

COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods

A study into the online abuse on X in West Yorkshire Constituencies in the 2024 General Election

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Contents-

Introduction	3
Literature Review	7
Research Questions-	17
Research Methodology	18
Discussion and Findings-.....	25
Conclusions.....	46
Bibliography	48
Appendices-	52

Introduction

As public figures with a great level of media attention and responsibility, politicians in the UK have always been the targets of a unique amount of unwarranted abuse and attention.

However, in recent years the scale of the abuse received has been said to have risen to unprecedented levels. Indeed in 2017, after the murder of Jo Cox MP, the Committee on Standards in Public Life conducted a review into this issue and stated how the “scale and intensity of intimidation is now shaping public life in ways which are a serious issue.”

(Intimidation in Public Life A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017).

Many have attributed this to the increasing polarising of UK politics, particularly after the 2016 EU referendum which revealed profound divides in UK society (University of Manchester, 2018). However, the introduction of social media and its rise has been said to be the major factor that has accelerated the increase in the levels of abuse and intimidation of MPs, with the 2017 Review by the Committee on Standards of Public Life deeming social media to be the “most significant factor accelerating and enabling intimidatory behaviour in recent years.” (Intimidation in Public Life A Review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017).

On the one hand the use of social media in UK politics has brought about many benefits for elected representatives. Social media has allowed for the democratisation of the political process, meaning that politicians are more accountable and easier to access, with many using platforms like X (or Twitter) to detail their campaigning activities and advice surgeries meaning that they can often be contacted more freely. But, alongside this increase in contact and the ease of communication comes unwarranted amounts of abuse and attacks. For example, a study done by the BBC in 2022 found that “more than 3,000 offensive tweets are sent to UK Members of Parliament every day. This study cited MPs who quit social media platforms due to the level of abuse that they received on Twitter specifically, with previous Conservative MP for Meon Valley deleting her account on Twitter and stating how this was a result of ‘out of hand abuse.’ (BBC Shared Data Unit, 2022)

During elections, the polarisation and toxic divisions within UK politics often reach a peak and on social media platforms, there is an unwarranted campaign of abuse towards candidates. The Electoral Commission studied the levels of abuse towards political candidates in the run-up to the Local Elections in May 2024, they found that of the 430 candidates that they surveyed 43% reported some kind of harassment or intimidation and the most common place to receive this kind of harassment was online. (Electoral Commission, 2024). Many have also noted how female MPs and more specifically female MPs from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority backgrounds are the recipients of the largest amount of abuse. In some cases, this can even deter them from standing in elections.

2024 Election and Context

The 2024 election was held on the 4th of July in the United Kingdom. Before the election, there had been several topics that were seen to be particularly polarising for UK two main parties. These included the issue of immigration, with the Conservative Party introducing their flagship Rwanda policy to tackle the issue of illegal migration which was met with large-scale backlash from all sides of the House. Secondly the economy and accusations of Tory mismanagement, thirdly numerous allegations of scandal and sleaze and lastly foreign policy and international affairs, including the Israel/ Palestine war with there being widespread criticism of the Labour Party's initial reaction to Israel's bombing campaign. The nature of the divisions in the UK over the aforementioned issues and what had been perceived to be a rejection of the Conservative Government at previous by-elections and local elections, as well as their precarious position in opinion polls meant that this election was anticipated to be one with large scale divisions and thus toxicity.

Context of the Platform X

Whilst toxicity and abuse have been seen to be present on every social media platform, X has been deemed by many to be the most toxic of all. For instance, in 2022 Simple Texting surveyed American internet users and found that users listed (Twitter as it was known at the

time) as the most toxic app (Norton, 2022). Journalists have ascribed this to various factors including the anonymity it provides, its tribal and its fast-paced nature (Yashwardhan, 2023). In 2022 Twitter was acquired by controversial Businessman Elon Musk. His management has been seen by many to further the toxic nature of the site. For example, in December 2023 the European Union launched a probe into X, with accusations that the platform is fuelling hostility and misinformation (Goujjard and Scott, 2023). Considering this, X will most likely remain a hostile place for politicians throughout the 2024 General Election and thus studying the use of the site to spread messages to politicians during the 2024 General Election will remain even more relevant.

Research Aims

Considering the above, this research will examine the use of social media amongst politicians in the run-up to the 2024 General Election. One of the main aims of this research is to gain a further understanding of the scale of the abuse faced by politicians taking into account the context provided about the level of abuse and the toxicity that was spread in the run-up to the election on the platform X. It is hoped that this research will help one gain a modern-day understanding of the scale of online abuse faced by Politicians and Prospective Parliamentary Candidates.

Moreover, a further aim of this research will be to gain an understanding of the factors that influence the abuse and negativity faced by politicians, such as, gender, ethnicity and political party. As outlined above, many previous researchers and politicians have reported that there has been a correlation relating to the abuse received and these factors. It is hoped that this research will allow one to gain an understanding as to whether this was the case in 2024 and the factors influencing abuse within this election.

Thirdly, this research aims to look at the topics that influence the abuse faced by politicians. As previously outlined issues such as international affairs and the Israel/ Hamas war were very important in creating division and toxicity in the run-up to the 2024 General Election, this research aims to gain a further understanding of whether this continues into the election,

as well as identifying other topics that could generate abuse towards politicians. For instance, immigration and the economy.

This research will seek to answer the following four Research Questions which will be further outlined in the Methodology Chapter:

RQ1- Are International affairs the topic that generates the most negative replies to PPCs in West Yorkshire constituencies on X?

RQ2- What is the overall scale of negative replies on X received by PPCs in West Yorkshire during the 2024 election?

RQ3- Do female and BAME PPCs in West Yorkshire receive more negative replies on X during the 2024 election?

RQ4- Do candidates for certain political parties receive more negative replies than others on X during the 2024 election in West Yorkshire?

Research limitations

There have been several limitations that have been identified that also must be addressed.

Firstly, whilst social media has become a main part of our political discourse and political communications, it is still only a small snapshot, particularly as this dissertation only has the scale to focus on the platform X. Whilst toxicity is widespread on X this dissertation has not looked at the other means where political candidates may receive abuse, for instance, print media, physical and verbal abuse, email and post. Therefore, one must be considerate of this before making any overall judgements on the scale of abuse during the 2024 election as there could have been more toxicity received by other means.

In addition, social media platforms, like X, operate with a system that means offensive and abusive language is often flagged and reported. Sometimes this can be immediately after they are posted. Prospective Parliamentary Candidates themselves may also report comments that are particularly abusive to the Police and other relevant authorities. This

means that whilst this abuse is received by politicians, it will not be publicly available and thus one must remain conscious of the fact that not all abuse on X will be accounted for in this study and one may therefore underestimate the levels of abuse received.

Similarly, within each region of the UK, there are different challenges, levels of political awareness and engagement. This means that whilst just focusing on the West Yorkshire Region, one needs to be conscious that this area may not be reflective of the whole electorate and the issues reflected across the country and therefore must not make overall conclusions of the 2024 election based on this specific region.

