In contrast, the ‘new man’ emerged out of changes in social norms, characteristic of less bifurcated gender roles between women and men, and alongside women’s greater presence in the workplace and equality legislation. Fatherhood is central to the new man image and shows the feminisation of masculinity, associating men with more traditionally feminine communal traits (A. Smith 2016). Tony Blair (UK Prime Minster 1997-2008) exemplified this ‘new man’ using his family - with a professional lawyer wife, three school aged children and a new a baby whilst in office - in representations of himself as the modern working father (J. C. Smith 2018). In advance of his election as leader, Blair was photographed in the family home, spoke of ‘fitting in time with the kids’, sharing the school run and changing nappies.

The review of the literature above identifies three empirical expectations on the media treatment of the women candidates (i) that the female candidates, especially the viable female candidate, will receive similar levels of coverage to the men; (ii) the women will be framed as a novelty; (iii) masculine metaphors and imagery will be used to describe the political sphere. It also identified the types of masculinity – traditional and new man – which may be used to represent the male candidates and masculinity in the coverage.

**2. Method and Case**

**2.1 The UK Case**

Whilst the bulk of literature on gendered media representation derives from the US, intermittent work has examined British women executives. Early work by Ross (1994) found gendered bias in the 1994 Labour leadership election. More recent work provides headline statistics on the visibility of women during elections (Deacon et al. 2017; Harmer 2015) and some observational work finds gendered representations may still be prevalent in the British media context – for instance Williams (2020) found higher instances of gendered tropes used to describe Theresa May than Margaret Thatcher (see also Harmer 2015; Higgins and McKay 2016). There remains a lack of a systematic analysis, and these studies are primarily focused only on female executives. By considering both femininity and masculinity for men and women in news framing this paper avoids limitations of the earlier generation of UK studies.

The 2015 UK Labour Party leadership election is a pertinent case for the analysis of gender and media representation and political leadership. For the first time, a mainstream British political the official leadership campaign featured, two women, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as two men, Jeremy Corbyn and Andy Burnham. Following the Labour Party’s defeat at the 2015 General Election, the then leader Ed Miliband stepped down triggering a leadership contest. Changes to the party voting mechanism introduced a new ‘one-member-one-vote’ system and members of the public could sign up to vote as ‘supporters’ for a reduced fee resulting in a contest which played out almost like a ‘prime ministerial primary’ (Cowis, 2015). The campaign ran from mid-June to mid-September offering a rich set of data. By mid-September Jeremy Corbyn was declared the shock winner of the election after a swell of grassroots support led to ‘Corbynmania’. A backbench MP for over 20 years from the marginalised left-wing of the party, Corbyn was unknown outside of Westminster and many colleagues only nominated him to ensure a range of views were represented in the election, expecting Andy Burnham or perhaps Yvette Cooper to win. Gender was a discussion point in the contest given the possibility Labour would appoint its first female leader. Alongside this, comments by Lord Falconer in support of Andy Burnham were interpreted as saying the women were not tough enough and should leave politics to the men (Wintour 2015), and Labour MP Helen Goodman sparked debate on politics and motherhood when she pledged her support for Yvette Cooper because she was a ‘working mum-of-three’ (Blanchard 2015).

**2.2 Method**

News items relating to the leadership contest from the date of the first candidate announcing (10th May 2015) to the winner being announced (12th September 2015) were collected for analysis. In line with traditional examinations of gendered media coverage newspaper and broadcast coverage was examined. Weekday national newspaper coverage was collated using LexisNexis. The broadcast coverage included all weekday coverage of the election by BBC Six O’clock News, ITV 10 O’clock News and Channel 4 News at 7pm. As news systems become more hybrid, this paper aims to be complete in understanding the media landscape (Chadwick 2011). In 2015, four in ten UK adults (41%) used the internet or apps for news – ten percentage points more than use print media (31%) and one in five adults (19%) used Twitter as their main source of information (Ofcom 2015). New media sources of blogs and Twitter are included to allow for a thorough, modern snapshot of gender and leadership in the contemporary media landscape. Weekday posts by the main Conservative and Labour blogs ConservativeHome and LabourList were examined alongside the more ‘insider’ blogs of the right-leaning Guido Fawkes and the left-leaning Labour Uncut. Tweets from the broadcast or newspapers’ chief political correspondents or deputy editors were collected dependent on which correspondent was covering the leadership election, as well as tweets on the election from the blogs’ editors[[2]](#footnote-2). Tweets were collated manually providing a full dataset of tweets[[3]](#footnote-3). In total, 4,145 news items are analysed.

