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## **How are tweets used to represent female politicians in social media discourse? A case study of gender bias on Twitter comparing Sigrid Kaag and Rob Jetten**

Schraa, Eelke

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# How are tweets used to represent female politicians in social media discourse?

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A case study of gender bias on Twitter comparing Sigrid Kaag and Rob Jetten



Author: Eelke Schraa

Student Number: S2970910

International Politics

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Supervisor: Dr. van de Wetering

Second reader: Dr. Schulhofer-Wohl

## Abstract

This thesis aims to answer the question how are tweets used to represent female politicians in social media discourse? I will utilise the critical discourse analyses (CDA) method to analyse language used in context of tweets. Gender bias is the behaviour that shows a favouritism towards one gender over the other. I will firstly present the literature that has been published previously, before moving on to the theoretical framework, looking at the theory of gender bias and women's empowerment. This thesis will focus on the Netherlands as a case study, with Sigrid Kaag and Rob Jetten providing the qualitative sample. The Netherlands was chosen as research is lacking on European countries, while the Netherlands has one of the highest rates of women legislators. Choosing two politicians who both have prominent positions in the political party D66, with different genders will allow the research to ascertain if there is a difference in tweets that mention Sigrid Kaag and Rob Jetten. In conclusion, the thesis shows that language used in tweets constitute a gender bias towards the female politician Kaag.

Word count: 178

**Key words:** Social network sites (SNS), Twitter, Gender Bias, Gender, Media, Stereotypes

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## Abbreviations

CDA Critical Discourse Analyses

MP Member of Parliament

SNS Social Network Sites

UK United Kingdom

USA United States of America

## 1. Introduction

Online social media connects more citizens in a faster way than ever before. A large amount of people frequently use social media to generate content, consume information and interact with others. However, gender bias and its stereotypes remain significant in modern culture, where online platforms are also shaping the norms and behaviours of their users (Chen et al, 2021;1). Social media has been accredited with changing the game of politics and participation on both a local and national scale. Politicians and political parties alike are increasingly utilising social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Instagram to promote their political agenda. The power of social media became apparent when in 2017 the #MeToo-movement spread virally on Social Network Sites (SNS) bringing attention to sexual assault and harassment against women (Thomson, 2018). However, less is known about whether and, if so, to what extent gender bias is perpetuated on social media regarding female politicians. Therefore, the following question is proposed: How are tweets used to represent female politicians in social media discourse?" To answer this question the theories of gender, women's empowerment and social media discourse will be utilised. Furthermore, this paper will employ the qualitative discourse analyses method (CDA) to review the single-case study of the Netherlands to see if tweets are used as a medium of communication to express gender bias on Twitter with regards to the case study of Sigrid Kaag and Rob Jetten.

As it has become a social normality to be active on SNS, it is important to understand what is happening online and how it shapes politics (World Bank, 2021). This research paper does not only fill an academic gap in the literature, but it also showcases a societal relevance. Previous research has proved, and disproved in certain cases, that media coverages are not always unbiased. Therefore, with a rise in social media usage by both citizens of the Netherlands and

the politicians, it is crucial to research whether there is gender bias on Twitter. The literature that is available is mainly focused on the United States (USA), and less on European countries. However, the Netherlands is a completely different case than the USA, as it has a different political system (theGlobalEconomy, 2021). Furthermore, national differences in gender equality make research that focuses on other countries than the USA expedient (Poushter & Fetterrolf, 2019). Research on this topic within the Netherlands is still lacking. So far, research that is available in the context of the Netherlands has either focused on gender bias within parliament or have made a comparison case study with other countries. Whereas I will focus on gender bias on Twitter, research that has not yet been conducted with the single case study of the Netherlands. The European literature available focuses on the European Union or constitutes a historical overview of voting bias within the Netherlands (Hooghe, et. al, 2015, Rohrbach, et. al, 2020). By contrast, I will focus on two politicians who have similar roles and backgrounds, creating an in-depth analysis. Additionally, most papers utilise quantitative methods, whilst this paper will use the qualitative method to research one of the most important months of the Dutch general election of 2021.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Gender, Media, and Stereotypes

Academic literature about women in politics has slowly been expanding over the years (Byström;2005, Falk;2010, Lawrence & Rose;2010). However, most literature has been focused on the USA as well as on predominant females in leadership positions. Fredkin (1974), Jamieson (1995), Byström (2005) and other scholars have provided solid, clear data demonstrating that the media treat women candidates and public officials differently and more negatively than their male counterparts (Falk, 2010;12). Falk's (2010) research in 'Women for President' finds that it is disheartening for those eager to see women succeed in electoral politics. She provides evidence that even after 130 years of women seeking the presidency in the USA, they are covered less by reporters, considered less viable and described as being better suited for the vice presidency. Falk also demonstrates a myriad of incidences where the press questioned the public's readiness for a woman president, despite public opinion polls stating the contrary (Falk, 2010:14).