Literature Review

The rise of social media has revolutionised political communication, providing politicians with direct channels to engage with constituents. However, this accessibility has also opened new avenues for abuse, leading to significant challenges for public figures, particularly Members of Parliament (MPs). Since the expansion of the use of social media amongst politicians, there has been a growing emphasis on the use of social media amongst politicians and how they interact with audiences. This is in part due to the growing nature of social media platforms and their extensive use in recent times. Since the early 1990s, scholars have noted the widespread rise of ICT in politics and how this rise has shaped the way politicians, political parties and other organisations have begun to engage with voters, but also carry out other functions such as empowerment and campaigning. More recently, there has been a focus on the abuse and 'trolling' of politicians using online platforms which has also been explored by scholars.

Emergence of Social media and Politicians as a concept-

In the last two decades the emergence and the rise of the use of social media and how this has been adopted by politicians and MPs has been widely discussed; particularly about how social media platforms are used by Politicians to engage with audiences. For instance, Philip

Norton (2008) discussed the implications that a widening use of social media will have on politicians fulfilling their representative function and the way that they communicate with their constituents and the wider electorate. He argues how, the Internet and electronic communication, were seen to be a new phenomenon which involved new challenges. For instance, he describes how “new generations of parliamentarians can exploit the Internet to bypass party and to create a more direct, individual mode of communication. The Internet is seen as being at the heart of communication and a challenge to existing forms of responsible party government.” (Norton, 2008). This is also echoed by Thomas Zittel in his article. Zittel presents his concept in 2003 which details how social media platforms have given citizens and politicians new ways of communicating with one another. In his article, he uses the case studies of the US, Germany and Sweden and describes how, in all of these instances “the internet is putting pressure upon representative systems to become more decentralised and thus more accessible and responsive. Across all of the three cases, individual members are using the Internet to communicate with constituents and to publish political information.” (Zittel, 2008).

Whilst many of these early articles on the concept discuss how the rise in electronic communications will impact democracy and the way that voters communicate with elected representatives, they do not yet discuss social media platforms, or indeed the impact that they have on the abuse of Politicians. However, these early articles paved the way for further research on these concepts in the future, particularly by detailing the accessibility and connectivity of electronic communications for those wanting to contact their MP.

Expansion of Research in this area-

As the use of electronic communication expanded, research in this field began to focus on the use of social media platforms as well as other forms of e-communication like websites and the roles that were played by these in reshaping the way that politicians and citizens interact. For instance, in his article, ‘The Effect of Digital Media on MPs' Communication with Constituents’, Andy Williamson explores the idea of websites and blogging tools on how MPs

connect with their electorate and voter base. He draws on focus groups and interviews with MPs and their staff as part of this study, he concludes that politicians see “digital media as largely positive in supporting their communication with constituents. This is particularly the case for email and websites but also for the ability to upload rich media, including photographs and video.” (Williamson, 2008. p.525). Whilst his article still pre-dates the expansion of social media in general, Williamson does touch on blogging tools, which are the most like the social platforms that we know today. He makes the point that “blogging is seen as a relatively poor value tool, in part because of the time commitment but also because of the negative connotations of the blogosphere in general.”, alluding to negativity when it comes to that area of e-communications and perhaps illustrating the fact that toxicity and negativity still exist in this area today.

Nigel Jackson (2008) also studied the use of blogs by Members of Parliament and how the visitors of these blogs tend to interact with posts online, paving the way for further research into the field of social media platforms and how users interact with them. To do this, Jackson analysed comments received on the blog pages of several Members of Parliament, Jackson studied the sentiment of these comments and whether they were positive, negative and neutral and also started to discuss whether certain MPs generated more negativity than others, for factors such as their political stances. For instance, he argued, “Shaun Woodward is the most likely to receive critical comments, 68%, which in part might be explained by the fact that he took a more partisan approach and tried to defend government policy, almost inviting ‘virtual’ heckling.” (Jackson, 2008, p. 656). In summary, Jackson’s research techniques are useful and could be applied to this dissertation in a more modern context.

Studies into the abuse of politicians-

Additionally, there has been an emphasis within the literature on the threats and abuse that politicians face more widely, particularly when it comes to stalking, harassment and physical and verbal abuse. James et al conducted a survey that investigated the prevalence and types of threats and abuse faced by Members of Parliament. They found that a staggering

81% of Members of Parliament had experienced at least one type of aggressive behaviour that was listed in their survey. (James et al, 2015, p.177). This study compares the level of abuse received in three Parliaments, namely the Norwegian, New Zealand and UK Parliament. Whilst this study mainly references physical abuse and threats like stalking and intimidation, the study does look at social media and the impacts that this has on Politicians being subject to these kinds of behaviour. From doing this, they found that there were differences between their results depending on the timings of the survey, with “the principal difference being the greater importance of social media, the more recent the survey.” (James et al., 2016). The authors of this study reflect on their findings in a later study. They look at the prevalence of threats such as stalking and harassment depending on many different characteristics, for instance, age, gender and the profile of the constituency that the Politician represents; all useful characteristics that should be considered within future research in this area. From doing this, they denote the fact that the initial study into the online abuse of politicians did not “deal sufficiently with MP’s uses of emails and social media and therefore perhaps further research into the field should focus on this angle.

In addition, much of the pre-existing literature on the physical and mental abuse of politicians focuses on the factors influencing one to abuse and stalk a Member of Parliament and approaches this topic from a physiological angle.

In addition, some studies look at the political motivations which lead one to committing, a crime against or attack a Member of Parliament. Several of these studies have looked at forms of extremism and the prevalence of extremism when leading to attacks on Members of Parliament. For instance, Toro Bjoro (2022) looked at the threats to Members of Parliament in Norway and the motivations behind these threats. He found that it stemmed from two main motivations, firstly the political causes and an individual’s anger regarding a policy, or political stance of a politician and secondly, often these sorts of threats are caused by mental health issues. Bjoro discusses the role that social media in both exacerbating and instigating these attacks and concludes that “social media platforms not only generated less severe

forms of harassment, which are likely to have less severe consequences, but also produced a significant number of very severe forms of verbal attacks, such as indirect and direct threats.” (Bjoro, 2022, p.105). Whilst this dissertation will not delve into the root causes of abuse and the importance that mental health had when causing one to abuse a Member of Parliament, these articles provide an important context which helps one develop a further understanding of this area.

Studies into social media and the scale of online abuse-

After the groundwork was set by these original studies that focused on how Internet users interacted, it was concluded that politicians and social media allowed for users to have instantaneous and spontaneous communication with their elected representatives, unlike we have seen previously, this accessibility allowed for abuse of Members of Parliament to become easier. This meant that several studies began to focus on the abuse of Members of Parliament on social media specifically. For example, Gorrel et al's study looked at online trends of abuse towards politicians. (Gorrell et al, 2018).