An in-depth case study provides a detailed exploration of the language and framing of political leadership. A mixed method approach, as common to content analysis, based on Berg and Lune (2014) was carried out, taking an inductive and deductive approach to identifying gendered framings. Firstly, based on the directed content analysis method, words, phrases and themes were collated according to the analytical framework set out in the literature review, based on existing studies on gendered framings. These included collating explicit mentions of female candidate’s sex, representations of new man or traditional masculinity, and masculine metaphors and imagery in the form of battle and sports imagery. The visibility of the candidates was also quantitatively coded for each news item, as set out below. Secondly, thematic analysis was used to qualitatively analyse the data looking for themes identified in the analytical framework and identifying any emergent gendered framings and similar sub-themes that arose from the data (Berg and Lune 2014).

1. *Visibility*

For each newspaper article and blog piece, a score of 1 was given if the politician was named first; named three or more times; named in the headline; or named first in the headline. For broadcast news, a comparable index is used where each ‘news item’ is given a score of 1 if the politician is named first, named three or more times, their image appears first or appears three or more times[[4]](#footnote-4). Broadcast news items are individual segments featuring the same reporter and/or guests. For example, a pre-recorded report by the political editor followed by an interview with a candidate back in the studio counted as two news items. An average visibility index is calculated for each politician ranging from 0 to 4 for broadcast media, newspapers and blogs. Mentions of a politician were not counted if they were listed as ‘also running’ or listed as ‘other’ candidates with no substantive commentary attached. Given the microblogging form of tweets the position of candidates’ names in the tweet is not seen as important as it is in an article or blog therefore to measure visibility on social media the numbers of tweets mentioning the politician are counted.

*Novelty Framing*

In line with the coding scheme, mentions of candidate sex were collated. Thematic analysis was undertaken analysing if mentions of women’s sex placed them in the ‘novelty’ frame where women are presented as ‘first woman’ and their sex is used as a primary descriptor (Gidengil and Everitt 2003; Ross 2010). The inductive thematic analysis identified an emergent theme that male candidates’ sex was also mentioned. These instances were collated and further analyis undertaken to identify the patterns in how male sex was discussed.

*Masculine Metaphors*

Instances of battle or sports imagery were counted and coded according to if they were applied to (i) male candidates only, (ii) female candidates only, (iii) both sexes or the overall contest.

**3. Results**

**3.1 Visibility**

The visibility scores for each candidate can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. Mean Visibility by Candidate**

**[Table 1 about here]**

Against expectations, there was a sex gap in coverage which saw the female candidates as less visible than their male counterparts. Beyond any doubt, Jeremy Corbyn dominated the coverage. Twice as many items mentioned him, compared with either female candidate and over one and a half times mentioned Corbyn compared with his male competitor, Andy Burnham. Much of this is due to his unexpected and unprecedented victory. Corbyn won the contest despite being from the far left-wing of the party, never having held political office before and, reluctantly, running primarily to widen the political debate on the left. Even when considering Corbyn’s success, however, a sex gap in visibility can be seen. Table 1 shows how the viable female candidate, Yvette Cooper, had a visibility score more in line with her less viable female colleague, Liz Kendall, rather than her logical male counterpart, Andy Burnham.

The two female candidates’ visibility scores were close across media types with a slightly larger gap on social media with Kendall’s share of all tweets 3.8 percentage points higher than Cooper’s. Nevertheless, both women’s mean visibility was lower than Burnham’s with a persistent gap of around 0.3 in broadcast, blogs and newspapers. Hayes and Lawless (2016) suggest the media is becoming more equitable in its coverage with differences better explained by electoral competitiveness and incumbency rather than sex. Burnham’s higher visibility could be explained by his electoral competitiveness as he was considered the likely winner of the contest from the outset and the best candidate to beat the Corbyn surge. However, Cooper and Burnham had comparable previous ideological, party and ministerial experience. They were from a similar wing of the party, were both senior figures in previous governments, and had both served in Cabinet. At the beginning of the campaign Cooper was Burnham’s closest rival and, as noted above, the election result was by no means a foregone conclusion. Yet, Cooper’s coverage was more in line with Kendall, the less viable candidate, as a relatively new MP, elected only five years previously, and who had only served in junior shadow ministerial roles.

