

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

**Masaryk University**

**Faculty**

**Applicant**

**Habilitation thesis**

**Reviewer**

**Reviewer's home unit,  
institution**

Faculty of Social Studies

PhDr. Lenka Vochocová, Ph.D.

Gender aspects of online political expression and exclusion in the perspective of media studies and intersectionality

Prof. Hajo Boomgaarden

University Vienna, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Department of Communication

The habilitation thesis constitutes an excellent scholarly achievement that engages with a topic of enduring relevance and societal significance. By focusing on gender and online political participation, it addresses central questions that continue to shape academic and public debates in political communication and democratic theory. The work provides genuinely novel insights, enriching existing discussions by systematically examining both structural participation patterns and the individual-level motivations and reasons that underpin them, as well as discussing contextual and platform specific characteristics that motivate or hinder equal participation. Presented as a cumulative thesis, it comprises a largely coherent and comprehensive body of articles which, taken together, offer a broad and multifaceted perspective on gendered participation in the digital political sphere. A particular strength lies in the methodological breadth of the research, employing a range of approaches, extending from quantitative analyses of user content and survey data to nuanced qualitative accounts of interview and content data. This diversity not only enhances the overall robustness of the insights offered by the thesis but also reflects a commendable methodological versatility. The individual studies have been published in reputable and internationally recognized journals, which is a strong indicator of the consistently high quality of the research and of the considerable recognition it has already garnered within the academic community. I strongly value the fact that the author was first author of all articles and sole author of three of them.

I have read the thesis with great interest and appreciate the high quality and scholarly value of the work. At the same time, fulfilling my role as a reviewer, a few critical remarks and questions seem appropriate. These observations pertain less to the individual articles themselves, which, having undergone rigorous peer review, meet high standards of quality, but more to overarching issues raised in the introductory chapter. It is, moreover, important to acknowledge that some of the earlier publications predate 2020 and must therefore be understood in light of the scholarly debates and available insights at the time of their publication, which makes detailed reviewing now a rather outdated task.

My first remark concerns the coherence of the cumulative thesis as a whole. While both the introductory chapter and the first four studies consistently place gender at the center of the

analysis, this focus becomes less pronounced in the later stages of the work. In particular, in Studies 5 and 6 gender appears only at the margins, which renders the overall focus of the thesis somewhat blurred at this stage. This shift in emphasis raises questions about the extent to which gender should be regarded as the guiding thread across the entire body of work, as stated in the title and introduction. I was somewhat surprised that the introductory chapter did not more strongly develop an explicitly intersectional framework as a unifying perspective, also relating to the literature review provided here. Such an approach could have provided a conceptual bridge between the earlier gender-centered studies and the later articles, thereby reinforcing the coherence of the thesis. So what is now presented rather as a conclusion of the work, namely that intersecting categories of marginalization need to be addressed in works on digital political participation, could have served as a more prominent abstract structuring principle from the outset.

A further point of critique concerns Section 1.2 of the Introduction, where the author addresses some of the conceptual underpinnings of the thesis. This section was somewhat underwhelming in its current form, as it primarily enumerates a range of related concepts, such as *online user discussions*, *online political participation*, *online expression*, *civic digital participation*, *online deliberative expression*, and *e-expression*, without offering a more thorough systematization or sustained discussion of their interrelations or boundaries. While the mere listing of terminology signals awareness of the conceptual landscape and grasp of the literature, the absence of a more coherent framework makes it difficult for the reader to fully understand how the thesis positions itself within, or contributes to, ongoing conceptual debates. In my view, this represents a missed opportunity to engage more explicitly with definitional controversies and to articulate the specific conceptual choices guiding the empirical analyses. A more deliberate effort to delineate the distinctions and overlaps among these concepts would not only have sharpened the analytical focus of the thesis but also enhanced its theoretical contribution. Such a framework might have been particularly valuable in situating the thesis within the rapidly growing body of literature on digital political expression. Indeed, considering the vibrant debates that have emerged in recent years around the scope, forms, and democratic significance of online political expression, a more sustained engagement with this literature would have considerably strengthened the introduction and provided readers with a clearer sense of the thesis's positioning in the field. This is also evident in the general conclusions, which state that differentiation of expressive activities is important, yet remains unclear how a differentiated perspective then would inform a more general framework of gendered online participation.

Another point concerns the review and critique of the existing literature on gender and online political participation. The author rightly observes that the diverse and sometimes inconsistent findings in this field may, at least in part, be attributable to the variety of methodological approaches employed. While this is a valid and important observation, it remains only briefly noted and is not further elaborated in a systematic manner. Here again, I see a missed opportunity to move beyond a descriptive acknowledgment of methodological diversity and to instead develop a more analytical discussion of its implications. Specifically, one might have expected a more explicit engagement with the question of how particular methodological choices shape empirical results. Which types of methods, be it quantitative surveys, experiments, content analyses, qualitative interviews, or ethnographic approaches, are more likely to produce certain kinds of findings? While Study 1 is very explicit about the different outcomes based on the chosen methodologies, this line of argumentation is not followed through. Is there evidence of systematic biases in how methodological approaches relate to the outcomes observed in prior research but also in the research presented in the thesis? Addressing these questions could have significantly enriched the literature review by providing a deeper understanding of why empirical results diverge and by highlighting the epistemological assumptions underlying different strands of scholarship and could have strengthened the overall conclusions from the empirical work presented in the thesis. Given the

commendable breadth of methods applied across the seven articles that constitute the thesis, such a systematic discussion would also have been of relevance for the author's own work. It could have informed the overall design of the cumulative thesis by situating the different methodological choices within a broader framework, thereby allowing the reader to better appreciate how the combination of approaches contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of gender and online political participation.