When it comes to media coverage of women in politics, early findings suggested that female candidates receive less coverage overall (Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991:181). Braden (1996) stated that female politicians often face stereotypical questions on womanhood by the media and are described according to traditional gender roles. Research on how gender bias limits a woman's ability to get elected in the US has examined three areas: media coverage, voter's perceptions, and candidate strategy (Lawrence & Rose, 2010:15). There seems to be a disagreement in the literature regarding two things. Firstly, the overall gender bias, and the argument that women still do not have the same equal opportunities as men. Secondly, within traditional media bias, there were two conflicting stories. In the USA based literature, scholars have found that there was a clear gender bias against women (Tromble, 2020, Falk, 2010). Many scholars point to



the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes and roles besides the perceived incompatibility of traditional female gender roles with pursuing a political career (Fox & Oxley, 2003:844, Lawless, 2004:180). However, Rohrbach et. al (2020) researched the gender bias in the media coverage in the run-up to the Swiss federal elections in 2015. They concluded that women candidates remained underrepresented across all types of media compared to their male counterparts. This proves to be problematic as a lack of women's visibility in election coverage may influence the voter's decision. However, this bias was proportional to the underrepresentation of women on the electoral lists and therefore the media did not disproportionately underrepresent women. This could mean that the underrepresentation in the media may disappear if more women ran for elections (Rohrbach, et. al, 2020:699). Hooghe et al. (2015), however, found that in Belgium there is still a systematic bias against female member of parliament (MP's). The volume of media coverage for female MPs were not in proportion with their actual share in parliament, nor did their research show that there would be an evolution to change. They also found that female MPs were less likely to be allocated speaking time than their male colleagues; and even if speaking time was granted, Belgium female MPs received less time on television (Hooghe, et. al, 2015:407). There is a gap to be found in the literature as the focus so far lies on traditional media rather than social media and social networking sites, where citizens give their opinion on politicians, which could significantly differ from how a network portrays a female or male politician.

## 2.2 Stereotypes

The presence of gender bias in reporting media has been the topic of numerous studies (Bystrom et al., 2001; Heldman et al., 2000; Kahn 1994). Existing literature states that many of the gender-related differences in coverage implicitly suggest that women are not as serious contenders than their male counterparts in the political arena. Political females often complain

that the press focuses too much on the appearances and personalities, rather than their policy proposals and actions (Heldman, et al., 2005:317; Fox & Oxley,2003; Lawless, 2004; McGregor & Mourão, 2016:12). Five characteristics of American commercial news media reporting on campaigns for women have been identified. Firstly, women candidates tend to receive less attention than their male counterparts (Kahn, 1996, Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011:1048).

Secondly, discussion of political women tends to focus on comparatively trivial subject such as their physical appearance, lifestyle, and family rather than their positions on prominent campaign issues. Research on traditional media found that the press paid more attention to personality traits when covering women candidates for governor (Kahn, 1994:156). Her research also showed that women candidates in U.S. Senate races received more negative coverage on their viability as candidates, emphasising their unlikely prospects for victory (Kahn, 1994:157, Kahn & Goldenberg, 1991:185). Braden's (1996) research has corresponded with Kahn's showing that female politicians often face stereotypical questions about womanhood in media-coverage and are described according to gender roles.

Thirdly, women tend to receive more negative coverage; claiming that they lack personality, experience, and knowledge necessary for effective leadership (Carlin & Winfrey, 2009). Women have been stereotyped as weak, indecisive, and less productive compared to men (Masdit, 1991:19). Lovenduski (2005) argues that women's political representation faces its 'most difficult obstacle' in what she describes are 'the deeply embedded culture of masculinity that pervades political institutions' (Lovenduski, 2005;146-7). This embedded culture can also be identified on SNS. Ritchie's (2015) research found that Hilary Clinton faced such backlash on social media, in particular attacks on both her character and gender. Her stance on pro-military stance and assertive foreign policy- policies often considered desirable in male presidential candidates- resulted in Clinton being characterised as violent and destructive. This

creates a paradox for other female politicians, who risk being labelled as ‘weak’ or ‘incompetent’ if they don’t adopt aggressive approaches, but risk being considered overly masculine if they do adopt them (Ritchie, 2013:104). Tromble’s (2020) research into the American female legislators showed that gendered slurs were most frequent. Words such as ‘witch’ and ‘bitch’ were most frequent (Tromble & Koole, 2020:208). Furthermore, an example that encapsulates this is the song ‘ding dong the witch is dead’ which was played and bought in massive quantities following the death of Margaret Thatcher in 2013. Many British citizens blamed her for polarising the country and pursuing policies that created a greater inequality within the United Kingdom (UK) (Schifrin, 2013). Lovenduski (2008) focuses on the gender bias present in those political institutions that are based on ‘unspoken assumptions about a traditional gendered division of labour’ and that show hostility when women enter ‘male institutional territory’ (Lombardo, 2008;80).

Fourthly, news media tend to tie women candidates to the so-called “feminine issues” (Meeks, 2012:178) such as women’s rights, health care, education, and social welfare (Meeks, 2012: 180, Carrol & Fox, 2006, Heldman, 2009).

Lastly, questions will be raised about the influence a woman candidate would have on policies should she be elected (Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011;1048). Voter’s gender stereotyping is rooted in ascribed character traits; individuals associate women with compassion and other traits such as caring, trustworthiness and willingness to compromise. Conversely, men are more often associated with agentic traits like dominance, decisiveness, and self-confidence (Meeks, 2012:180). Social role theory hypothesises that people expect men and women to full-fill the so-called gender-role stereotypes. If this gender division has not changed then the gender stereotypes remain and negative discrimination may occur (Smith et.al, 2007:227).

## 2.3 Social media

Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61).

