Online Cultural Backlash? Sexism and Political User Generated Content

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This version is the accepted manuscript of: Inguanzo, I., Zhang, B., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2021). Online cultural backlash? sexism and political user-generated content. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(14), 2133–2152. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1962940

Abstract

Prior research highlights substantial beneficial effects of political user generated content (UGC) in society, such as diversifying political viewpoints, mobilizing the electorate, and fostering citizens' civic engagement. However, important user asymmetries exist when creating political content. Gender, age, media uses, and skills gaps have been identified as key variables predicting UGC. This study addressed the political UGC gender gap from a political perspective. We build on previous theory about feminist media studies, political polarization, and cultural backlash theory to disentangle whether hostile sexism predicts UGC creation. Drawing on an online survey data from four well-established democracies, we find that those individuals holding hostile sexist views are more likely to generate political content online. Further implications for democracy and the role of women in the digital sphere are discussed.

Keywords: user generated content; sexism; polarization; cultural backlash; gender gap

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Previous literature on digital content creation suggest that women are less likely than men to create and share certain types of online content, which is in part due to media and technological skills gaps (Bode, 2017; Hargittai & Shaw, 2015). Even when women do raise their voices in the digital sphere, they are at times confronted with offensive comments, harassment, and hostile sexism (Chen et al., 2020; Searles, Spencer, & Duru, 2020; Sobieraj, 2018). It is unclear whether women's participation in online content creation is deterred precisely by this hostile and sexist digital entourage, or whether sexism play a part in men and women's likelihood to produce online political content, thus contributing to the gender gap in UGC. Indeed, to our knowledge, no study has yet explored the role of sexism as an important individual antecedent predicting online political content creation. Does hostile sexism influence UGC creation? And if so, how?

To answer these questions, we build up on three strains of research: 1) feminist media studies 2) political polarization, and 3) the cultural backlash thesis. We argue that since gender equality and women' rights have become a salient issue both in the public and the political agenda, certain politized individuals might want to share their own views on the topic. But who is creating and sharing more online content? Those who are more polarized on gender issues or just those with more hostile sexist views? The literature suggests two competing hypotheses to answer this question

Drawing on polarization literature, we should expect that ideologically divergent individuals, and those polarized over gender equality, should produce more online political content. Alternatively, and following the literature on cultural backlash, traditionalist and sexist individuals might be perceiving a strong bias towards gender equality in society institutions, media, and elites. Since these individuals do not find confirmatory news or messages for their prior beliefs on mainstream media, and political institutions, they have more incentives to search and create new content online aligned with their sexist attitudes.

The present study aims at solving this puzzle by relying on online survey data from four countries - Germany, Spain, UK and USA, which have undergone processes of polarization and cultural backlash, and share similar levels of quality of democracy, gender equality and human development. Overall, findings suggest that in Western democracies ideological polarization is not directly related to UGC creation. In contrast, and while we find some support for polarization over sexism and UGC creation, sexist attitudes *per se* are a more robust predictor of online political content creation, lending support to a deleterious linear association between unfavorable attitudes towards women and their political role in the digital sphere.

Literature Review

Contemporary technologies provide broader channels and opportunities for citizens to generate news content which blurs the boundaries between news consumption and news production (Dylko & Mccluskey, 2012; Garret, Bimber et al, 2012), especially when it comes to online news. Prosumers of news are known as user generated content (UGC) creators (Holton et al., 2013). Broadly speaking, any practice of producing and circulating content related to public affairs and news may be regarded as *political* UGC.

But who is creating and disseminating this online content? Are all segments from society equally participating in the creation of political UGC?

Interestingly, research has consistently found differences across demographics regarding UGC creation and sharing (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2018). Men are usually more engaged in political content creation than women, which is reflected on studies showing that the blogosphere is dominated by male-created content (Meraz, 2008; Wall, 2015), and that the gender gap may be bigger in platforms with weak-tie networks (Koc-Michalska et al., 2021). According to this well-established literature, we expect:

H1: Women will generate less political UGC.

Some authors have explained this UGC gender gap based on internet and technological skills (Hargittai & Shaw, 2015). Others, according to socialization theory, suggest this might be due to women engaging in less visible political activities, and then abiding with patriarchal norms that keep women away from the public space (Bode, 2017; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). In the present research, we approach this gender gap on political UGC by looking at its potential political antecedents. We contend that differences in UGC creation might be the result of different processes of polarization between men and women over ideology (Harteveld et al., 2019) and sexism (Kunst et al., 2019). While polarization can be approached through different dimensions and measures (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996) here we adhere to Layman et al. (2006) and we consider polarization as the increasing distance between the poles of one or more policy dimensions. Empirically, this is usually measured by capturing the absolute distance to the average position (Thomsen, 2014; Wagner, 2021).

Ideological Polarization & UGC Creation

One of the most well-known gender differences in political behavior is voting. The literature on political science has stablished that men are more likely to vote for

radical parties while women vote for more moderate ones (Harteveld et al., 2019). However, it is unclear whether these differences in party preferences reflect different ideological positions or different political motivations (Harteveld & Ivarsflaten, 2018). Alike voting, the relationship between individual ideological polarization and political UGC creation is also contested. For instance, while men are more likely to share UGC from populist parties as compared to women, gender differences were not significant between radical and moderate parties (Bobba et al., 2018). Conversely, recent studies have shown that grassroot party activists, from new parties with more radical ideologies, are over-represented when it comes to create and share online content on social media (Koiranen et al., 2020; Lobera & Portos, 2020). Others suggest that new digital media and people's news platform preferences fuel political engagement, and ideological binaries fostered by populist actors (Rensmann, 2017; Bachmann & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). But why would these radical parties' supporters be more likely to engage in UCG creation? Here, explanations from the supply and demand side provide different responses.