**Figure 1. Total Candidate Visibility by Month**[[5]](#footnote-5)

[figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 examines the mean visibilty of candidates across time in the campaign. It confirms, to some extent, the visibility pattern seen in Table 1. Sex appears to be a stronger driver of visibility than electoral competitiveness or political experience as the viable female candidate, Yvette Cooper, saw her visibility to be closer to, or less than her less viable female colleague, Liz Kendall, for the first three months of the campaign, rather than her logical male competitor. The narrow gap between Burnham and Cooper was consistent and statistically significant across the campaign although it did narrow and was non-significant in the final days in September. The closeness in the women’s overall visibility seen in Table 1 varied slightly across the campaign. The ‘novelty’ of Kendall as a lesser-known candidate may have awarded her more coverage at the start with Kendall’s visibility higher than Cooper’s in May. It is not until the last six weeks, when the chances of Liz Kendall winning were very slim, that a larger gap opens between the two women and for two of the five months in the campaign (May and July) the less viable female candidate was more visible.

**Figure 2. Average Tweets per Day by Month**

[Figure 2 here]

The average number of tweets per day each month showed a very similar pattern (Figure 2)[[6]](#footnote-6). Although no claims of significance can be made here, a persistent gap between Burnham and Cooper can be seen until the last few weeks of the campaign in September.

**3.2 Masculine Metaphors: Conflict and Competition[[7]](#footnote-7)**

Masculine metaphors, in the form of sports and battle imagery, were common and were less frequently applied to women. Overall, 30% of all news items contained such imagery. Over one in ten (14.5%) news items contained battle imagery; the contest was “a battle for the heart and soul” of the Labour Party with candidates “at war”[[8]](#footnote-8) over welfare policy. Statements containing such imagery were applied most frequently to men on their own (53.9%), closely followed by statements about both sexes or the overall contest (26.7%). Only 17.7% of these statements applied to women on their own consistent with the idea that women do not belong on the battlefield of politics (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). Sports imagery was also common: Corbyn was heading for a “knockout victory”[[9]](#footnote-9) in the polls and Cooper “scores plenty of runs”[[10]](#footnote-10) in a Parliamentary debate (referring to cricket). Within this sports imagery, presenting the contest as a horse race was most common as candidates were ‘bookie’s favourites’ and ‘outsiders’; only 7.8% of such statements referred to women on their own compared to 62.7% which referred to men only, reinforcing yet again, that women are not part of the ‘game’ of politics.

**3.3 Use of Candidate Sex**

**(1) First Women**

In line with empirical expectations, the media’s mentions of the female candidates’ sex framed them as a novelty. In contrast, mentions of the male candidates’ sex placed them firmly within the masculine sphere of politics. Several types of masculinity were identified in the coverage, discussed further below; Andy Burnham represented a version of traditional masculinity, although with some ‘new man’ elements, and for both men their sex showed relatability and a type of ‘male communality’.

There is complex interplay between media framing and candidates’ strategy and at times it can be difficult to disentangle from which the resultant framing derives. Although this paper cannot speak directly to candidates’ conscious use of gender, initial insights into their self-presentation is provided, for instance in candidates’ direct quotes and campaign ads discussed in the coverage. The media, supporters of the leadership candidates, and candidates themselves differentiated the candidates on the basis of biological sex. Firstly, let’s consider the female candidates.

*Candidates:* Both women, but especially Cooper, used this ‘historic opportunity’ as a selling point in her campaign. Cooper argued that electing the first woman would be more radical for the party than electing “white men”[[11]](#footnote-11) she was quoted rallying support by stating, “David Cameron has a woman problem, let’s give him an even bigger one. Let’s elect Labour’s first woman prime minister”[[12]](#footnote-12).