The most important critical remark I wish to raise concerns the overall framing of explanatory factors in the introduction and, by extension, in the synthesis of the thesis's outcomes. I very much appreciate the review of psychological factors provided in section 1.3 of the Introduction, which offers a solid overview of individual-level explanations for gendered differences in online political participation. Yet throughout both the review of extant literature and the discussion of the author's own empirical results, it becomes clear that additional influences likely play an equally important role. Among these, the thematic focus of debates, the specific platforms and their affordances, as well as broader cultural contexts are repeatedly highlighted as contributing factors to gender inequality in online political engagement. Precisely because these diverse elements are acknowledged at various points in the thesis, I found it somewhat unsatisfying that they were not brought together more systematically in the overall conclusions. I cannot help but wonder whether the thesis would have gained even greater analytical depth and conceptual clarity had the author developed a more structured framework for approaching the different layers of influence. To tie together the wealth of empirical insights across the seven studies, the construction of a conceptual model of factors would have been particularly valuable. Such a model could, for instance, encompass individual-level factors (psychological traits, motivations), thematic-level factors (the substantive content of debates), platform-level factors (design affordances, debate tone, and discursive norms), as well as contextual or cultural-level factors (structural and societal conditions). Developing such a layered model would not only have provided a powerful heuristic for synthesizing the findings of the cumulative thesis, but also would have allowed readers to more easily grasp the multifaceted dynamics at play. In addition, it could have positioned the thesis to make an even more lasting contribution to the field by offering a conceptual tool that future scholarship might further refine and apply in comparative perspective.

Taken together, these critical observations should not be understood as diminishing the substantial merits of the thesis, but rather as pointing to opportunities for sharpening its conceptual and integrative dimensions. The introduction, in particular, could have benefitted from a stronger emphasis on coherence across the individual studies, a more systematic engagement with competing conceptual vocabularies, a deeper reflection on the methodological underpinnings of divergent findings, and a layered framework for organizing the multiple factors influencing gendered participation in digital politics. Developing such a model would have provided readers with a clearer map of the terrain, while also offering an elegant way of synthesizing the rich set of empirical insights generated by the seven studies.

At the same time, these remarks highlight a promising avenue for future work. The author has already demonstrated commendable breadth in methodological expertise and a capacity to engage with both psychological and structural explanations. Building on this foundation, a more integrative framework that systematically considers individual, thematic, platform, and contextual factors could constitute the next step in advancing the field. In this way, the thesis not only stands as a significant achievement in its own right, but also as a springboard for further conceptual innovation and scholarly leadership in the study of gender and online political participation.

**Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)

In light of the above remarks, I would like to conclude this part of the review by formulating a set of questions that may serve as constructive prompts for scholarly dialogue during the habilitation hearing. These questions are not intended as points of criticism per se, but rather as invitations to further reflection and elaboration:

- 1) **Limitations of the cumulative thesis:** While specific limitations are addressed in the individual studies that comprise the habilitation thesis, I was missing a more general account of the limitations of the corpus of studies as a whole. Drawing also on the critique above I invite the author to reflect on possible shortcomings in conceptual or methodological approaches and what alternative approaches could have been suitable to alleviate existing limitations? How does the candidate assess the main limitations of the work when considered as a whole, beyond the strengths of the individual studies?
- 2) **Conceptual framework:** Relating to the above mentioned lack of an overall integrative model: If the candidate were to sketch an overarching conceptual or theoretical model of gender inequalities in political participation, what would such a model look like? What would be its building blocks? How might it capture the interplay between individual, thematic, platform, and contextual factors, among others?
- 3) **Methodological reflections:** What is the author's assessment of the relative value of the mixed-methods approach employed in Study 1 as compared to the more mono-method designs of the subsequent studies? More generally, how does the author evaluate the advantages and limitations of drawing on data from different platforms and cases across the seven studies? To what degree do contextual factors such as the choice of interview partners, the topics under study, or the specific platform environments shape and potentially constrain the results? How might these dependencies affect the generalizability of the findings? In particular, what could be the value of comparative designs beyond the two-country comparison in Study 7 and what could such designs look like?
- 4) **Conceptual clarity:** With regards to the concepts discussed, such as *online user discussions*, *online political participation*, *online expression*, *civic digital participation*, *online deliberative expression*, and *e-expression*: How does the author position their work within these overlapping conceptual debates, and what would a more coherent conceptual framework look like?
- 5) **Future prospects:** Looking ahead, what is the author's position regarding the equalizing potential of online spaces as a remedy for persistent inequalities in political participation? How might an explicitly intersectional lens inform future research in this area? Which types of research could have the potential to inform policy recommendations for more equal participation?

**Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled "Gender aspects of online political expression and exclusion in the perspective of media studies and intersectionality" by PhDr. Lenka Vochocová, Ph.D. **fulfils** the requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Media Studies and Journalism.

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Signature