On the one hand, from the supply side, alternative online news sites have been showed to be partisan and niche-oriented instead of balanced and mass public oriented (Baum & Groeling, 2008), which may reflect that online prosumers have incentives to create and disseminate partisan online content among audiences that are small but loyal. Coupled with users' selective exposure (Garrett, 2009), homogenous group discussions, (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017), and online echo-chambers where trench warfare dynamics take place (Karlsen et al., 2017), individuals reinforce their previous attitudes and ideological positions. The result would be a vicious cycle between polarization, consumption and creation of online partisan content. Additionally, internet and social media lower entry barriers for new and ideologically extremer parties and opinion

leaders, who were previously marginalized by mainstream media editorial filters (Hopster, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga, Koc-Michalska & Römmele, 2020). Therefore, internet incentivizes polarized individuals to offer ideologically polarized content to the digital audience.

On the other hand, an ideologically polarized environment increases the demand of ideologically polarized content. In the age of populism, ideologically polarized individuals are more skeptics towards traditional media (Krämer, 2017). In turn, media skeptics and political cynics are less likely to actively seek traditional news (Song et al., 2020), and more likely to trust citizen media news as opposed to traditional media (Carr et al., 2014). Indeed, more polarized and fragmented audiences are less likely to think professional news editors perform well in selecting news publication (Steppat et al., 2020), and while trust in traditional media does not directly predict the creation and sharing of UGC, trust in citizen and social media news is positively associated with UGC (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2018).

A joint observation of the arguments displayed above makes us believe that ideologically radical positions will be positively associated to UCG creation. More formally:

H2: Ideological polarization is positively associated with political UGC creation.

The Saliency of Gender Issues

Although we expect a general connection between ideological radicalism and UGC, individuals' political ideology is composed of diverse preferences on different issues, and not all issues are equally salient across groups (Layman et al., 2006). It reasonable to expect that as gender issues become more salient and polarized, they will influence the generation and dissemination of online UGC.

Throughout the 20th century, the world has witnessed a flexibilization of traditional gender roles, and also a gender equality improvement across fields such as health, education, job market and career opportunities, and politics. Although usually at different rate across regions, this trend is linked to changes in cultural attitudes, generally towards a greater support of gender equality (Inglehart & Norris, 2001; Inglehart et al., 2002). In parallel, post-materialist social movements and parties have brought to a public political agenda issues related to environmental concerns, human rights, economic redistribution, minorities civil rights, and also gender equality (Offe, 1985). Mainstream media has also engaged in certain attempts to improve media coverage and perspectives of women issues (Minic, 2008), paving the way to policies promoting gender equality such as affirmative action programs (Beloshitzkaya, 2020).

As a result, differences between men and women on sexism are relatively constant but in general moving towards a liberal-egalitarian direction (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Clark, 2017). Successive waves of feminist movements have render other women more feminist. Feminist women in turn, have resulted increasingly empowered, and are willing to politically participate both offline and online (Heger & Hoffmann, 2019).

In response, traditionalists, perceiving a threat to their values and status, which were once predominant, have responded negatively to these advancements, in what has been called a cultural backlash (Norris & Inglehart, 2018). Studies indicate that while general support for gender equality has increased over past decades, gaps in support of gender equality are increasing between men and women. For example, men socialized after the third wave of feminism -when conventional wisdom suggested that gender equality was on the verge to be achieved- show higher level of gender resentment (Jennings, 2006). As a result, some studies have found that hostile sexism – defined as

negative attitudes towards gender equality -- not only predicts increased levels of political participation in opposition to female candidates (Cassese & Holman, 2019), but also predicts increased levels of online political expression in opposition to online feminist campaigns (Benton-Greig et al., 2018; Kunst et al., 2019).

Therefore, the literature agrees the current polarization over gender equality is a product of a cultural backlash process under the auspices of populism success and radical political parties. However, less is known about how this polarization translated into the online public sphere and UGC creation.

Competing Hypotheses for the Sexism and UGC Relationship

Although feminist movements and cultural backlash trends have cohabited for decades, they are becoming electorally relevant in recent times (Norris & Inglehart, 2018). If we focus on the virtual sphere, the accounts collected in the above sections should lead us to think that those on both extreme poles of sexism might be more active UGC creators. For example, the landmark judicial case of "*La Manada*" in Spain led to a massive digital response both from feminist and anti-feminist positions (Idoiaga-Mondragon et al., 2019).Throughout the internet, people aligned with feminist and anti-feminist perspectives, becoming more vocal on issues related to gender. We can easily find examples of digital feminist activism across the board – #MeToo (Ringrose & Lawrence, 2018), as well as the emergence of the manosphere, a digital anti-feminist activist sphere, that has grown into the 'dominant arena for the communication of men's rights in Western culture' (Ging, 2019). In short, gender equality is far from being an uncontested issue in the digital sphere. These recent developments suggest that polarization over specific issues, specifically gender equality, may predict online UGC.