*Candidates’ supporters*: Supporters of female candidates mentioned the women’s sex. Senior Labour figure, Alan Johnson endorsed Cooper by saying, “After over a century of male leaders we have an election where the most qualified candidate … happens to be a woman”[[13]](#footnote-13). Johnson sought to counter potential accusations of tokenism here – Cooper “happens to be a woman” – this was seen in other supportive statements mentioning the women’s sex in the media.

*The media:* Labour’s potential to elect its first woman leader was ultimately seen as positive. *The Daily Mirror* observed Cooper and Kendall “have fought tough campaigns and would have broken the Labour mould as female leaders”[[14]](#footnote-14) and a LabourList blogger noted, “It is simply unacceptable that our party has never elected a woman to be our leader. We need to fix that now.”[[15]](#footnote-15) *The Daily Telegraph*, noted Kendall “like Margaret Thatcher” is a “grammar-school girl ... who got where she is by her own efforts”[[16]](#footnote-16). There were negative suggestions of tokenism, it was said of the women, “their gender is the best thing going for [them] both”[[17]](#footnote-17) But, ultimately the women’s sex was represented as an asset as Labour needed a woman leader – “choosing a woman as the next party leader would be a good start”[[18]](#footnote-18) – and a female leader would give Labour an advantage over the Conservatives – “a Kendall leadership could seriously spook the Government. Cameron is vulnerable to the Women Question”[[19]](#footnote-19).

The women were not the only novelty in this contest. Jeremy Corbyn was also a novelty. He was not a break from the male domination of politics, as a woman might be, but represented an anti-Westminster movement against the stereotypical smooth, career politician. He presented “a very different type of politics”[[20]](#footnote-20) and a “unique style [not] typical of a modern-day politician”[[21]](#footnote-21). Corbyn was thus presented as somewhat of a maverick from the fringe left-wing of the party and was often described as such, “a rebel on the brink of becoming leader”[[22]](#footnote-22). This novelty framing was not always positive, especially in the right-wing newspapers and blogs where Corbyn was the “loopy Left-winger”[[23]](#footnote-23). An association of Corbyn with madness was a consistent frame used against him.

**(2) Decent Blokes**

By examining representations of men and masculinity as well as women and femininity this paper shows that explicit mentions of sex were not limited to female candidates but were also seen for the male candidates. In contrast to the women as outsiders, these mentions worked to place the men inside the masculine sphere of leadership. An examination of these mentions reveals the types of masculinity that were portrayed in this campaign. For both male candidates, a type of communal masculinity was seen. For Andy Burnham this was more rooted in traditional masculinity, although with some elements of ‘new man’.

Jeremy Corbyn was framed as the ‘honourable man’, and it was often *man*. The framing was for the most part positive, Corbyn was a “palpably decent man standing up for the underdog … [a] plainly principled chap”[[24]](#footnote-24), and an “ideologically pure man of honour”[[25]](#footnote-25). However, this also played against Corbyn as being principled and honest was not enough, “Corbyn, saintly and decent man that he is, was likely to be unelectable”[[26]](#footnote-26). The honourable man frame applied to discussions of Corbyn’s appearance. He was an unexpected Lothario and the housewife’s guilty crush when it was revealed that users of the popular parenting blog Mumsnet found him surprisingly sexy. His appeal was related to his principles and passion, and his masculinity was retained in the discussions as he was attractive in a “’weary, old sea dog’ kind of way”[[27]](#footnote-27). Daily Mail columnist Sarah Vine, summed up the phenomenon, “Put crudely, Corbyn may be 50 shades of beige pensioner; but when you see him up on that stage, alive with revolutionary zeal, you just know he'd be ten times better in bed than poor old [Ed] Miliband”[[28]](#footnote-28).

An intra-sex comparison of the framing of the male candidates found communality a consistent theme in mentions of the male candidates’ sex. Usually stereotyped as a ‘feminine’ trait, this relates to ideas of the ‘new man’ in politics – where compassion is a component (MacKinnon 2003; A. Smith 2016). However, for Andy Burnham compassion was framed within a traditional type of masculinity – a ‘decent bloke’ – most clearly seen in the use of sport.