They studied the trends of abuse aimed at politicians prior to both the 2015 and 2017 General Elections in the UK and articles examined the impact that events like Brexit had on these trends. During this article, the authors looked at several different indicators, including the follower count of the user that was sending the abuse, the topics that triggered the abuse and indicators such as their gender and political party. It was concluded that “Abuse received relates strongly with tweets received, suggesting such behaviour is for the most part impersonal. However, whilst more prominent politicians receive more tweets and therefore more abusive tweets by volume, within that there is a tendency for more prominent politicians to receive less abuse.” (Gorrel et al, 2018, p.3). This study was very useful to this dissertation, being a study that focused on the abuse of politicians during two UK General Elections before the 2024 elections and thus providing an important framework that this dissertation can focus on. In addition, the article “Turds, Traitors and Tossers: the abuse of

UK MPs via Twitter,” by Ward and Mcloughin (2020) also focuses on the abuse of UK politicians. They focused on the different indicators that impact the level of abuse received by politicians such as their political party, gender, prominence and political party. This research was conducted after the murder of Jo Cox in 2016, although £there was no evidence that Cox’s killer had directly engaged in online harassment, it highlighted MPs’ experiences of online abuse. Twitter threats, impersonations and trolling were seen as an increasing matter of concern, as several MPs highlighted the almost daily barrage of abusive and threatening messages.” (Ward and Mcloughin, 2020, p.47). Thus, this is an important event to consider when studying the topic of the abuse received by MPs on social media.

MP’s abuse and the murder of Jo Cox-

When it comes to research surrounding the murder of Jo Cox, the murder brought significant attention to the issue of abuse faced by Members of Parliament and there was an increased focus on the issue within research. For instance, several Parliamentary Select Committees and Governmental Organisations produced reports, examining the level of abuse received by Members of Parliament and the issues that arise from these threats. This issue was examined by the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2017 which examined ‘Hate Crime and its violent consequences, particularly relating to the consequences on MPs and elected representatives. (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2017). One of the members of the committee, Eric Hepburn described Cox’s murder as the “wake-up call,” which meant that Parliament began to act on this situation. The Committee discussed the impact that social media has had when it comes to exacerbating these threats towards Parliamentarians, and Social Media platforms were generally agreed to exacerbate the threats faced by Members of Parliament. This was discussed by Mr Hoyle who describes how he and other politicians “have sat down with certain MPs who have had problems and issues, which have mainly come via social media. I recognised that it targets, as I said at the beginning, certain women MPs who seem to be more vulnerable than others. Ethnic minority MPs certainly seem to

have had the worst of both worlds, because this is coming at them from two sides.” ((Home Affairs Select Committee, 2017). Whilst these reports do not directly link to this dissertation, they again provide an important context which this dissertation will be based and an understanding of the multi-faceted nature of abuse faced by Parliamentarians.

Reasons for the abuse of Politicians: Gender

One of the most prevalent factors impacting on the amount of abuse on social media platforms and one of the most prevalent is gender. This was illustrated by Amnesty International when they produced a report which looks at Twitter specifically and describes how the site is “a toxic place for women.” (Amnesty International, 2018). Their study looked at the experience of regular users on the site as opposed to Parliamentarians, however, they found that for women “Twitter as a place where violence and abuse against women is widespread and where inadequate remedies exist for those who experience such abuse.” (Amnesty International, 2018)

They argued that this is down to the nature of the website and the fact that it allows for open and instant communication meaning that “the platform is vulnerable to being used to send violent and abusive content.” (ibid). Findings like this meant that there have been several articles which study the impact that gender has when it comes to the abuse of female politicians. For instance, Harmer and Southern’s (2021) article analysed Tweets sent to female Members of Parliament in the UK. The authors studied Tweets which were deemed to be uncivil by their analysis and this was done to ascertain the kinds of abuse and microaggressions that were received by female MPs and how these were used to undermine female MPs. This study specifically looked at Tweets which were deemed to be misogynistic, but, it could be expanded on by looking at other forms of abuse directed at women.

Additionally, Collingnon and Rudig (2021) conducted a similar study which looked at the abuse received by female Parliamentary candidates during the 2019 General Election. This study looked at all kinds of abuse received by women as opposed to just the abuse received on social media platforms, but they did acknowledge the impact that social media had on

exacerbating abuse. For example, their study “found overall, 15% of candidates avoided going to political meetings or rallies, 20% avoided canvassing voters and 31% avoided using social media during the campaign,” (Collingnon and Rudig, 2021, p.432). Illustrating the impact that social media has in this area.

Wagner’s (2020) article ‘Tolerating the Trolls? Gendered perceptions of online harassment of politicians in Canada’ focused on the treatment of female politicians within Canada. This research took place in 2019 and involved interviews with over 100 elected representatives. Wagner acknowledged that whilst all groups face online abuse and discrimination, this is felt more and perceived to be more of an issue amongst minority groups, she makes the case that “While online abuse is a problem that all politicians confront, research participants were aware that women politicians face a higher degree of attacks with several noting the sexist, racist, and/or homophobic aspects of online vitriol.” (Wagner, 2020, p.41). She goes on to study the impact that this has and whether this affects the ambition of female representatives in politics, illustrating the consequences that these kinds of abuse can have on politicians and showing the significance of this area.

This research will therefore be very useful to this dissertation and one of the key considerations which will be accounted will be the impact that gender has on the abuse of Parliamentary candidates, but, will aim to look at all forms of abuse such as religious abuse and how frequently it is received by female MPs. .

Reasons for the abuse of Politicians: ethnicity

In addition, another factor that is discussed in the literature that impacts the amount and type of abuse received by politicians is the ethnicity and religion of elected representatives. There have been several pieces of literature which focus on this topic in particular and the impact these factors have on the abuse of politicians. This was discussed in Gorrell et al’s (2018) article which examined Tweets sent to Parliamentarians. They conducted this research with

the 2016 EU referendum in mind and they found that during this time there was also a large amount of racist and religious abuse, they found that black MPs such as Dianne Abbot and David Lammy and Asian MPs like Sajid Javid received a large amount of abuse. He argues “Antisemitism in the Labour Party and Islamophobia in the Conservative party were topics that attracted attention during this period, echoing a sense of polarization around identity politics that is also evident in responses to David Lammy’s and Diane Abbott’s tweets.” (Gorrell et al., 2018, p.20)

Gorrell et al’s (2019) article also looks at several different indicators that impact the abuse of MPs and acknowledges the impact that race and ethnicity have in impacting the amount of abuse received by Parliamentarians, although they did not include these factors in the study explicitly. They however do find that although all MPs receive a large amount of abuse and this does not vary depending on ethnicity, when it comes to the type of abuse received a minority of tweets include “explicit, unpleasant racism, with ethnic minorities and Muslims being the particular targets.” (Gorrell et al, 2019, p.12).

Considering this, this dissertation aims to add to the previous research on this topic and the ethnicity of candidates will be one of the key considerations and thus it is hoped that this dissertation will further expand on this topic.

Recent issues and the 2024 election

As the 2024 General election is a very contemporary topic, there are limited academic articles published so far and thus this dissertation aims to be one of the first within this field. However, there have been news articles that provide a context and understanding of the online abuse received by politicians and the toxicity of the campaign. For instance, Nathoo

and Francis (2024) look at the abuse experienced by political candidates and interview candidates who faced unprecedented levels of abuse during the campaign describing how there was an “unprecedented” campaign of harassment throughout the election.” In an interview with the MP for Bethnal Green Rushanara Ali, she argued that “during her 14-years representing Bethnal Green “we’ve seen a lot, but not this level of hostility,”. (Nathoo and Francis, 2024). The article cited the Israel/ Palestine conflict as a contentious issue during the campaign and described how the topic has been weaponised by some and it was a topic that generates abuse. This was also highlighted in the Guardian (Courea, 2024). The authors found that the abuse found by several candidates was the worse than it had been previously and highlighted the role that tensions regarding the Israel/ Gaza conflict had on this.