H3: Holding extreme attitudes towards sexism will be positively associated to UGC creation (U-shaped relationship)

H3a: Non-sexist views will be positively associated to UCG creation

H3b: Hostile sexist views will be positively associated to UGC creation

However, it is also possible that this is not a story of a balanced relationship. Radical traditionalist groups and individuals are increasingly taking advantage of the UGC tools to circulate their ideological precepts (Krämer, 2017; Rensmann, 2017), such as white supremacy (Adams & Roscigno, 2005) or hostile sexism (García-Favaro & Gill, 2016). Since most research that identifies and analyzes online traditional-authoritarian UGC is based on content and text analysis, the extension of traditional content throughout the internet remains unclear. It could be that nowadays sexist and non-sexist individuals are both actively creating more UGC than before, or it could be that today sexist individuals are creating more online UGC than non-sexist individuals.

While nostalgia of traditional values and old social structures among certain sectors of Western societies can be traced back to the seventies (Inglehart, 1990), it also true that the cultural backlash has been reinvigorated due to the emergence of radical right parties and movements (Inglehart, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2018). Today, whenever mainstream, alternative media, or even politicians take up the issue of gender equality, it tends to be framed by radical right supporters as a 'gender ideology' (Kováts, 2018). Indeed, radical right members often condemn mainstream media as well as social media for marginalizing their conservative voices (Knüpfer et al., 2020; Lawson, 2018).

Previous studies have shown how the cultural backlash and social resentment, has been able to mobilize individuals through digital networks, fostering different forms of political behavior including protest, party activism and voting (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011). We contend that following the cultural backlash theory, people who feel cultural and social grievances as a result of a more globalized, liberal and post-

materialist public sphere (Sandel, 2018) will have more incentives to express themselves online, through the creation of new UGC. To the extent they perceive their grievances are being silenced by a biased traditional media they have greater supply and demand incentives to create their own content online (Rensmann, 2017). As mentioned before, it is particularly in the digital sphere where their cultural grievances easily resonate in online echo-chambers and homogenous audience discussions, and they feel heard and understood by their peers. Extreme forms of this pattern could explain online radical right movements such as alt-right online communities (Ganesh, 2020), or the infamous *incel* movement (Hoffman, Ware, & Shapiro, 2020).

However, although there is a strong connection between hostile sexism, old traditionalist and radical right supporters, the gender divide is somehow transversal. First, the gender equality issue is not equally salient for all conservatives, and not all self-identified as conservatives hold sexist views. Similarly, people self-identified as progressives can still hold sexist views (Utych, 2020). Second, sexism is a different dimension, and it has its own politically mobilizing capacity regardless the general ideology of the individuals. For example, previous studies have shown that hostile sexism has been able to politically mobilize electors towards particular party options (Valentino, Wayne, & Oceno, 2018) or policy options (Green & Shorrocks, 2021). So, Finally, certain political parties in the radical right have raised speeches of pretended gender equality as a strategy to oppose migration or to attack ethnic minorities (Moffit, 2017; Vochocová, 2021). So, stronger sexist views on gender roles might have an independent effect on content creation, regardless the ideological position of the individual.

H4: Hostile sexism is positively associated to political UGC, beyond the effects of ideological polarization.

Method

Survey Procedure & Sample

To address the hypotheses proposed above, the study relies on an original multi country cross-sectional data drawn upon Spain, Germany, UK, and USA. This project shared by different research groups at University of Vienna and Massey University, conducted a massive Digital Influence World Projectsurvey in different countries. The research team partnered with Nielsen to get the final sample in each country, following stratified quota sampling techniques according to official demographic reported data from national census (Callegaro et al., 2014). The administration of the online survey was conducted by the researchers with the support of Qualtrics in September of 2015.

To test whether the polarization hypothesis or the cultural backlash hypothesis was at work, we focused on countries where the gender issue has become polarized. Thus, the present study includes information from four countries: US (n=1161), UK (n=1064), Spain (n=1064) and Germany (n=1053). These four countries have been experiencing a cultural backlash in the last years while at the same time present similar levels of quality of democracy, human development, and gender equality. It is noteworthy that responses to the survey were collected in 2015, which was prior to massive feminist mobilization in these countries such as the Women March in the US, and Women Strike in Spain both in 2017, as well as other worldwide online actions denouncing sexual violence against women such as #MeToo.

Measurements

Table 1 in the online appendix shows the descriptive data and reliability measures for the main independent variable and the dependent variable, segmented by country.

*Dependent variable***.**

User Generated Content. We follow previous research on online political content creation (Bachmann, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2012) to construct an index on

online political UGC creation. 3 items asked respondents how often they conduct the following activities including (1= *never*, 7 = *always*): (a) upload my own news and public affair videos; (b) share news links on sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit; and (c) write comments on others' blogs or write posts on my own blog. The variable was standardized as is was eschewed towards non UGC creation.

*Independent variable***.**

Hostile sexism. Our measurement on sexism is based on the short version of the Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) which includes several items to measure sexism (Spence, Heleich, & Stapp, 1973). Since certain items might have turned obsolete (McHugh & Frieze, 1997, p. 7), AWS is now used as a measure of blatant and overt sexism as opposed to other more subtle and covert forms of sexism (Swim & Cohen, 1997). Thus, our variable measures 'hostile sexism' with 5 items.

Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the following statements (1 = *completely disagree*, 7= *completely agree*): (a) the husband should be regarded as the legal representative of the family group in all matters of law; (b) women should be concerned with their duties of childbearing and house-tending, rather than with the desires for professional and business careers, which are best left to men; (c) Women should have as much sexual freedom as men' (reversed); (d) swearing and obscenity is more repulsive in the speech of a woman than a man; and (e) the initiative in courtship, between a man and a woman, should usually come from the man. As our dependent variable, hostile sexism was also standardized.

We use separate models to test hypothesis 3 and 4. Since our hypothesis 3 expects a U -shape curvilineal relationship between sexism and UGC creation, to measure the *Polarization over hostile sexism* we obtain the absolute values of the

standardized measure of sexism. For testing hypothesis 4, we just include the standardized measure of hostile sexism.

Ideological polarization. Following Castles and Mair (1984) ideology is measured on a scale 0 to 10 where 0 = strong conservative and 10 = strong liberal. Since we are interested in ideological polarization we follow Thomsen's work (2014) and construct this variable by obtaining the absolute standardized values of ideology.

Control variables.

We include two sets of control variables. The first is standard media related predictors based on previous studies on online citizen journalism and media use (Strauß et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that media use and media trust in alternative media positively predicts online news creation and in turn news creation positively predicts online and offline political participation (Ardèvol-Abreu et al, 2018). Second, skepticism of professional journalism decreases perception of mainstream journalism credibility but increases perceived credibility of citizen-generated news (Carr et al., 2014; Finn & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011).

Media consumption. Building on prior research (Diehl et al., 2019), respondents were asked how often (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*) they get news from the *Traditional offline news* (a) TV, (b) printed newspapers; and (c) radio; and from *Virtual News*, including: (d) online news sites (e) social media; and (f) citizen journalism sites (non-professional journalism, e.g., blogs).

General internet use. According to previous studies on internet skills and inequalities in creating UGC, we include this control variable as an antecedent of internet skills (Hargittai & Shaw, 2015). Following Hargittai (2010) respondents were asked how many hours per day they stay online.

Trust in media. Following previous research (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2018) we separately ask respondents how much they trust (1= do not trust at all, 7= trust completely) a) *news from mainstream media* (e.g., newspapers, TV)and b) *news from alternative media*- For the latter, we construct and index averaging scores of two items: 'how much would you trust news from alternative news media (e.g., blogs, citizen journalism)' and 'how much would you trust news from social media).

The second set of control variables relate to standard demographics: Gender (54.2% female), Age (M = 46.7; SD = 15.5), level of educational attainment (High School or less: 41.5%; Some College: 20.8%, Bachelor's Degree: 23.5%, Graduate Degree or Higher: 14.2%) and perceived own wealth (M = 5.54; SD = 1.91). This last variable measures comparative perceptions of economic status (1 = *being the people that are the least well off in society*; 10 = *being people who are the most well off in society*).

Analysis

We run different OLS regressions, first with the 4 countries pooled together, and then country by country. To explore link between sexism and online content creation and sharing, we run OLS regressions estimating both curvilinear and linear effects of sexism to identify which one explains this relationship. We also performed several robustness checks. First, we retest our hypothesis including ideology as opposed to ideological polarization. Furthermore, we performed several robustness checks with a randomized sample of democratic countries[1].

[1] We test our model in other countries that either have similar levels of gender equality, development and democracy (New Zealand, Italy, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) or do not present similar level of democracy and gender equality however where processes of cultural backlash have been documented at some point between 2015 and 2020 (Argentina, Brazil and Chile).

Results

While the main variables of interest show a similar distribution in the four countries, certain differences are nonetheless noteworthy. As depicted in the table 1 of the supplementary material, both UGC and sexism do not follow a normal distribution. Both are eschewed towards lower levels of UGC and sexism, respectively. Furthermore, there are important country and differences (tested though Kristal Wallis and Mann Whitney U tests respectively). Figure 1 shows UGC by country and gender. Individual outliers are labelled by their values on sexism.

Figure 1. Box-plots of UGC creation distribution by country and gender.