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it was assumed that digital communication would produce positive political effects. This included support for public debate, community formation and enhancement in citizen participation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:198). The foundational notion of American democracy is the idea that people exercise sovereignty through a republican form of governance, and information communication systems are vital to this process. These system structure what people know and how they understand it. Gainous and Wagner (2014) accredit social media with two vital elements of the political learning process. Firstly, it enables consumers to pick his or her own network of communication, and allows citizens to self-select their own content in a way that avoids any disagreeable ideas or interpretations. Secondly, these networks exist outside of the traditional media sphere, allowing political actors to shape and dictate their content (Gainous & Wagner, 2014:1).

## 2.4 Social Media and politics

Understanding how these new networks affect political information and communication is increasingly relevant. The expansion and intensification of social media use for political gain is significant even by Internet growth standards. In just the last few years in the US, candidates, interest groups, parties and even voters utilise the SNS. As the use of social media becomes universal, measures of the impact of the new medium and testable theories of its importance are becoming vital to understanding this new political environment (Gainous & Wagner, 2014:2). The Social Network site (SNS) universe is user-driven and allows the user a greater control over their content in an environment which offers them more choices than the existing

radio or television (Gainous & Wagner, 2014:6). Furthermore, SNS can be a tool utilised within the political sphere. A well-known example of this success is the online campaign from Barack Obama's presidential campaign, which was instrumental to his first election win in 2008 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:198). Although these positive factors have occurred, negative effects have also taken place in the form of fake news and political disinformation (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2018:1).

Furthermore, while women have seen significant advances in democratic political life as they have doubled their presence in national parliaments and have become more visible as social and political activists, as well as gaining recognition as a key voting demographic (Krook, 2017:73), global reporting has also shown an increase of physical attacks and harassment aimed at female politicians and voters (Krook, 2017:74). This may be a factor of presence on SNS, where they have increased their presence but has also made them more open to attacks.

Twitter has grown exponentially in the last decade and is now one of the most powerful SNS in the public debate. Currently, Twitter is used by journalists, politicians, sportsmen and many more to communicate announcements, opinions, and news (Broersma & Graham, 2012:403). As voters are getting more and more political information in a social network environment (Chadwick, 2013) the characteristics of online discussions about gender and politics are increasingly relevant (McGregor & Mourão, 2016:2). The growth of Twitter has shown politicians that this social media platform is one of the quickest and best ways to spread their messages. Furthermore, politicians and their campaigning teams have realised that social networks are relatively cheap, engaging, and easy-to-control tools to reach voters (Broersma & Graham, 2012:405). Therefore, this thesis focuses on Twitter, rather than Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis combines critical discourse analysis with gender theory. Howarth defines 'discourse' as a collection of ideas, concepts and categories through which value is given in a social and physical phenomenon, which is constructed and duplicated through a recognisable set of practices (Howarth & Torfing, 2005:300). Fairclough (2003) agrees with this, and he has distinguished three features of discourse that describes its operationalisation within social life. These are genres, discourses, and styles. 'Genres' are the specific aspect of ways of acting and interacting during social events. This is defined by its social practices, and is most often used in cultural studies, media studies and so forth (Fairclough,2003;66). Secondly, 'discourses' is a way of representing aspects of the world: the processes, relations, and structures of the material world and the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings and beliefs, and the social world (Fairclough,2003;124). In a way, the same applies to citizens creating a profile on a social media platform and how they share and represent information. Some are motivated by anger and anxiety; others share political information to shape public opinion or just inform others. However, limited "political learning" has been identified in social media (Bode, 2016:29). Researching these motivations will be conducted through media discourse. Lastly, 'styles': a way of self-identifying and a way of being. Who you are is partly due to how you speak, how you write, as well as how you look, how you hold yourself and so forth. 'Styles' is linked to identification, both by oneself and by others (Fairclough, 2003: 159).

Social media discourse has many of the same concepts as traditional discourse. However, it does move away from the traditional media as the development of social media has changed how people join communities and participate them. Vossen and Hagemann (2007) define this phenomenon as "virtual online communities" as "groups of people with common interest who

interact through the Internet and the Web, such as communities of transactions and communities of interest” (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007;59). Therefore, social media discourse increases cohesion and group identification. This community crosses national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, which forms strong social identities on social media which can transform individual and group trajectories (Kim & May, 2015;2). When studying social media discourse analysts usually focus on four aspects, these will form the foundation of the analysis.

- I. Texts: how different technologies of textualization allow us to combine semiotic elements to form socially recognisable texts that can be used to perform different kinds of socially recognised actions.
- II. Contexts: social and material situations in which texts are constructed, consumed, and exchanged.
- III. Actions and interactions: what people do with texts, especially what they do with and to each other.
- IV. Power and ideology: how people use texts to dominate and control others and to create certain ‘versions of reality’ (Jones et. al, 2015:7).

Social media operates in a space between public and private domains, a paradoxical space where ‘intimate’ confessions or conversations are created without expectation of permanence. This semi-anonymity allows engagement in spaces which may be restricted in other spaces. The concept of ‘known strangers’ fits in with Rose’s (1993) ‘paradoxical space’ and reflects what happens when social media becomes the medium to develop political movements. It is a space where arguably multiple identities can co-exist simultaneously, Twitter being a paradoxical space (Mclean & Maalsen, 2013;244).