Firstly, descriptions of Corbyn’s heartfelt politics: his “human and generous-minded politics [was] an antidote to never-ending austerity”[[29]](#footnote-29). This compassion and gentleness were on occasion devalued as Corbyn’s ‘nice guy’ image was questioned and derided, in particular the right-wing blog Guido Fawkes ridiculed ‘Cuddly Corbyn’, contrasting his compassionate image with perceived extreme policy positions. Elsewhere, the fact that Corbyn was a ‘nice guy’ worked to qualify disagreement with him – Labour heavyweight John Prescott pointed out, “I'm sure Jeremy Corbyn is a lovely, great principled man, and by all accounts is a very, very nice man, but I don't think he can win in places like this [place].”[[30]](#footnote-30) As with the honourable man frame it was notable again that Corbyn was explicitly a ‘nice *guy*’ as his sex was often explicitly referenced in relation to his compassion.

In comparison, the second male candidate, Andy Burnham, was presented in a more traditional frame of working-class masculinity, including criticism of this imagery given his career had mainly been in politics and the revelation he wore Armani suits. Burnham was the ‘decent bloke’. His relatability was grounded in representations of his gender. As with explicit mentions of the women’s sex this was seen both in the candidate’s self-representations and the media’s framing.

*Candidate:* Burnham stressed his Liverpool roots by giving interviews from his childhood home and pledging to retain his season ticket for the local football club if he became Prime Minister. A campaign strategy that was grounded in his masculinity, Burnham said he was “a Labour man, through and through”[[31]](#footnote-31) (and tweeted song lyrics “I’m only a paperboy from the north-west, but I can scrub up well in my Sunday best”[[32]](#footnote-32)). Sport played a significant part in this strategy with Burnham saying he wouldn’t want to be leader if it meant missing a football match played by his local team. Burnham’s masculinity did include some elements of ‘new man’ femininity however as he gave interviews from his family home – in part to show his local roots – and one campaign video featured him baking with his daughters.

*Media:* The media picked up on this image, Burnham was framed as the decent, ordinary bloke; he was a “working-class lad”[[33]](#footnote-33) who “understands the everyday issues facing Mirror readers”[[34]](#footnote-34). The ‘everyman’ who a retired football player described as “top blue and top guy”[[35]](#footnote-35).

 **(3) Relatable Women?**

Female candidates’ relatability was on occasion grounded in their gender. For Yvette Cooper this focused on her family life. Helen Goodman MP, a supporter of Cooper’s, said she was voting for Cooper because “as a working mum she understands the pressures on modern family life”[[36]](#footnote-36). Furthermore, she was represented as a ‘how-does-she-do-it’ woman with friends commenting she was “all too human”[[37]](#footnote-37) as she dashed out of meetings to get sports kit to her children[[38]](#footnote-38). For Kendall, her appearance and femininity made her relatable, a “cheerful inhabitant [of Westminster] … usually happy to stop for a natter”[[39]](#footnote-39), Kendall was presented as a kind of ‘cool schoolgirl’, “something of a teenage rebel” who a close friend recalls “sunbathing on the college roof, listening to Wham!”[[40]](#footnote-40). It was said, “most of us went to school with a girl like her”[[41]](#footnote-41). These representations were intermittent and less common than the masculine framings of Corbyn and Burnham as the ‘nice guy’, ‘decent bloke’ and ‘honourable man’.

**4. Discussion**

An inter- and intra-sex comparison of the media framing of leadership candidates in a UK party leadership campaign in this paper not only finds leadership remains gendered but demonstrates that it is gendered for *both men and women*. It makes several contributions to current understandings. Firstly, whilst intermittent work on gender media representations has been undertaken in the UK to date there remains a lack of a systematic inter- and intra-sex analysis as offered in this paper. Second, by considering *both* femininity and masculinity in the news framing of *both* men and women candidates, it sheds further light on the gendering of political leadership and questions are begged on problematizing the conceptions and performance of masculinity by men in leadership.