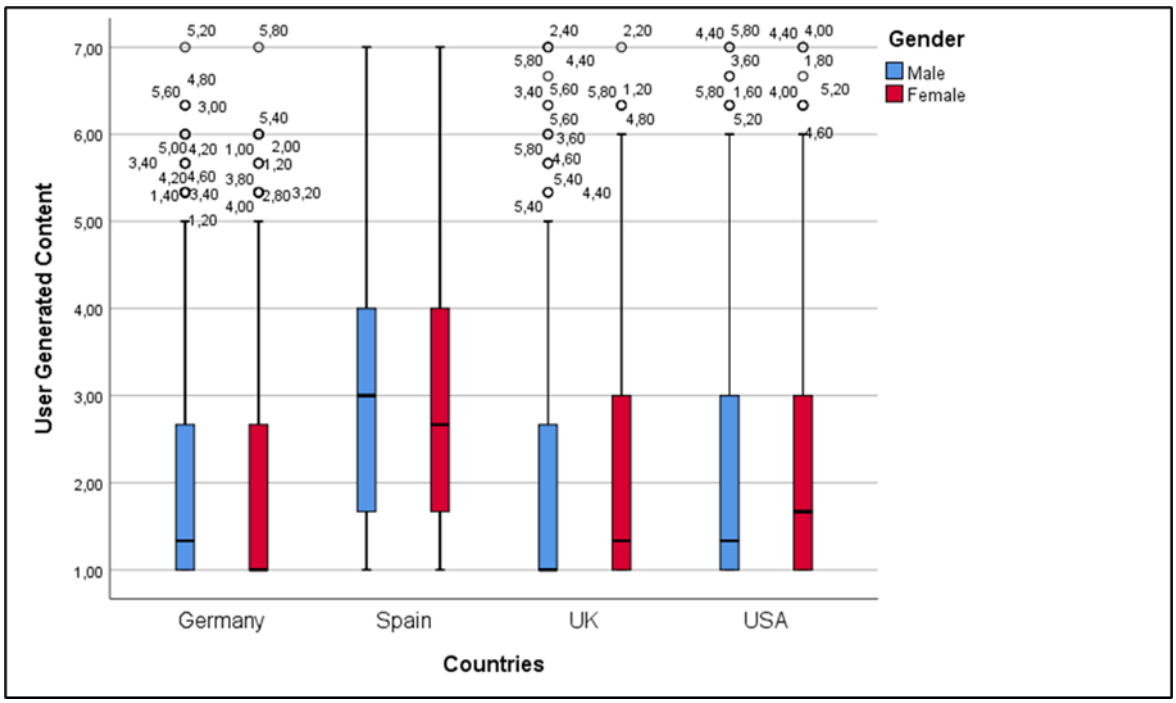

Figure 1 shows that Spanish people are more likely to post and share online content as compared to Germany, UK or US citizens. Spanish and German women are less likely than men to create and share online content, however the opposite is true for UK and US women. Regarding 'really creative outliers' we can see a variety of sexist attitudes. However, these outliers hold in general more sexist views on gender roles. Figure 2

shows levels of sexism by country and gender. In this case the most sexist outliers are labelled by their level UGC.

Figure 2. Box-plots of sexism distribution by country and gender.

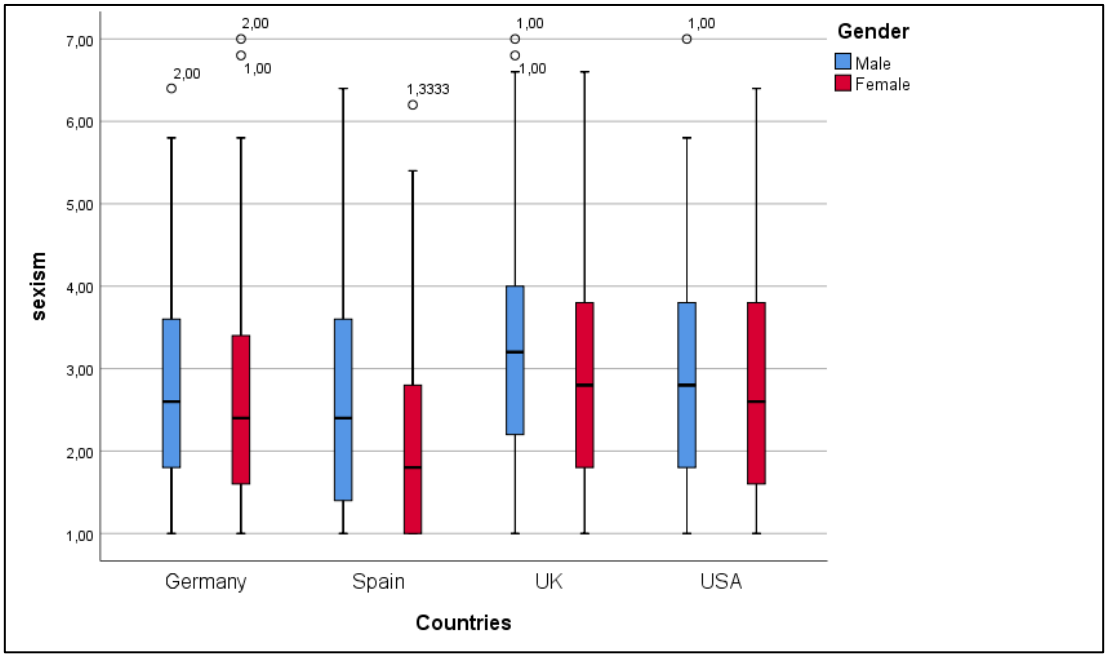

Figure 2 shows that both men and women tend to have egalitarian views on gender roles in the 4 countries analyzed here. This is especially true for Spain where both men and women have the lowest level of sexism when compared to the average of the other countries. However, there are statistically significant differences between men and women in their median level of sexism (Mann Whitney Up < 0.001), for all countries except for the US (marginally, p = 0.053). Again, differences are especially significant in Spain. Spanish men, although relatively egalitarian when compared to the rest of the countries, hold significantly more sexist views than Spanish women. In general terms, men hold more sexist views than women. What is interesting here is that when looking at the 'sexist outliers' these seem to produce less online content.

To better understand these relationships, we performed several OLS regression models including media and political related variables (see Table 2).

Table 1. OLS Regression Models for All Countries Pooled Together.