Considering this this dissertation hopes to consider this context when examining the abuse received during the 2024 election and studying this topic from an academic perspective. One of the key factors that this dissertation will study is the topics that trigger abuse and the topic of Israel/ Palestine is one that will be analysed.

Conclusion

In summary, there is a large and varied amount of literature on the topic of online abuse of politicians both during elections and Parliamentary sessions. The literature covers several topics such as the factors influencing abuse received like gender and ethnicity, the types of abuse received and what would motivate an individual to abuse, several articles set the groundwork and provide context to one studying modern-day abuse of politicians. Therefore, this research aims to look at the abuse of politicians from a modern-day perspective and build on previous research on the recent 2024 election, studying the influence that factors like political party, gender and ethnicity have on the abuse received as well as the topics that influence the abuse of politicians, accounting for recent events like the Israel- Hamas war.

Research Questions-

Before the 2024 election and when looking at analysis by mainstream media of issues faced by MPs, there was a focus on the scale and level of social media they received and the factors that meant that this was the case, for example, their stance on various political issues and characteristics such as their gender, ethnicity and political persuasion. Considering this, two types of research questions have been developed:

Firstly, a focus on the issues that have generated the most abuse. As discussed in the literature review, the issue of Palestine has generated a lot of discourse, particularly on social media since the beginning of the Israel- Hamas war on October the 6th 2023. This research therefore hopes to determine whether this carries over into the subsequent general election by looking at the political topics that generate replies on X.

RQ1- Are International affairs the topic that generates the most negative replies to PPCs in West Yorkshire constituencies on X?

RQ2- What is the overall scale of negative replies on X received by PPCs in West Yorkshire during the 2024 election?

Moreover, there also will be a focus on the characteristics of the PPCs who the abuse is targeted at. As also discussed in the literature review, there has been an understanding that online abuse by MPs is often based on certain characteristics, for instance, their gender and ethnicity; with research finding that BAME and women MPs are often subject to more abuse than their counterparts. This research therefore hopes to determine whether this is the same for Parliamentary Elections.

RQ3- Do female and BAME PPCs in West Yorkshire receive more negative replies on X during the 2024 election?

RQ4- Do candidates for certain political parties receive more negative replies than others on X during the 2024 election in West Yorkshire?

Research Methodology

1- Research Strategy and Design-

This research aims to adopt a quantitative approach to collecting data. Normally, by using quantitative methods, one can produce a “well-rounded study which is conclusive in nature.” (Mcmillan & Weyers, 2007). Quantitative research is suited to this study as each of the research questions is focused on cause and causality. They each have dependent and independent variables which can be quantifiable. Similarly, due to the instantaneous and fast-paced nature of social media during an election campaign, it is anticipated that this study will involve large amounts of social media posts and thus quantitative methods of analysis are suited to this and are often used for collecting and analysing large amount of data sets.

This study is hoped to be a cross-sectional study as it is focused on one particular period; this being the 2024 general election and 10 days during the purdah period (from the 10th to the 21st of June). It is hoped that by focusing on the 4 weeks during the election period in the summer 2024 election, a snapshot can be provided into the social media and political landscape of the election period. As during an election period Parliament is dissolved and goes into pre-election purdah, this time-period and the unique landscape of it cannot be replicated and thus this research is suited to a cross-sectional study.

Case Selection and Sampling-

This study seeks to look at the use of X (formally Twitter) and online abuse directed at PPCs on X specifically. Twitter, or X, is often the platform most strongly associated with politics and it is used frequently for elections. Previous elections, for example, the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections were said to be elections where social media platforms

like Twitter were frequently used. The site itself describes how it “has bolstered the ability of citizens to interact with one another as well as their public representatives, and for politicians and journalists to keep their finger on the pulse of the public opinion.” (X, 2019) Similarly, its instantaneous and direct nature, particularly with regards to the fact that it provides users with the opportunity to reply directly to posters with an @reply, mean that it is often used to comment directly on the activity of politicians and can also be used to target politicians with abusive replies, for instance, a study by the BBC found that more than 130,000 tweets mentioning MPs were considered to be toxic (Lynch, 2022).

This study aims to focus on Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs) who are standing in constituencies within the West Yorkshire region specifically. This region was selected as it is a region that represents a diverse range of constituencies and views. For example, it covers rural constituencies such as Selby and Wetherby and Easingwold, but, also urban areas like Bradford West and Leeds Central and Headingley as well as smaller towns like Huddersfield, Dewsbury and Batley. The area also reflects a diverse range of religions and ethnicities, for example, 16% of the population identified as Asian or Asian British in the 2021 census and 3% of the population identified as Black and Black British (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2022).

The diversity of the region in terms of ethnic make-up and the areas means that a wide range of viewpoints are represented within the electorate and will thus help to answer RQ1 and look at the topics that generate the most hate in election. Moreover, there are 23 seats in the region and several candidates from different ethnic backgrounds and political parties. This means that this dissertation can focus on the characteristics of those who receive negative replies on X as well as whether some parties receive more negativity than others. The focus on the 23 constituencies within West Yorkshire as opposed to the 650 constituencies in the whole country, means that the research is a manageable size to be undertaken by a sole researcher. When looking at the MPs who

are standing within the constituency of West Yorkshire there are a few high-profile MPs that are incumbents, for instance, Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves in Leeds West and Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper in Castleford, but there are several candidates for all parties who less widely known. When looking to identify candidates and their usernames on X, the Website Who Can I Vote For? (2024) will be used where all PPCs will be listed.

The data collection period will be from the 10th of June 2024, which is the given deadline shortly after the delivery of the nomination papers for the election, thus meaning that every candidate will have declared their intention to stand in the election and can be identified, it will then run until the 21st of June. It is hoped that this period will provide a good picture of the national period during the election campaign as it will be during the purdah period, when Parliament is suspended, and campaigning is in full swing. Moreover, the ten-day period for data collection will make it a manageable project.

This study has chosen to look at the 2024 election specifically. This was chosen as it is so recent and will give an accurate picture of the use of X for online abuse in 2024. Additionally, the election is seen to address a great deal of unique issues and challenges. For example, online usage has accelerated and more people than ever before are social media users. Equally, this is the first election following the Covid-19 pandemic and the Cost-of-living crisis where the level of online abuse and toxicity has increased. During the election a large range of topics and issues have emerged for instance, the ongoing Israel- Hamas war, environmentalism, cost of living and immigration have been cited to be huge areas of concern for voters.