The framings of candidates by the media, and arguably the campaign strategies of candidates themselves, constructed an insider/outsider frame where women were outsiders in the masculine sphere of politics whilst men were placed on the inside. Potentially, bias in media coverage in this way presents a barrier for women who continue to be under-represented in the higher echelons of party leadership. Three main findings contributed to this insider/outsider frame. First, the empirical results demonstrated how masculine images and language perpetrate the masculinity of politics and place women as outsiders (Gidengil and Everitt 2003; Trimble 2017). Sports or military metaphors were consistently used in the coverage (featured in 30% of all news items). Although Trimble suggests the representations of women on the ‘battlefield’ of politics could work to disrupt the public man/private woman dichotomy, that this language was consistently used less frequently towards women compared to men clearly worked to place women on the outskirts of the battlefield. Trimble’s optimism was not upheld in this particular case.

Second, as outsiders, the novelty of women can increase their visibility in campaigns. However, this was not the case for the media coverage examined in this paper. There was a sex gap in the visibility of candidates which could not be explained by electoral competitiveness as some recent US work suggests (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Across broadcast, newspaper and blog coverage, women were consistently less visible than men. The competitive female candidate found her visibility to be at the same level as (and sometimes lower than) her less experienced, more electorally unviable female colleague as opposed to her more logical male counterpart.

Third, explicit mentions of candidate sex framed women as novelties and men as members of the masculinized political sphere. The novelty/difference frame contends that women are portrayed as a novelty in politics, not just politician but *woman* politician (Ross 2010). Whereas further evidence for this frame was seen in the 2015 UK Labour Party leadership campaign, explicit mentions of sex were not limited to female candidates, male candidates also saw their sex mentioned. Completing an inter-sex comparison shed further light on the insider/outsider dichotomy. It was not just that women were outsiders but men were presented as insiders, the media framing reinforced ideas of masculine political leadership: language suggested that the male candidates were ‘one of the boys’. This was especially in the use of sports imagery to illustrate the ‘decent bloke’ frame. Explicit references to the men’s sex indicated their membership of the masculinized political sphere. For male candidates, their sex seemingly stood in for their relatability they were the ‘nice guy’ and the ‘decent bloke’.

In contrast to Conroy’s (2015) gender conflict framing in US presidential races, in this contest the representations of masculinity were less of the competitive type of who was ‘man enough’, i.e. ‘tough enough’, to become leader. Rather, there was a communal aspect to their masculinity, with relatability of the male candidates implied through the types of masculinity they represented. Contextual differences between US and UK political leadership could be relevant here, emphasising the need to consider findings from this mainly US-based literature on gender and political leadership in alternative contexts. The US presidency has a more militarised, masculine history (Conroy 2015; Heldman, Conroy, and Ackerman 2018) whereas prime ministerial systems are thought more beneficial for ‘feminine’ leadership styles and women’s chances of gaining high office (Jalalzai 2013). Perhaps this also affects the types of masculinity we are seeing; do more communal types of masculinity present more readily in prime ministerial systems? It should also be considered that Conroy’s findings relate to male only races. Indeed, the presence of female candidates arguably tempers the likelihood of inter-candidate competition over ‘manliness’, although Conroy does note that women also often try to present as most ‘masculine’ in political races.

*Playing the Gender Card: Candidate Self-Presentation*

Although the interplay between candidates’ strategy and media framing can be difficult to disentangle, the direct quotes candidates gave to media outlets and their campaign ads discussed in the coverage gave initial insight into how the candidates themselves use gender in campaigning. That one of the female candidates in the race used her sex explicitly to differentiate herself from her male opponents implies the ‘playing the gender card’ critique which is often levelled against women candidates. In particular, parallels are seen to Hillary Clinton in 2016 – Clinton based some campaign tactics on the historic nature of her campaign with the slogan ‘I’m with her’. In both the Clinton and the UK case, an establishment woman (Cooper) was facing an anti-establishment male candidate (Trump and Corbyn respectively) who was building momentum and represented a significant risk to the woman’s chances. These parallels across the UK and US context prompt new research questions about *when* and *how* women use their sex in campaigning, and to what effect. And what difference does it make if there is the presence of another ‘novelty’, in both cases, in the form of an anti-establishment male candidate? Does it increase the likelihood for women centring their campaign on their sex? Evidence from the US suggests the ‘gender card’ may be effective but is dependent on voters having low levels of sexism (Caughell 2016), similarly women are often attacked for playing the gender card (Cassese and Holman 2019; Johnson 2015) the effect of such attacks on voting for candidates is again dependent on the type and level of sexism of voters (Cassese and Holman 2019).