	Model 1 UGC Curvilinear All countries	Model 2 UGC Linear All countries
Block 1 Socio-demographics		
Gender (Female=1)	-.018	-.004
Age	-.074***	-.091***
Education	-.027*	-.012
Income	.002	-.009
ΔR ² (%)	*9.8*	*9.8*
Block 2 – Media use		
Traditional offline news	-.004	-.011
Virtual news	409***	.429***
General Internet use	-.015	-.016
Trust in mainstream media	-.078***	-.078***
Trust in alternative media	.239***	.233***
ΔR ² (%)	*26.3*	*26.3*
Block 3 – Ideological Polarization		
Ideological polarization	.021	.036**
ΔR ² (%)	*0.1*	*0.1*
Block 4 – Sexism		
Polarization over sexism	.114***	
Hostile sexism		.146***
ΔR ² (%)	*1.2*	*2.1*

N= 3811. Note: (*) Statistically significant at p ≤ 0.05; (**) Statistically significant at p ≤0.01; (***).

Preliminary results when the 4 countries are taken all together show that once sexism is considered, there are no longer differences between men and women in relation to UGC creation against H1. Similarly, there is no consistent significant relationship between ideological polarization and UGC once controlling for sexism (against H2). However crucially, model 1 suggest that hostile sexism has a significant curvilinear (u-shaped) effect on UGC creation (supporting H3).

Figure 3. Curvilineal relationship between sexism and predicted standardized values of UGC creation in the 4 countries.

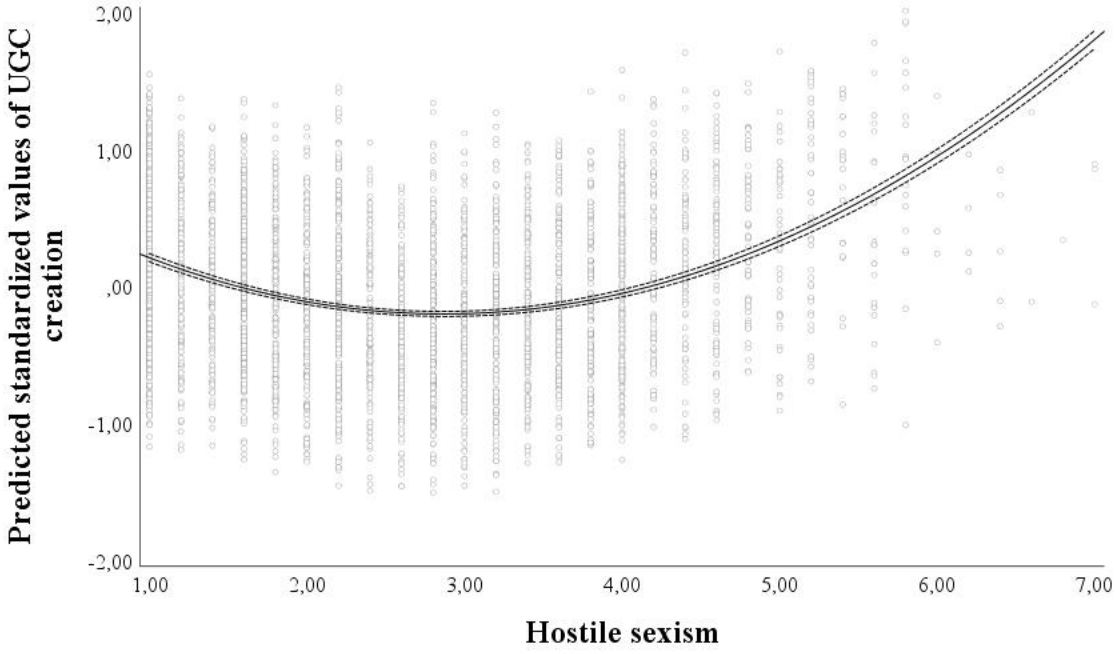

Figure 3 shows, however, that the curve is asymmetrical. Those holding radical egalitarian views on gender roles are creating less content than those having radical hostile sexist views. Indeed, as depicted in Model 2 hostile sexism is positively associated to UGC creation , even when controlling for ideological polarization (supporting H4).

This asymmetric U-shaped curve is also found when we perform a country-by-country analysis (Table 2 and 3). Both tables show how ideological polarization is positively associated with UGC creation only in Germany and the US once sexism is included in the analysis. Therefore, H2 is only partially supported at the country level. However as shown in Table 2, polarization over sexism, is still significantly and positively associated with UGC creation in all countries. This finding suggests there is a u-shaped relationship between hostile sexism and UGC (supporting H3).

Table 2. OLS Curvilinear regressions in 4 countries.

	Model 3 Germany U-Shape	Model 4 Spain U-Shape	Model 5 UK U- Shape	Model 6 USA U-Shape
Block 1 Socio-demographics				
Gender (Female=1)	-.028	-.027	-.016	.015
Age	-.045	-.022	-.128***	-.092**
Education	-.014	-.045	-.019	-.035
Income	-.003	.008***	.013	.031
ΔR ² (%)	*3.4*	*5.1*	*18.4*	*10.3*
Block 2 – Media use				
Traditional offline news	-.036	-013	.028	.014
Virtual news	.322***	.417***	.379***	.371***
General Internet use	.021	.019	-.020	.022
Trust in mainstream media	-.111***	-.047	-.075**	-.053º
Trust in alternative media	.210***	.206***	.306***	.213***
ΔR ² (%)	*21.8*	*25.6*	*25.0*	*22.6*
Block 3 – Ideological Polarization				
Ideological polarization	.061*	.014	-.007	.059*
ΔR ² (%)	*0.5*	*0.0*	*0.0*	*0.6*
Block 4 – Sexism				
Polarization over sexism	.133***	.153***	.082***	.117***
ΔR ² (%)	*1.7*	*2.2*	*0.6*	*1.2*

Germany N= 936; Spain N= 893; UK N= 942; USA N=1040. Note: (*) Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$; (**); Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.01$; (***)Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.001$

Moreover, as depicted in Table 3 hostile sexism – in its linear form- is still statistically and positively associated with UGC creation, even when controlled for ideological polarization (supporting H4). Furthermore, Betas and the explained variance are higher in table 3 as opposed to table 2 in all countries but the US.