### 3.1 Social media and participation

MacIntosh (2004) has created a three-step participation ladder of online communication. Firstly, e-Enabling which provides access and shared information to citizens. Secondly, e-Engaging: this step is where politicians react and interact with citizens. Lastly, e-Empowering which allows citizens to take part in political activities (Macintosh, 2004:6). The last step will be the focus when analysing Tweets during the chosen period. Van Dijk and Hacker (2018) concurred with this, and they added that political participation is one of the key concepts in understanding democracy within a network society, throwing up the question if networking and utilising digital media increase the opportunities of political participation (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2018:49). Research has shown that making use of social media has allowed a more horizontal conversation between political parties and citizens. Now that the internet has evolved to include SNS, it offers a variety of tools that could influence politics. This includes, but is not limited to, connecting people, allowing constant interaction and cooperation as well as bringing the voices of citizens to a broader public (Chadwick, 2013:52). Scholars note that SNSs allow information to be shared without the mass media serving as a mediator because information is shared from the individual (Weeks, et al, 2017).

### 3.2 Women's empowerment

Researching the connection between social media and gender bias has shown the need to further explore the concept of women's empowerment, this for the simple reason that women's empowerment is always mentioned before or after gender bias and equality. The notion of empowerment grounds itself in a long history of social change. The early applications of feminism and its consciousness was developed in the 1970's. This evolved further in the 1980's and 1990's as an effort towards greater equality between men and women. The movement



stood for recognising inequalities in power, asserting women's rights, and advancing structural changes in favour of greater equality (Batliwala, 1994:127).

Rowlands (1997) argues that a feminist understanding of power is concerned with “the dynamics of oppression and internalised oppression” and that empowerment, “[...] must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy...decision-making space... so that the people affected come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence” (Rowlands, 1997: 87). Meanwhile, Hartsock says that if we ask ourselves the general question about the association of power and gender that the answer is self-evident: power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity (Hartsock, 1989:157). The theoretical research from the 1990's gives us three important insights, firstly; these writings suggest a version of empowerment that is fundamentally about changing power relations. This process radically changes the way people see and experience their world. This can raise awareness of inequalities, and rouses resentment about injustice and generates an impulse to act together to change society. Secondly, they offer a view in which empowerment is relational. Any account of a lived experience of empowerment and disempowerment must embrace the essential sociality of the concept of empowerment. The personal and political overlaps here. Lastly, these writings insist that empowerment is a process, and that there is neither a fixed state nor an endpoint nor a measurable outcome to which targets can be attached. Moreover, what empowers one woman might not empower the other, there is no one-size-fits-all recipes for empowerment (Cornwall, 2016:344).

### 3.3 Gender Bias

Gender stereotypes are created through society, and the socio-cultural differences between men and women. These differences arose because the community attributes them and expects them to act a certain way (Anckaert, 2012). Gender stereotyping manifests itself when certain traits

or behaviours are attributed to an individual solely based on gender. When these stereotypes lead to expectations and judgments that limit opportunities in a particular social group, gender stereotypes may become problematic. Gender bias in media coverage of political elections have also long been theorised as an obstacle to the success of women in electoral and institutional representation (Håkansson, 2021:515). We still find forms of gender stereotyping in all spheres of society. There is a great pressure to behave in a gender-congruent manner (De Groof, et. al, 2015;23). The media often plays a role in bringing this to life (Lester & Ross, 2003:3). The societal relevance of this thesis therefore lies in evaluating whether social media, here Twitter, creates and/or perpetuates forms of gender stereotyping as well, particularly as it relates to politicians.

Gender ideology emerged from the study of gender and feminist's considerations of political ideology. It is understood to be the structured beliefs and ideas about how power should be arranged according to social constructs associated with gender. Feminist scholars have recognised that gender is a construct through social and political processes that focus on the practices of masculinity and femininity, which in turn is re-enforced by social and political structures and institutions (Goertz & Mazur, 2008:102). Mele (2012) rather optimistically claimed that 'social media is the next wave of women's liberation'. She suggests that the digital world is more egalitarian than most fields, and that social media enhances this through the connectivity of others regardless of their location (Aarons, 2012). An example to explain this phenomenon is the research conducted by the Qatar Computing Research Institute, who found that in countries with a large gender inequality in offline life, women were more likely to have a significant online presence. In Pakistan, for example, women on average had more followers on Google+ and Twitter than their male counterparts (Powell, 2018). Therefore, this thesis aims

to explore how tweets are used as a medium of communication to express gender bias on Twitter with regards to a female politician in the Netherlands.

## 4. Method

I will utilise the qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method. The primary aim of CDA is to study language from different aspects in both social and political matters (Flowerdew & Richardson,2017; Mullet,2018). Applying this method to this single-case study of the Netherlands allows me to develop a greater understanding of the tweets and if they are indeed negatively biased towards women. The scope of the analysis will lie between the dates of 15 February 2021 and 17 March 2021. This timeline was chosen as the television debates started on 15 February, and the closing day of the elections was on 17 March. This will create a larger scope to analyse the tweets that have been posted regarding the national television debates, as well as the replies on the voting day itself.

### 4.1 Case selection

There are several reasons for choosing the Netherlands for this descriptive inference single case study. Firstly, a vast array of the literature available specifically on this subject has been written about the US or other Anglo-Saxon countries. These, moreover, have either looked at traditional media or only analysed how citizens reply to tweets from male and female politicians. I will focus on citizens' tweets themselves and see if they posted positive and or negative tweets. Furthermore, The Netherlands was chosen as a case study as it has one of the highest rates of women legislators, as well as the Dutch population frequently utilising Twitter. Whereas Dutch women obtained political rights in 1919, the number of women in parliament remained under 10 percent until the 1970's. By the mid 1980's it had risen another 10 percent and since the 1990's women make up slightly above one-third of MP's (Lombardo & Meier, 2009:364). In 1972, the Man-Vrouw-Maatschappij, a feminist non-governmental organisation, first campaigned for more women in office (Oldersma, 2005:153). For the next 20 years they encouraged parties, particularly the larger ones, to pay attention to the on-going issue of women

equality. Since the beginning of the 1990's most parties have implemented measures to promote gender equality by use of quotas or target figures for positions within the parties or for electoral lists. The government themselves published a position paper in 1992 and initiated a project to promote women in politics and public governance (Lombardo & Meier, 2009:365).