When selecting the sample for this study, the unit of selection will be 10 tweets per day aimed at every candidate (if possible). Before the data collection, the X handle for every Parliamentary candidate within the region, if available will be identified and ten posts will

be randomly selected when conducting a daily search of the @ mentions of each candidate. The only occasions where a post that includes a candidate's handle will not be used is when the post is a post targeting many politicians, but not aimed at a PPC specifically. For example, if one is looking at the posts aimed at a Labour PPC and a user has included them when discussing all Labour politicians, but, is not discussing them or their constituency specifically. In addition, any post which is spam and has no relation to the candidate, the election or their policies will also be disregarded. This is because of the instances outlined above the user is not targeting the specific PPC. In addition, Posts that are not written in English will also be omitted as they will not include the keywords that constitute abuse. When these are collected, each Tweet will be coded and the profile of the candidate that they are aimed at, for example, their political party and ethnicity will be noted to help to answer the research questions. In terms of the sampling method, a random sample of 10 tweets aimed at each candidate will be selected per day.

Method of Data Collection-

As X has now limited access to its API for academic purposes, this means that it is no longer a possible to use this for the collection of the posts within this study, as initially had been intended. Therefore, this dissertation hopes to use manual methods to collect the data. Before the data collection period and when all candidates have declared their intention to stand in the election, the handle of each will be noted. Then a daily search of X for any posts referencing the user's handle will be conducted. This search will take place at the same time each day (7PM) each evening to ensure consistency and any post made including an X handle within the 24-hour period will be recorded. Each Post will then be logged in a separate spreadsheet and ten of these will be selected for each candidate as a random sample.

Method of Data Analysis-

A content analysis will be conducted to analyse the posts that have been collected. Content analysis is seen as both an efficient (Hansen and Machin, 2019) and adaptable way of analysing a large amount of data. When each post is examined, the PPC that the post was aimed at will be noted as will their gender, political party and ethnicity. Each Post will then be coded into categories based on the nature of the post (whether it is positive, negative, or abusive) and the topic that is being discussed. Please see this in more detail in Coder's manual in Appendix A. Before the coding a list of words that are abusive and are often directed at politicians and PPCs will be made and any Post that contains any of these will be flagged as abuse, if a post is abusive the type of abuse will be looked at e.g. homophobia, racism, ableism or misogyny. Then the Post will be coded based on the overall sentiment and also the topic that is being discussed. It is hoped that these categories will be clear-cut and thus help to answer the research questions.

Reliability and Validity-

Reliability-

Only one coder will be available to undertake this analysis, so this dissertation hopes to take several measures to ensure the reliability of the methods used. Firstly, it will be ensured that the coder is as familiar as possible with the coding manual before the data collection taking place. In order to do this, a small sample of posts directed at PPCs will be taken and coded prior to the study to ensure that everything is accurate and ensure ease of use. In addition, test-retest reliability will be used. This method will mean that the posts, once collected, will be coded several times to ensure that the codes given to them remain consistent throughout the study.

Validity-

To ensure the construct validity of this study, the coding manual has been developed based on pre-existing literature that denotes abuse and the list of abusive terminologies has been developed. This was based on the guide produced by Ofcom based on research by Ipsos Mori (2022), but, also several additional words were added specific to politics in the UK and based on pre-existing literature on abuse of UK politicians. Much of this literature involves comprehensive studies into language and what constitutes abuse in 21st-century Britain and thus the coding manual seeks to reflect it. Moreover, even if these terms were not included but were heavily alluded to, then these Posts were also seen to be abusive. Please see Appendix A.

In terms of face validity, as previously discussed, a trial run of the coding process and the data collection will be undertaken. It is hoped that during this trial any flaws, mistakes or any issues with the validity of the coding categories will be identified and rectified to ensure the continued validity of this process overall.

Limitations of Methods-

Although it is hoped that this study will be well-rounded and conclusive, there are several limitations of the study that must also be considered. Firstly, there will only be one coder who will present during the coding process of the content analysis, which means that the research could run the risk of leading to bias and subjectivity; if there were several coders present, they would be able to offer a more diverse range of viewpoints and eliminate bias. For example, some of the decisions based on the sentiment and the abuse present in the posts may be impacted by the fact that the researcher is a member of the Labour Party and therefore may favour Labour Party candidates over candidates from other parties and

therefore may be quicker to label posts to Labour candidates as abuse than they would be to other parties.

Similarly, the content analysis method of analysis has several limitations. For example, as found by Bryman et al the content analysis can be 'atheoretical', meaning that they do not have a strong theoretical basis. This is because the emphasis on measurement in content analysis can result in researchers focusing on what is measurable rather than on what is theoretically significant." (Bryman et al, 2021, p.291). In addition, as this content analysis will be done manually by one coder there can be a possibility for bias and subjective interpretations and mistakes can be made whilst coding manually meaning that the results can also be invalid.

Moreover, only a small 10-day window was selected for this study and any posts included outside of this window will not be counted, meaning that any significant events that occur outside of this timeframe will not be considered within the study. This is also the case for any posts that are directed at users made by private accounts. If a PPC candidate is more active on X then they may have more posts targeted at them during this time and that also should be considered.

In addition, whilst the region of West Yorkshire has been selected to narrow down the focus of this study and to make it more manageable and it is hoped that this analysis will be an in-depth study into the political climate of this region, the focus on one region may mean that an accurate picture of the election nationally is not provided. For example, regional parties like the SNP and Plaid Cymru are not able to stand in the West Yorkshire region and events that occur outside of the region during the election campaign will not be considered.

Discussion and Findings-

Overall Findings-

In total, there were 3120 tweets collected from the sample period (between the 10th of June and the 21st of June 2024). There were 72 PPCs who were included throughout the study, but the frequency of tweets directed at them did vary.

RQ 1

When looking at the topics that generate abusive replies and the role international affairs and the Israel- Gaza war had in this, this study looked at both the topics of the original tweet that the abusive, or negative replies were in response to and the topic of the replies themselves. The topics that generate abusive replies and the topics involved in the replies are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: THE TOPIC OF TWEETS THAT LED TO A REPLY CATEGORISED AS ABUSIVE

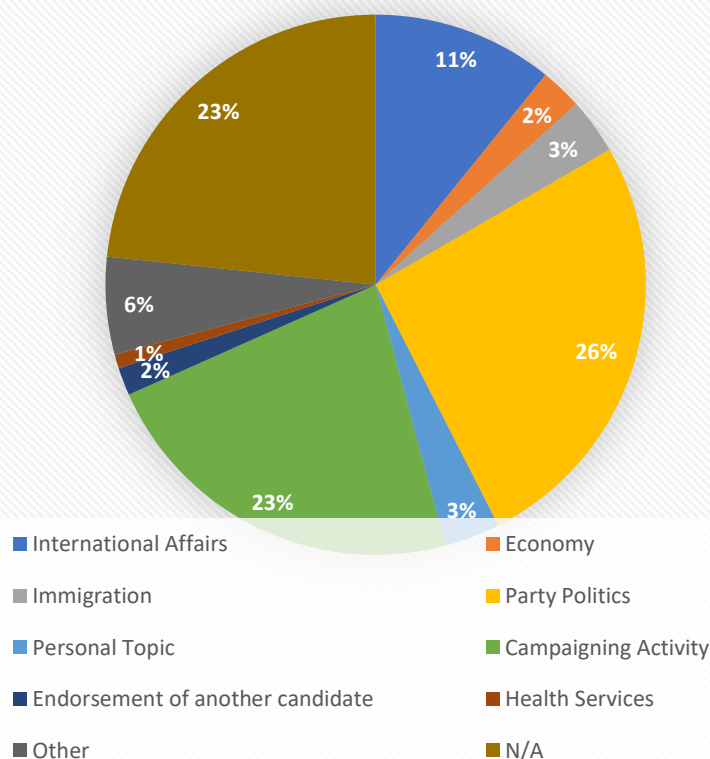
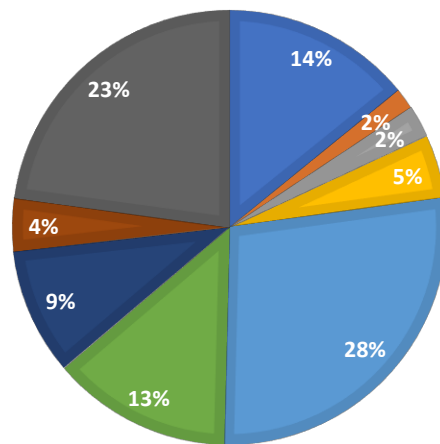
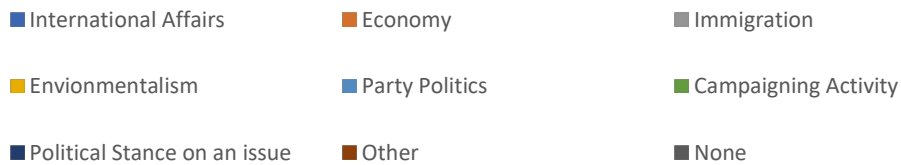