Table 3. OLS Linear regressions in 4 countries.

Germany N= 936; Spain N= 893; UK N= 942; USA N=1041. Note: (*) Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$;

	Model 7 Germany Linear	Model 8 Spain Linear	Model 9 UK Linear	Model 10 USA Linear
Block 1 Socio-demographics				
Gender (Female=1)	-.015	.008	.009	.020
Age	-.054	-.035	-.147***	-.101***
Education	.008	-.024	-.010	-.025
Income	-.008	.063	-.003	.028
ΔR ² (%)	*3.4*	*5.1*	*18.4*	*10.3*
Block 2 – Media use				
Traditional offline news	-.041	-.015	.013	-.006
Virtual news	.324***	.417***	.399***	.392***
General Internet use	.024	.034	-.017	.027
Trust in mainstream media	-.103***	-.063*	-.070*	-.051º
Trust in alternative media	.195***	.206***	.274***	.211***
ΔR ² (%)	*21.8*	*25.6*	*25.0*	*22.6*
Block 3 – Ideological Polarization				
Ideological polarization	.078**	.017	.016	.076**
ΔR ² (%)	*0.5*	*0.0*	*0.0*	*0.6*
Block 4 – Sexism				
Hostile sexism	.166***	.218***	.195***	.097***
ΔR ² (%)	*2.6*	*4.4*	*3.6*	*0.9*

(**); Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.01$; (***)Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.001$; (º) Marginally significant at $p \leq 0.1$

Everything else held constant, hostile sexism is able to explain around 1% of the observed variance in online content-creation, but interesting country differences remain. While hostile sexism explains 4.4% of variation in UGC creation in Spain, it is able to explain a limited 0.9% of the variance in UGC creation in the US. In fact, as depicted in Figure 4, the US U-shape curve is a little more pronounced.

Figure 4 Curvilinear relationship between sexism and predicted standardized values of UGC in each country

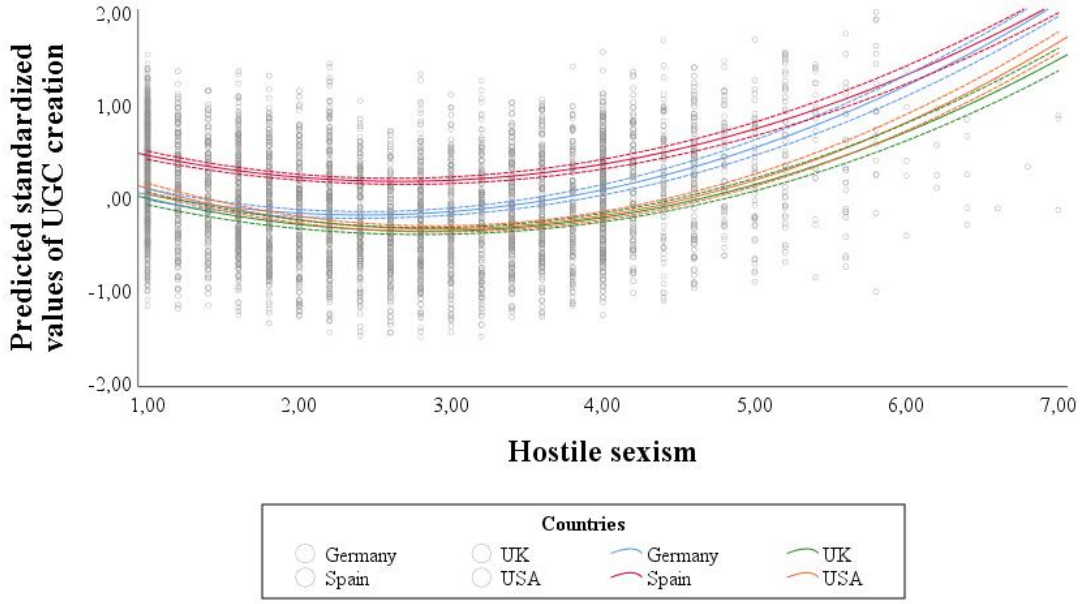

Figure 4 shows the unbalance between the non-sexist and the hostile sexist voices in all countries. It also shows that patterns of UGC creation vis a vis sexism are quite similar in the UK and the US while in Germany and Spain, not only individuals create in general terms more UGC, but especially hostile sexist individuals create much more UGC than hostile sexists in the UK and the US.

As a robustness check for the effects of hostile sexism, we repeat the analysis using political ideology (0 = strong conservative; 10 = strong liberal) as opposed to ideological polarization. In this case, the influence of conservatism is uneven throughout the countries: in Spain, UK, and Germany it is not significant, while in the US, progressive people are more likely to create online content (see supplementary material). In all four cases H3 and H4 are supported [2].

[2] Additionally, after randomly applying the model to other countries, H4 is supported in 7 out of 8: New Zealand, Italy, South Korea, Taiwan, Argentina, Brazil and Chile. However, H3 was only supported in New Zealand, Argentina and Chile.