## 4.2 Data collection

To analyse the potential gender bias, I have chosen one male politician, Rob Jetten, and one female politician Sigrid Kaag. I selected these two politicians as they are members of the same political party, and they both play an important role in D66. As Jetten is the fractievoorzitter and Kaag is the head of the party, often their job roles overlap. Furthermore, they both have a distinct background, Jetten is married to a man, and Kaag is married to a Muslim man. Choosing one female and one male politician will show if and to what extent there is a difference in the tweets regarding gender bias.

Several reasons make Twitter the ideal platform for analysis. First, Twitter has 330 million monthly active twitter users making it one of the largest SNS in the world. Secondly, Twitter is a well-known platform for political communication and over two-thirds of the world's heads of states and governments hold a twitter account. This results in Twitter providing an easy way for citizens to access their representatives (Tromble & Koole, 2020:197). Furthermore, as most tweets are sent publicly, even if one does not have a Twitter account, they can receive a lot of public attention. Furthermore, the algorithm of Twitter allows tweets to be retweeted numerous times, and the mass media outlets frequently report popular or provocative tweets. Lastly, a Twitter account can be opened anonymously, which means that ethically speaking, I do not need to gain consent for using tweets as they are publicly available. This combination of disinhibition and popular political use makes Twitter a critical tool to answer the research question.

### 4.3 Operationalisation

Three searches will be conducted for both Jetten and Kaag. Firstly, tweets with the words ‘Sigrid’ ‘Kaag’ and ‘Sigrid Kaag’ will be researched. These tweets will then be categorised into three groups. Firstly, tweets utilising gender-based derogatory terms such as “bitch”, “bossy”, “kutwijf”, “hoer”, and/or “whore”. As these politicians are Dutch, Dutch search terms had to be used as well. The following words have been translated to English as clarification: hoer means whore, kutwijf translates to slang for ‘bitch’, ‘heks’ is ‘witch’, ‘eng’ translates to ‘scary’, and the ‘#kutkaag’ in Dutch is ‘#bitchkaag’.

The second category will be tweets that have broad derogatory references to gender e.g., insulting all/most women’s intelligence, however, this category would fall under gender bias of women in general. The last category will be the positive category, in which no derogatory terms have been used. A similar approach will be used for the research of Jetten. The first category will be personal slurs relating to his private life. Secondly, negative references relating to his working relationship with Kaag and his political function. The last category will be positive tweets about Jetten. Utilising these different categories will help understand if this case study is a most likely case study against gender bias on social media against women.

In the analysis I will present the findings of tweets in the three above mentioned categories, illustrating them with example tweets. CDA will then be used to answer the research question and show the extent of gender bias in Dutch political discourse on Twitter.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Texts

In the following chapter, I will draw on the theoretical framework to create an analysis using the CDA approach to the tweets found on Twitter between the time frame 14 February until the 17 March 2021. I will use the four steps of media discourse, as well as the three-step ladder of participation from MacIntosh (2004). This section shows the analysis of selected tweets in relation to the gender bias rhetoric.

Twitter is a social media platform that accessible for all those who have an internet connection and a device to get online. People can post photo's, videos, links, as well as texts, Twitter describes it as a platform for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through quick and frequent tweets. A tweet is a text content that can contain up to a maximum of 280 characters. These cannot be edited once posted; however, they can be liked, retweeted, or deleted (Twitter, 2021). As Twitter is such an accessible platform, it has become a stage for online communication for and about politicians in the Netherlands, as well as globally. Furthermore, as it is meant to send a quick message rather than tell a story, tweets can be tweeted out of a range of different emotions, happiness, stress, anger, as well as frustration. Gender bias language used on twitter creates a difference of women versus men, inferior versus superior. Twitter users do this by utilising derogatory words such as 'bitch' 'whore' 'homo' or 'terroristwhore'.

### 5.2 Context

For context and background information, the Twitter accounts of Sigrid Kaag and Rob Jetten have been analysed in the designated time-period between 15 February and 17 March 2021. This period was chosen as this is when both politicians appeared on televised debates to accrue more voters. Contexts influence the form and meaning of tweets, how different kinds of texts

make possible different kinds of actions and interactions. Furthermore, it shows how people use texts to act and interact in specific contexts both reflect and help to reproduce certain ideologies and power relationships (Jones et al,2015;15). Therefore, the context of the tweets tweeted between this time-period have to do with emotions the Twitter user is feeling whilst watching the debates and the campaigning of the political parties. Their twitter accounts fall under step one of the MacIntosh ladder, providing access and sharing information with citizens (Macintosh, 2004:6). Both Jetten and Kaag's Twitter profiles are public, which means that tweets they tweet, or retweet can be seen by both followers and non-followers, meaning that all the information they tweet can be seen by everyone. A large point of reference for Twitter themselves to show the influence of a profile is the Twitter Author Influencer score. A Twitter Author influencer score is a collection of data that is the result of a proprietary algorithm. This calculates aspects such as the number of followers, frequency of posts and actions that followers take on the authors posts. This is done on a scale of 0-100 (Twitter, 2021).