FIGURE 2: THE TOPICS OF REPLIES SCORED AS ABUSIVE

When it comes to the topic of the tweet that received an abusive reply and the topics of tweets that contained an abusive reply, party politics was the largest for both areas. This suggests that party politics was a very contentious issue with during the 2024 General Election with much of the abuse being targeted at candidates because of their political party. Similarly, when a PPC tweeted about their campaigning activity this was the second largest category that led to abuse and again shows that toxicity was aimed at candidates due to their political party. When looking at the issue of international affairs, this issue is also

prominent in both with it consisting of 11% of the original tweets and 14% of the replies. The majority of these referenced the Israel/ Hamas war. The topic is slightly more prominent when it comes to abusive replies and suggests that PPC may have sometimes received abusive references to their stance on the Israel/Hamas war without referencing it themselves; with this being a theme in the election. However, contrary to what was suggested by the literature before the election, whilst being significant it was not the most significant topic that led to abuse and this should be considered also. Indeed, other topics also did feature such as Immigration and environmentalism. However, it could also be said that some of the abusive tweets surrounding a PPC's political party could have been a result of disdain for their political party which could have stemmed from their stance on the Israel/Palestine war and thus this should also be considered in addition.

The topics that generate negative replies to PPCs and the topics included in these replies are shown in figures 3 and 4. In terms of the original tweets and the replies given to these tweets, the main topic which generated negative replies was Party Politics. This reiterates the point made earlier and suggests that much of the toxicity and negativity that arose from the 2024 General Election was a result of the Political Party of PPCs. When looking at the role of the topic of International Affairs and Palestine, (as with abusive replies), tweets relating to this issue are certainly featured in this data, but this is not the most prominent category. In addition, the topic's score is slightly higher when one looks at the replies to tweets as opposed to the content of the original tweet and again shows that PPCS could receive tweets relating to Palestine unprompted. For instance, in terms of the topic of the original tweet, it scores 7% whilst when one looks at the topic of the reply it scores at 10%, again correlating with previous studies such as those conducted by the BBC (as discussed in the literature).

Figure 3: TOPICS OF TWEETS THAT LED TO A REPLY CATEGORISED AS NEGATIVE

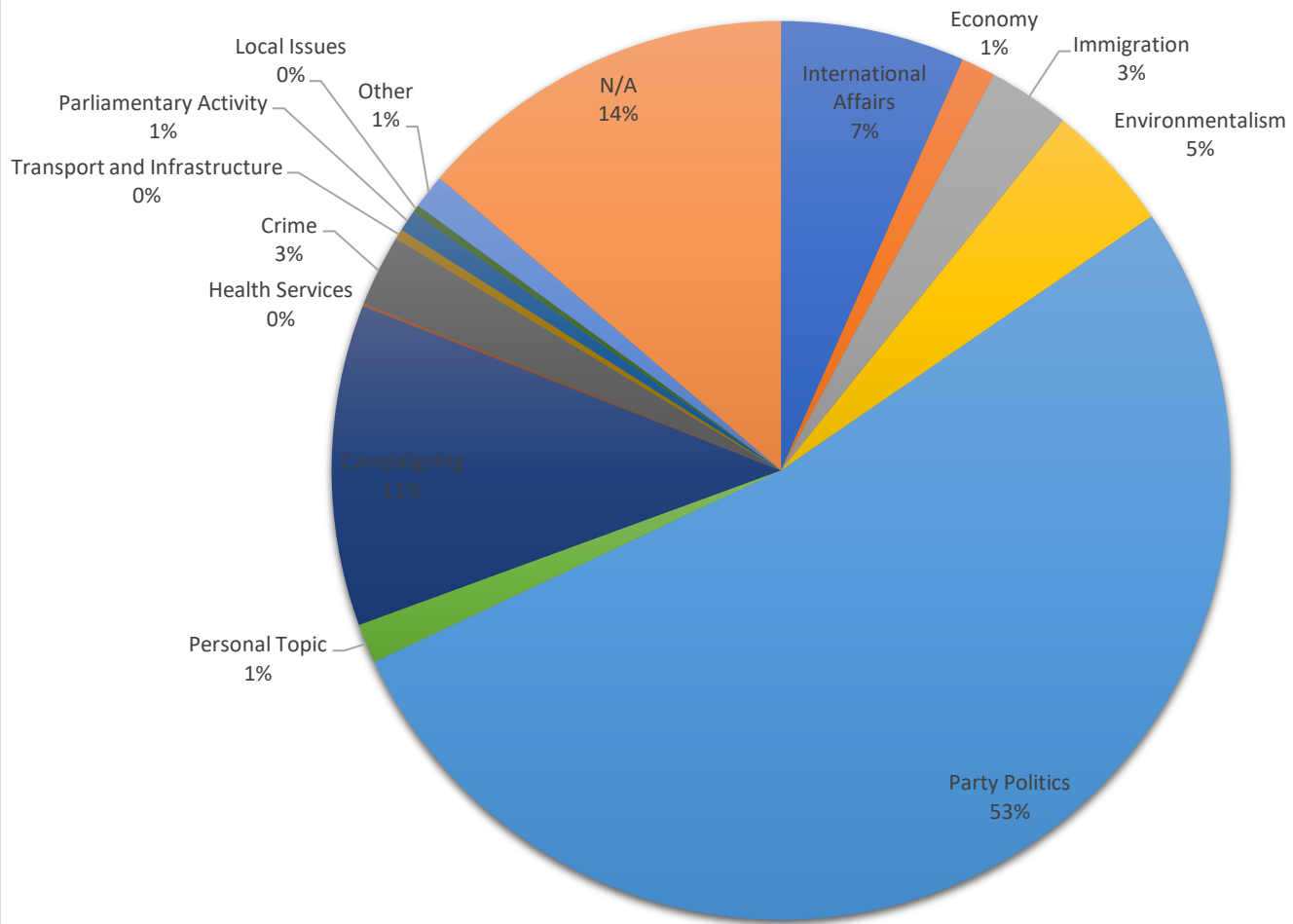
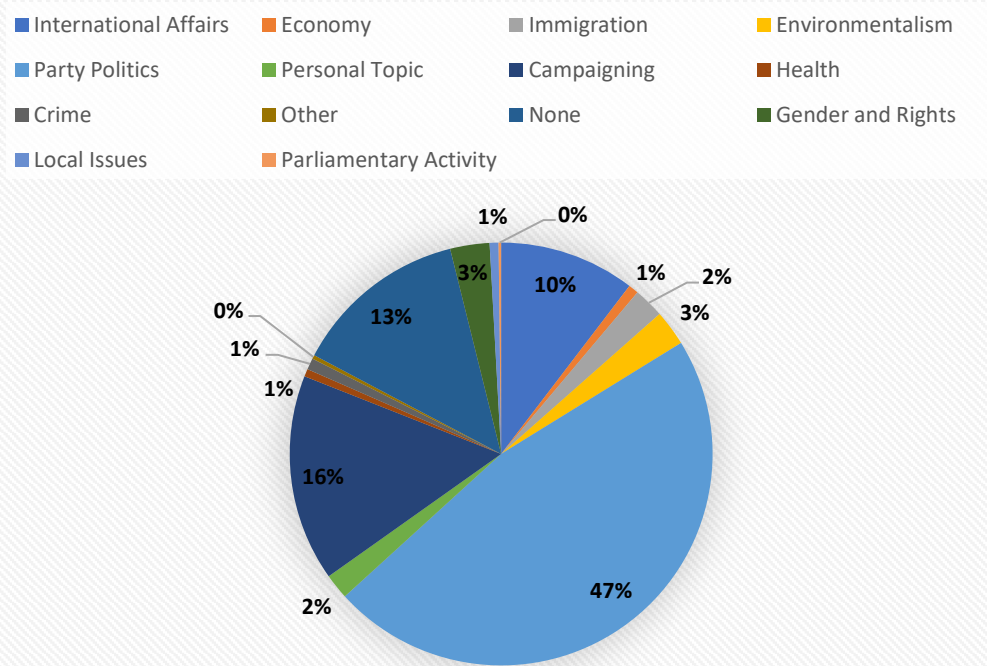