Yet, in reality, all candidates ‘play the gender card’ as they navigate the gendered norms of leadership (CAWP 2016). The 2015 Labour Party leadership election supports this contention in the explicit use of gender by the male candidates, which was more overt for one male candidate, Andy Burnham, than his male competitor, Jeremy Corbyn. Such differences raise similar questions as to when male candidates ‘play the gender card’, and when it may be beneficial for them to do so?

**5. Conclusion**

Gendering of political leadership – as seen in this UK case study – suggests nuanced gendered frames were applied to both *men and women* against the backdrop of a wider framing of politics as a masculinized sphere. Previous scholarly work on media representations of gender and political leadership has primarily focused on female politicians. This analysis has demonstrated how gendered framing was also applied to men, working to reinforce the complexity in gendered ideas of leadership. The language used and the gendered framing of the candidates of both sexes, by the media and in candidates’ own campaign strategies, reiterated the gendering of an insider/outsider status with women represented as ‘space invaders’ in the masculine realm of politics. Furthermore, both men and women appeared to ‘play the gender card’ when negotiating the gendered norms of leadership, using their gender in their campaign imagery. Unable to speak directly to questions of the conscious use of gender in campaigning and the possible effect of this on voters, this is a clear future area for research. Not only can men and masculinity be brought further into the scholarship, gender is most usefully conceived as multifaceted for both men and women. There is much more research to be undertaken, with masculinities often under-theorized in a binary approach to gender. The ‘masculine norm’ of the political leader invites greater theoretical and empirical reconsideration, without which only a limited understanding of masculinity and political leadership will be achieved.

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**Figures and Tables**

**Table 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Mean Visibility Index |  |  |
|   | Politician | Total (exc. Social Media) | Broadcast | Newspaper | Blog | Social Media N (% of all tweets) | Total N News Items\* |
| Male | *Andy Burnham* | 1.12 (1.37) | 1.08(1.37) | 1.11(1.4) | 1.18(1.29) | 468(21.8%) | 1,551 |
| *Jeremy Corbyn* | 2.07(1.48) | 2.31(1.28) | 2.12(1.49) | 1.86(1.45) | 957(44.7%) | 2,486 |
| Female | *Yvette Cooper* | 0.81(1.22) | 0.79 (1.19) | 0.78(1.22) | 0.89(1.23) | 272(12.7%) | 1,211 |
| *Liz Kendall* | 0.77(1.19) | 0.76(1.13) | 0.69(1.16) | 1.0(1.26) | 353(16.5%) | 1,272 |
| *N=4,145, Standard deviation for visibility indexes in parentheses.* *\*Some news items counted twice, i.e. mentioned more than one candidate.* |

Figure 1



Figure 2



**Appendix 1. Twitter Accounts Analysed**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Journalist*** | ***Position*** | ***Publication*** |
| Patrick Wintour | Political Editor | *The Guardian* |
| Christopher Hope | Chief Political Correspondent | *The Daily Telegraph* |
| Michael Savage | Chief Political Correspondent | *The Times* |
| John Rentoul | Chief Political Commentator | *The Independent* |
| Jason Groves | Deputy Political Editor | *The Daily Mail* |
| N/A | N/A | *Daily Express* |
| Craig Woodhouse | Chief Political Correspondent | *The Sun* |
| Ben Glaze | Chief Political Correspondent | *Daily Mirror* |
| Norman Smith | Assistant Political Editor | *BBC News* |
| Chris Ship | Deputy Political Editor | *ITV* |
| Michael Crick | Political Correspondent | *Channel 4* |
| Mark Wallace | Editor | *ConservativeHome* |
| Conor Pope | Acting Editor | *Labour List* |
| Guido Fawkes | Main Twitter Account | *Guido Fawkes* |
| Atul Hatwel | Editor | *Labour Uncut* |