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2021, Sigrid Kaag's Twitter account had 115,284 followers, and has posted 1,624 tweets since the start of her account. She currently holds an influence score of 77 out of 100. All her tweets have engagement, meaning that citizens, like, retweet or comment on her tweets. Kaag's tweets have an average of 58 retweets per tweet. Her average likes per tweet are 488 times (SparkToro, 2021). Between the observation period, Kaag tweeted 50 times, and the highest retweet count,1238 times, was the tweet she posted on the 17 March 2021, thanking those who voted for her. This tweet can be found as figure one in the annex.

Rob Jetten's profile has 59,410 followers, and has posted 20,883 tweets. He currently holds an influence score of 69 out of a 100. Furthermore, his profile also has 100% engagement. Whilst he has an average of 34 retweets per tweet, his average likes per tweet is 275 (SparkToro, 2021). Rob Jetten's most popular tweet from the period was a tweet about Sigrid Kaag's



leadership versus politician Geert Wilders. This Tweet was retweeted 158 times. This means that although both politicians are active on social media, and they both have the same level of engagement, Kaag holds a higher influence score, due to the fact she has more retweets and more followers.

### 5.3 Actions and interactions

The last step of the MacIntosh ladder, E-Empowering, is the most crucial step to this thesis and analyses. This step allows citizens to take part in political activities. For the period chosen, this means that citizens were tweeting during and after debates to say what they thought of the politicians, as well as reacting to Tweets Kaag and Jetten tweeted themselves. On Twitter the interaction happens in a few different ways. Firstly, people who are in favour retweet posts of the politicians with a positive message, whilst people who are against may retweet with a negative message or a slur.

To analyse the action and interactions of Tweets that mention @SigridKaag and @RobJetten three categories were set up for both.

### 5.4 Sigrid Kaag

The handle @SigridKaag was mentioned in 129,074 tweets between the dates 15 February and 17 March 2021. The following gender based derogatory terms were found: 'bitch', 'hoer', 'kutwijn', 'heks', 'eng' and '#kutkaag'. 4,312 tweets were found to have one or multiple search terms. Out of these terms the words most frequently used were derogatory terms for a Muslim woman, 2,509 negative tweets that either called her a Muslim woman in a derogatory fashion or called her a terrorist sponsor. Kaag was also mentioned in 1,022 tweets with the hashtag '#kutkaag' meaning '#bitchkaag'. Three examples were chosen to showcase the derogatory tweets aimed at Kaag.

Firstly, the following tweets depict Kaag as a Muslim women, where they call her a ‘corrupt Islam whore’ (DS,2021) ‘wise socialist female? Terrorist sponsor and indirectly responsible for blood on Dutch hands’ (Harry,2021). These tweets use the strategy of generalisation and presupposition. They generalise the conflict in the Middle east and terrorists, stating that Kaag is directly responsible for killing innocents for sponsoring them as she donated money through a non-profit organisation. Using presupposition and tendentious language, these twitter users build on the fear of Dutch citizens and create an ‘us versus them’ situation. There are three reasons as to why Kaag has been targeted with negative Islamic terms. Firstly, she was minister for foreign trade and development for four years (Parlement, 2021). Secondly, her husband, Anis al-Qaq, is a Palestinian national (Thole, 2021), and lastly, she was the foreign minister from the 25 May 2021 until the 17 September 2020. The notion of gender theory returns here, as the tweets relate back to her husband, conveying to the power of the male, in this case her husband, and not Kaag herself. This invites the idea that Kaag is not an independent person, but rather an attachment from her husband.

On the international day for women, Kaag made a speech asking all fathers, grandsons, brothers, grandfathers, son in laws and sons to speak out against sexism. This was after Kaag was in the news as she was targeted on Twitter by means of sexist tweets (Hoedeman, 2021). This may also be a result of how the Twitter platform was set up, as it is meant to be a way to send a quick message, therefore it is easier to tweet messages without thinking them through. Secondly, most derogatory contexts of messages that included the @SigridKaag handle were about the Islamic faith, and her wearing a headscarf. Most of the complaints were that this was keeping an antiquated law alive in the Western world. This shows gender bias against Kaag as Twitter users focused on Kaag’s physical appearance, as she was not depicted as a stereotypical Western woman, rather than her political mission. Consequently, as Kaag’s representation of

herself moves away from the gender stereotype that is expected, the need for women's empowerment and the discussion of gender and its biases returns.

Secondly, tweets using '#kutkaag' employ language to deconstruct the existing identity of Kaag. These tweets add a personally insulting aspect to blaming Kaag, for example 'another psychopath that @SigridKaag #kutkaag #NOVaccineForMe #NOVaccinePassports' (Jandemie,2021). Utilising the word psychopath, which is a reference to a mental illness is often used to denigrate another person. Another example given is the tweet '@SigridKaag, Jewish discrimination is not something we do in this country. #Kutkaag #removekaagfromtheHague' (Do,2021). These tweets present Kaag as someone who is pushing a controversial agenda on multiple issues, such as the vaccination passport, or that she allegedly discriminates Jews as she is married to a Palestinian Muslim man. Although these policies are not women or gender issues, the insults are gender based personally blaming Kaag for these decisions, not the Dutch parliament, or the political party of D66. The word 'kut' loosely translates to 'bitch'. The word 'bitch' has several meanings according to the Collins Dictionary. Firstly, a bitch is a female dog. The second definition as a countable noun is, 'if someone calls a woman a bitch, they are saying in a rude way that they think her behaviour is very unpleasant'. The last definition they give is a singular noun, 'if you describe a situation as a bitch, you mean that it is very unpleasant or difficult to deal with' (Collins Dictionary, 2022). The word 'bitch' is typically used as a pejorative term against women, and in this case, it is used against a woman who has a political aspiration, degrading her to a female dog, or thinking that her behaviour is incorrect in some way, rather than stating why they disagree with Kaag, they call her a 'bitch'.