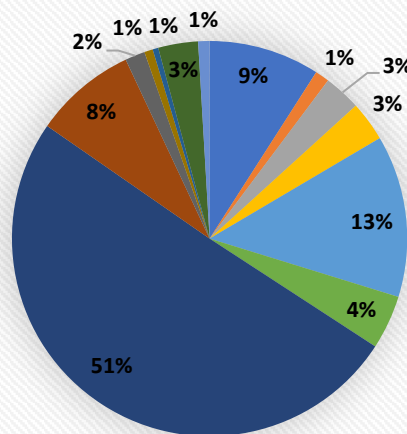
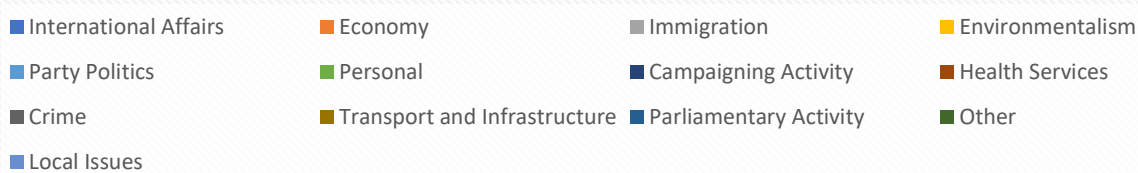
FIGURE 4: THE TOPICS OF REPLIES SCORED AS NEGATIVE



When it comes to negative tweets directed at PPCs, there is a wider array of topics that lead to negativity. For example, topics such as immigration, Parliamentary Activity, gender and rights and environmentalism were all featured when looking at the dataset, but none of these topics featured prominently and this does show the wide variety of issues involved in the election. Furthermore, one of the main topics which was a source of both negative replies and which was referenced within the replies themselves was Campaigning, with there being several instances of users referencing their dissatisfaction with their methods of campaigning such as the content of their leaflets and signs and the frequency of their canvassing visits to a certain area.

This research also studied the topics that triggered positive and neutral replies to PPCs, in order to gain a further understanding of the topics that led to abuse and negativity directed at PPCs. This is illustrated in Figure 5. The data included in Figure 5 was only for tweets that were in reply to a tweet by a PPC, as a majority of those included within the study were @mentions but not replies.

Figure 5: TOPIC OF TWEETS THAT LED TO A POSITIVE/ NEUTRAL REPLY



As can be seen from looking at Figure 5 the key focus of the vast majority of tweets which led to a positive or neutral response was campaigning activity. This is understandable, given that the study was conducted during an election period. As a result, a significant portion of the tweets included references to campaigning, and many of the positive tweets expressed support for specific candidates or positions. For example, many users used X to advertise

canvassing sessions with PPCs and that they were attending these sessions. In addition, whilst scoring very high when it comes to abusive and negative tweets, the topics of international affairs were also very prominent with positive and neutral tweets too, perhaps illustrating the fact these topics were not always linked with negativity and abuse.

In conclusion, International Affairs was certainly a prominent topic when examining the topics that led to abusive tweets and replies directed at PPC, as had anticipated by several news articles in the run up to the campaign. However, this topic was not the most prominent topic, with this being the Political Party of PPCs, however, it could be argued that the Israel/Palestine crisis may have amplified disdain towards certain political parties. In general, whilst Israel and Palestine were prominent in the election, there was a wide range of topics featured in this study which were also significant.

RQ2-

When looking at the scale of the abuse received by PPCs Figure 6 illustrates the breakdown of the type of tweets received and their categorisation. As shown, when looking at the categorisation of the Tweets directed at PPCs during this period, out of the 3120 Tweets ranked, 1032 (46%) were deemed to be neutral. When it comes to abusive tweets specifically, 118 were deemed to be abusive (3.8%). Furthermore, tweets that were seen to be negative consisted of 33% of the total and represented the second largest category whilst positive tweets made up 16.9% of all tweets ranked.

Figure 6: Breakdown of types of tweets received and their categorisation

Rating	Total	%
Positive	528	16.9
Negative	1032	33
Abusive	118	3.8
Neutral	1442	46.2
Total	3120	100

At 3.8% abusive tweets represents a relatively low proportion of total tweets when compared to expectations at the outset of the study. However, at 3.8% abusive tweets are clearly evident and often this may have been more directed at certain types of politicians (as discussed in the literature and answer to RQ3). Moreover, there may be some further explanation of the relatively low score. For example, abusive tweets and comments may have been directed elsewhere through other means like direct messages and from private accounts so outside the scope of this study. Similarly, when a tweet is deemed to be very abusive and causes distress and upset towards the PPC, there is a policy in place which means that these messages would be quickly deleted and reported as abusive, sometimes these may be reported to the Police and security services, these therefore would not be publicly available at the time of the data collection and this should be considered before making further conclusions regarding the scale of abuse directed at PPCs which is likely to be underestimated by this study.