**Word count: 8850**

**Date of submission: 16/09/2020**

1. Analysis is limited to the candidates who contested the whole election. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Given news outlets Twitter feeds are mainly factual with links to articles, personal twitter accounts of relevant politicos were examined. Originally it was planned to use political editors’ tweets however an investigation of broadcast and newspaper political editors’ feeds found they were infrequent tweeters. Therefore, tweets from the broadcast or newspapers’ chief political correspondents or deputy editors were collected dependent on the correspondent covering the election. These are senior journalists who were ‘on the ground’, providing more data for analysis as they were more frequent tweeters. Given blogs’ smaller teams political editors’ Twitter feeds were analysed, except for Guido Fawkes which uses its main Twitter handle for opinionated, journalistic-style tweets and whose editor only tweets in a personal capacity. Appendix 1 lists Twitter accounts analysed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alternative methods rely on the Twitter API and therefore would recover only a selection of tweets. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Based on Trimble (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Average visibility score of broadcast, newspaper and blogs (excludes social media). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Average tweets per day used instead of total tweets each month to account for May and September having a smaller sample of days as the campaign began mid-May and ended in Mid-September. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In proceeding sections analysis was undertaken on all media forms. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 'Parties civil war over spending record', *Daily Mail*, 15/05/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 'The longer Brown spoke the punier the candidates looked', *The Daily Telegraph*, 17/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 'Elfin Yvette has given her flat vowels a dab of polish', *Daily Mail*, 29/05/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 'Smash our glass ceiling, says Cooper', *The Daily Telegraph*, 14/08/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Channel 4 News at 7pm. *13/05/2015.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 'Corbyn madness has got to stop, Alan Johnson tells Labour', *Daily Mail*, 05/08/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 'Experience, passion and principle: PM in waiting..', *Daily Mirror*, 14/08/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 'Community union backs Yvette Cooper and Caroline Flint in leadership races', *LabourList*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 'Labour in turmoil as it tries to prophesy its future from its past', *The Guardian*, 19/05/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 'Harriet's the best man for Labour', *Daily Mail*, 15/06/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 'Winning the women: Yvette Cooper has spotted where Labour's hope lies', *The Independent*, 26/05/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 'Labour Liz has style and substance... and not a hope in hell of becoming leader', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Channel 4 News at 7pm. *10/09/2015* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. BBC Six O'Clock News. *26/08/2015* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Channel 4 News at 7pm. *09/09/2015* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 'So, Sir Kevin, who watches the watchers?', *Daily Mail*, 22/06/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 'Lovable man of principle? No, Corbyn's spent 30 years embracing the world's most repellant monsters', *Daily Mail*, 20/08/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 'You decide who takes on Tories', *Daily Mirror*, 12/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 'My fictional PM was destabilised by MI5. Corbyn's enemies would be in his own ranks.', *The Guardian*, 11/08/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 'Blair: Corbyn would put Labour in the wilderness', *Daily Mail*, 23/07/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 'Why are women hot for sex pot trot?', *Daily Mail*, 11/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 'Tony Blair versus Corbyn: What the newspapers say', *The Guardian*, 23/07/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Channel 4 News at 7pm. *09/09/2015* [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. BBC Six O'Click News. *15/06/2015* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. 'Hague gets a dressing down', *The Times*, 05/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. 'Burnham Parents: Why Andy's right for Labour', *Daily Mirror*, 03/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 'Experience, passion and principle: PM in waiting..', *Daily Mirror*, 14/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. 'Andy Burnham: 'I've never been part of the Westminster in-crowd'', *The Guardian*, 11/08/2015, ‘Top blue’ refers to loyal and longstanding supporters of Burnham’s local football team, Everton FC. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. 'Yvette Cooper profile', *The Guardian*, 13/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 'Yvette Cooper profile'', *The Guardian*, 13/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For further analysis see Smith 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. 'Liz Kendall Interview: 'We have got to face up to the catastrophe'', *The Guardian*, 18/05/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. 'Liz Kendall profile'', *The Guardian*, 13/08/2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. 'Labour Liz has style and substance... and not a hope in hell of becoming leader', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19/08/2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)