Discussion

While many scholars have showed a gender gap in UGC creation, most studies have centered around the role of media and technological skills, and socio-psychological traits in explaining these disparities. Less attention has been paid to political antecedents that might also affect the gender gap on UGC. This paper investigated how hostile sexism affects online UGC, in a context of cultural backlash and increased political polarization. By analyzing the different drivers of UCG creation, and considering sexist attitudes in different countries, we uncover a consistent, positive, and statistically significant relationship between sexism and UGC creation. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of hostile sexism are more likely to create and share their own online political content. Sexism reveals to be a different phenomenon from classical conservatism.

These findings suggest strong support for the cultural backlash hypothesis. At odds with previous literature, we do not find consistent evidence that ideological polarized individuals are more likely to create their own online content (only Germany and the US follows this U-shaped pattern). We do find an asymmetric U-shape curvilinear relationship between sexism and political UGC creation in all countries where hostile sexists create much more content than non-sexist individuals. Individuals holding sexist attitudes are statistically significantly most vocal at creating online political content. A possible explanation for this, is that sexist individuals believe their hierarchical views of society are marginalized from the "official discourse of political correctness" (Haller & Holt, 2018; Kováts, 2018) and therefore, they engage more frequently in online content creation, as a way of scaping ostracism. Due to asymmetry of the curvilinear effect in our data, results suggest that feminist and anti-feminist voices are not equally active in the digital sphere. Sexists prevail.

Second, although we found the same general pattern between hostile sexism and UGC creation in all 4 Western countries analyzed here, there are still interesting differences between countries, endorsing comparative strategies on these issues to properly assess the extent to which these results could be generalizable to other Western societies. For example, the ideological polarization hypothesis works only for Germany and the US, but not for Spain and the UK. Another interesting difference is that the curve is more symmetric in the US than in the other countries. This means that in Spanish, British and German UGC ecologies, sexist voices are more present than non-sexist opponents, and that in the US non-sexists individuals are relatively more active in the creation of political UGC as opposed to their counterparts in other countries. Several possible explanations might be behind these differences such as the distinct levels of society polarization (both ideological and over gender) in each country, the visibility of women in politics as candidates and political office holders, the diverse media structures and its ideological polarization, and the different scope of each national feminist movement. All these elements can impact the relationship between sexism and UGC creation. Further research should shed more light on the specific influence of these elements on the relationship between sexism and UGC.

To do so, up to date data would be certainly needed. Indeed, one important limitation in this research is that data was collected in 2015. Readers need to be aware that at the time, in the US Hillary Clinton was already the front runner candidate for the Democratic nomination, and she ran specifically on a gender equality discourse. So, the apparent more moderate relationship between sexism and UGC creation in the US was maybe influenced by the casuistry of that election. Another potential caveat we must consider is that the most recent wave of online and offline feminism has emerged after the data for this study was collected. It is evident that online actions such as #MeToo in

the Anglosphere, #WomensMarch in the US, #8M in Spain or # aufschrei in Germany might have increased the voices of feminist women throughout the world and the World Wide Web (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Heger & Hoffmann, 2019; Mendes et al., 2018). Perhaps, with some of these visible feminist movements transpiring into society, future studies on this topic may showcased a more pronounced symmetric curvilinear effect than the one we have found with 2015 data. Anyhow, we are confident about the robustness about the uncovered relationship between sexism and UGC since the basic underlying mechanisms and motivations influencing UGC creation have remained stable over the years (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2018).

Furthermore, although time and the existence of feminist movements can re-shape the relationship between sexism and UGC into a more curvilinear fashion, the fact that we have found a greater linear relationship across the different countries gives interesting and generalizable information about the original connection between sexism and UGC. The fact that the survey was conducted in 2015 can give us therefore insight on whether the polarization over gender in the digital sphere followed the same temporal sequence as in the offline public sphere -mainstream egalitarian discourse followed by a sexist backlash- or whether on the internet, sexists were mainstream, whereas egalitarian voices became the alternative minority. Our findings suggest the latter tends to be the case.

If new research finds a more symmetric representation of voices in the digital sphere this will be good news for egalitarian views on gender roles in general, and it will also show the influence of online and offline activism on reducing sexist bias within the digital sphere. But based on our data, we should take with a grain of salt the oftentimes argument of the digital sphere serving as a representative arena to different political and gender attitudes.

These findings shed important implications for democratic theory, specifically for the debates over the digital sphere as a democratic deliberative space. Previous studies found that UGC creation fosters civic engagement (Kaufhold, et al., 2010; Nah et al., 2017), but future research should more deeply scrutinize potential asymmetries in digital participation that seem to reinforce privileged individuals with more hierarchical views of gender relations. Furthermore, since sexist online UGC has been found to foster exclusionary practices online (Drakett, Rickett, Day, & Milnes, 2018), and reinforce sexism among its own creators (Fox, Cruz, & Lee, 2015), the implications for the world wide web as a participatory, deliberative and civic sphere that fosters democracy and emancipation should in any event be taken with prudence, at least with regard to gender equality issues. All in all, the present study clarifies important issues revolving the role of sexism in hindering a more equalitarian development of digital political spaces, where women tend to be less represented.

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Funding

This work was supported by Asian Office of Aerospace Research and Development: [grant number FA2386-15-1-0003].