Furthermore, some tweets state that Kaag is ruining democracy as is shown in these example tweets: “@SigridKaag I can call you #Kutkaag right? You ruin democracy! You are scary, you cannot sit in parliament, you know, we know it, and you do it! #kutkaag’ (Fer,2021). Language written in this tweet uses the ‘us versus them’ technique, which is intended to draw connections with another, to unify a group of people that are perceived to share the same identity, interests, causes and goals. In this case, some Dutch citizens are making a clear distinction that they dislike Kaag, and they distinguish themselves in opposition to Kaag and her supporters. ‘@itrigeren @SigridKaag democracy?? Kutkaag has never heard of that!!’ (Vogelbart,2021). Language portrayed here uses presuppositions, stating that although the Netherlands is a democratic country, and that Kaag is the leading face of D66, they feel that Kaag in particular is responsible for a lack of democracy within the Netherlands.

The second category created, which encapsulated tweets that had slurs about all women, there were 61 tweets to be found, example of these tweets is ‘I should really file a police complaint against all women who have voted on @SigridKaag, just based on the fact she is a “WOMAN”, this is not just sexist but also discrimination. Maybe all men should vote on a man instead of on a woman (Zwijgende\_stem,2021) and ‘Could all women stand up who voted for #SigridKaag just because she is a woman and she ‘eyes’ powerful? (ProtecttheWorld,2021). These tweets question the morality and independent judgement of women, just based on their political allegiance. These Twitter users suggest that the women who voted on Kaag have helped with the ‘downfall’ of democracy. However, the theory of empowerment makes a return, what empowers one woman, may not empower the other. It is possible that some woman may have voted on Kaag based on the single fact that she is a woman. Within this category, Kaag was also compared to Merkel with regards to the wearing of a headscarf in Iran. This all transpired on the 16 March 2021, after Kaag defended herself on a

national TV debate, stating that she had to wear a headscarf in Iran as part of her job as foreign minister. On Twitter, citizens tweeted ‘Merkel can apparently go to Iran without a headscarf but #Kaag can’t’ (Michel,2021). Citizens on twitter drew a parallel between Kaag’s visit and Merkel. Kaag wearing a headscarf, and Merkel not. This language shows a way to deconstruct an existing identity: instead of Kaag being portrayed as a Western political figure going to Iran to strengthen political and business ties as a representative of the Netherlands, she is being cast as a regular Western woman not adhering to the gendered stereotypes and instead conforming to the laws of Iran. Dutch citizens on Twitter felt that she was showing the world she was acceptable with the Islam oppressing women and normalizing such a regime.

The positive tweets were not widely tweeted during the early period of observation, however on the 17 March when the voting booths closed there were 154 tweeters that stated they had voted for her with the hashtag ‘hupkaag’ meaning ‘go Kaag’.

The other remaining tweets were neither positive nor derogatory, but more a collection of descriptive tweets on how Kaag handled herself during an interview, or the national TV debates or how she was in the second chamber.

## 5.5 Rob Jetten

Rob Jetten was mentioned in 81,741 tweets during the designated period. Unlike Kaag, Jetten did not have many derogatory tweets that fell into the first category. There are 1,939 tweets that the analysis uncovered which called him a ‘homo’, a derogatory term for a homosexual person. In the second category, negative references relating to his working relationship with Kaag, there were 1,150 tweets. ‘@RobJetten, remember this, you, your wife, your children, and everyone you love will have their turn. You may be a politician; however, you are nothing but a ‘puppet on a string’ and replaceable’ (Deathspank,2021). ‘@RobJetten, hey Robbie, act

normal. Nobody is waiting for your terroristic lover #kutkaag, so no, voting on DDR66 we are not' (Rechts is Rechts,2021).’ ‘@RobJetten No to #kutkaag’ (Ozongat survivor, 2021). These tweets all portray a language that suggest that Jetten is Kaag’s puppet or marionet, which creates the illusion that Jetten does not have his own identity within the Dutch politics, and instead his political identity is firmly intertwined with that of Kaag’s. Whereas Kaag is slammed for having an opinion and people calling her a bitch, Jetten was called her puppet as he supported her decisions. Within the sphere of power and ideology, the language and tone of tweets differed greatly between tweets that mention Kaag or Jetten. Jetten was questioned as to why he would continue to work for Kaag or if he would vote for her. However, all tweets related to Kaag were direct attacks on herself.

Jetten received more positive tweets than Kaag, 721 in total, saying he was a great guy and women stating how attractive they found him. Terms that kept repeating in positive tweets were, handsome, attractive, hot, and cute. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March a video of Kaag’s celebratory dance on a table was released with Jetten in the background clapping his hands and looking at Kaag, and many retweeted this video with various captions such as ‘I wish I had a man that looked at me like Jetten looks at Kaag’ (Groot,2021). Jetten is then portrayed as a desirable man who has supported Kaag. However, language of the people that retweeted the video suggests that they want this affection within their relationship. This moves away from the political setting, and they see Jetten as a desirable man, whereas the focus on that day should have been on the political success of Kaag and D66. This encapsulates the theory of gender ideology as states that the association of power and gender is undeniable: power is always associated with the male gender (Hartsock, 1989:157). Therefore, instead of celebrating the success of D66 with Kaag as head of the political party, and the amount of votes they received, the attention was on the gaze of the male politician Jetten.

## 6. Discussion

In accordance with the research question “How are tweets used to represent female politicians in social media discourse?” the following section will draw on the analysis to discuss the findings. The analysis identified, distinct differences between the wording of tweets that mention Sigrid Kaag on the one and Rob Jetten on the other hand. Firstly, overall tweets directed at Kaag were more verbally abusive with regards to derogatory terms. Secondly, few positive tweets were found of Kaag, whereas Jetten generally received positive engagement. The data therefore supports the theory that there is a gender bias towards female politicians in the Netherlands.

Previous research in different countries brought up dissimilar results. Whereas in the USA it was stated that there was a systematic bias against women (Falk,2010), Rohrbach et. al found no gender bias in media coverage in the Swiss federal elections of 2015 (Rohrbach, et. al, 2020:699). Furthermore, previous research has predominantly focused on traditional media, rather than social media. My results directly relate to previous research, as it builds on the foundation of literature from different countries. In the case of the Netherlands there were both similarities and differences.

The previous research of women receiving more negative coverage, as (Carlin and Winfrey 2009) as well as an increase in reports of harassment aimed at female politicians since the rise of SNS platforms (Krook 2017), is supported by this case study. By a vast majority, most tweets that mention Kaag were negative, whilst Jetten received mostly positive tweets. Secondly, Heldman, et al. (2005) mentioned that political women often complained that the press focused too much on appearances, rather than their policy proposals. In the case of Kaag, there was a debate on Twitter about Kaag, a Western woman, wearing a headscarf whilst being on a trading

mission in Iran as the minister for foreign trade and development. There are two explanations possible for the negative tweets. Firstly, as Kaag is the leader of the political party D66, some citizens may have felt she did not have the integrity to represent the enlightened Western Netherlands. Secondly, as Kaag is married to a Muslim man, it may be the case that tweets mentioning a derogatory Muslim word is directed at her personal life, seeing her only as the wife of a Muslim, and not her work. Either scenario, this creates a bias towards Kaag.

Kahn (1996), Wasburn and Wasburn (2011) state that women candidates tend to receive less attention than their male counterparts (Kahn, 1996, Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011;1048). This statement, however, is not supported by my analysis. Between the dates of 15 February and 17 March 2021, Kaag was mentioned in 47,333 more tweets than Jetten. Furthermore, the notion that there was a persistence of traditional gender stereotypes and the alleged incompatibility of females pursuing a political career (Fox & Oxley, 2003:844, Lawless, 2004:180), does also not completely apply to this case. There were tweets that mention Jetten or Kaag, stating that Kaag had ruined democracy. However, they did not state that Kaag was unable to lead her political party or become Prime Minister on the basis of the gender stereotypes that a women was incapable of leadership. It is important to distinguish SNS from traditional media, as the former offers everybody a voice, instead of one writer writing a potentially biased article. However, the openness and accesibility of SNS means that it may be possible that these platforms give voices to more citizens who feel that traditional gender roles should be conserved.



## 7. Conclusion

In this thesis I aimed to address how tweets are used to represent female politicians in social media discourse. To answer this research question, I used a critical discourse analysis of tweets that were tweeted between the dates of 15 February and 17 March 2021 that mentioned the handles of @SigridKaag and @RobJetten. Previous research has already shown that there is a gender bias in traditional media, and this research shows that although there are dissimilarities regarding SNS and traditional media, the gender bias remains. Overwhelmingly the analyses showed that when comparing a female politician to a male politician, Sigrid Kaag received more negatively characterised tweets. Within this case study, it was the language that set Kaag and Jetten apart. Kaag received more negative gender-based derogatory tweets than Jetten. Tweets that portrayed an ‘us versus them’ mentality, and utilised words such as ‘bitch’ and expressions as ‘she killed democracy’ that deconstructed her identity. Furthermore, while Rob Jetten and Sigrid Kaag both have marriages differing from the mainstream (Jetten being married to a man and Kaag to a Muslim man) Kaag received more derogatory terms about being associated with Islam than Jetten about being gay. Kaag was called the derogatory slur ‘Muslim whore’ frequently, where the citizens on Twitter judged her based on her appearance, instead of her political stance. This thesis concludes that negative tweets that mention Kaag are inherently gender biased in the language that is written.

This thesis contributed to the existing conversation in the literature by looking at the unique case of Sigrid Kaag and Rob Jetten regarding gender bias on the SNS Twitter. This thesis has a limitation regarding generalisability. As this case study focused on the political party of D66, future research should thus look at conducting a larger scale study, both at regional and national level within the Netherlands to test the applicability of this thesis conclusions. I used Twitter

as this SNS hadn't been researched within the Netherlands, however, further research could add other popular SNS such as Facebook as it is a growing platform for the political discussion. Moreover, additional longitude research studies of traditional media versus SNS may be beneficial to see if gender bias has changed over the years in terms of politics.

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Zwijgendestem (2021, March 03) Eigenlijk zou ik aangifte moeten doen tegen alle vrouwen die op @SigridKaag hebben gestemd alleen om het feit dat zij een "VROUW" is.... [Tweet].

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