The fact that neutral tweets made up the largest category of tweets may suggest that many of the tweets by PPCs do not trigger a passionate response and X may be used by many as a platform to merely share information. Indeed, data by Ofcom (2023) has found that in the

UK adults are increasingly likely to use social media platforms, including X, as their main source of news with this figure being as high as 17% in 2023. If a user is directing a neutral tweet at a PPC, then this may suggest they are simply seeking information with no agenda, with many of these neutral tweets being questions aimed at PPCs and tweets which share information. Moreover, for PPCs from smaller parties many of whom were purely paper candidates with no expectation of gaining office, X was still used but much more informally and many of the tweets to these candidates involved them being engaged in dialogue with other users so were benign in nature.

Whilst the level of abuse aimed at PPCs may have not been particularly high, there was a significant level of negative tweets and when contrasted with positive tweets, this was reflected by a difference of around 17%. Many of the tweets that were given a negative score were tweets that involved personal criticism of a PPC. These often targeted their political persuasion or party and even involved personal attacks. However, whilst these tweets were negative, they often did not contain abusive language and thus were not categorised as being abusive. However, one should certainly consider these when making overall conclusions around the scale of abuse on X, as the significant difference between the level of abusive tweets and the level of positive tweets perhaps illustrates the toxicity of X as a whole and PPCs in receipt of large amounts of negativity would be adversely affected even without the use of abusive language.

Figure 7 illustrates the types of abuse that make up abusive tweets in this study. As illustrated, the largest category of abuse received was that surrounding political party. When one considers the context of the 2024 election and the fact that it was seen to be the first election after scandals such as 'Party-gate', the mini Budget and a disillusionment with the Conservative Party in general and at the same time some scepticism towards the Labour Party this then provides some context to the reasons that much of the abuse is aimed at the political party of PPCs.

Figure7: Types of abusive tweets recorded

34

Rating	Total	%
Misogyny/ Sexism	2	1.6
Racism/ Xenophobia	4	3.3
Religion	25	20.8
Violence and Intimidation	3	2.5
Party	55	45.8
Ageist	2	1.6
Multiple	5	4.1
Other	24	20

Similarly, the second largest category was abuse surrounding the PPC's religion. In most cases this involved Islamophobic abuse directed specifically at Muslim PPCs. This finding is deeply concerning and perhaps illustrates the toxicity of the context of this General Election and the worrying level of Islamophobia and religious abuse still present in the UK, particularly surrounding the Israel- Gaza war and the toxicity of the platform for BAME Muslim PPCs, as further discussed in the literature and RQ3.

A further category consists of abuse seen as 'other,' this involved tweets which may have not referenced any further issues and instead were singular words or insults, which suggests the reasons for the large score in this category as it has a wide scope and encompassed different tweets that would otherwise be undefined. The other categories are relatively narrow in terms of the number of tweets allocated to them, but, the fact that they are still present perhaps illustrates the variety of abuse received by PPCs. As an illustration, this category consists of ageist, violent and misogynistic abuse, showing the large number of characteristics of PPCs that are a trigger for abuse.

In summary, the scale of abuse directed at PPC may have not been overwhelming but it was still very much an issue and the large level of negative tweets directed at PPCs illustrates the toxicity of the platform during the 2024 General Election. This is further evidenced by the concerning fact that abuse relating to a PPC's political party and religion made up the largest percentage of abusive tweets directed at PPCs. These findings are in line with the recommendations from the Committee on Standards in Public Life (2017), this research further underscores the urgent need for social media platforms to implement stronger moderation policies to protect public figures from abuse

RQ3-

RQ3 focused on looking at the various characteristics of Members of Parliament and whether this led to them receiving more abuse, as had been suggested by previous literature on this topic. For instance, Collingnon and Rudig highlighted the high levels of abuse directed at female MPs and Gorrel highlighted the abuse that was faced by BAME MPs. This sought to determine whether the conclusions of other authors like Wagner (2020) that female MPs faced a greater amount of abuse than their counterparts, could be applied to the 2024 General Election.

Figures 8, 9 and 10 illustrate the breakdown of abuse by gender.

FIGURE 8
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED AT
MALE MPS

■ Abusive ■ Negative ■ Neutral ■ Positive

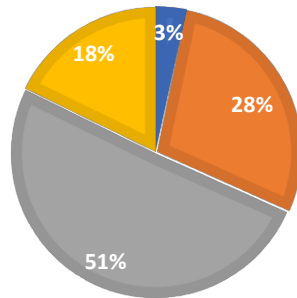


FIGURE 9
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED AT
FEMALE MPS

■ Abusive ■ Negative ■ Neutral ■ Positive

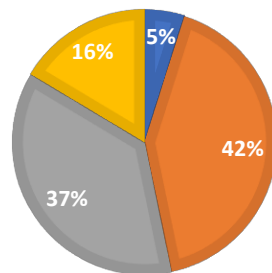
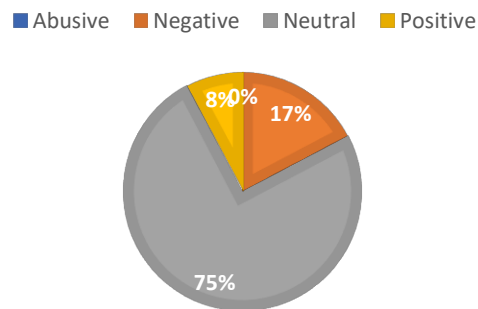


FIGURE 10
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED AT NON-BINARY MPS



In total, there were 1170 tweets received by female PPCs and 1846 tweets aimed at male PPCs. Two candidates identified as non-binary and they received a total of 104 tweets directed at them from the period that the data was collected. When looking at Figures 8 and 9 a contrast is clearly evident in the types of tweets received by male and female PPCs. For both genders, neutral tweets reflected a large majority of the tweets. Negative tweets represented the second largest category, positive the third and abusive the smallest. But when one examines the proportions of these categories then there are certainly differences. For instance, male MPs received a smaller proportion of the abusive and negative tweets, but, a larger proportion of the positive and neutral tweets, perhaps illustrating the trends outlined previously highlighted by authors in this field and the reinforcing the fact that female MPs are more susceptible to abuse and negativity than their male counterparts.

However, there was still a relatively low levels of abuse received by both genders and one must allow for a margin of error when examining datasets such as this. In addition, two of the female PPCs included in this study were previously high-profile Members of Parliaments, with the MP for Leeds West Rachel Reeves being the Shadow Chancellor and the MP for

Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley, Yvette Cooper being the Shadow Home Secretary.

Whilst some male PPCs in the sample were relatively well known, Cooper and Reeves were key parts of the Labour campaign frequently appearing on media rounds during the campaign trail, therefore they received a disproportionately large amount of attention and negativity which may be explained by the data.

When looking at the data for the PPCs who identified as non-binary there were further contrasts in the results; with there being no abusive Tweets recorded and 75% of the tweets being neutral, 17% being negative and 8% being positive. Whilst there is a huge contrast in these results compared to the results of the tweets directed at male and female MPs, one must be mindful of the fact that this data reflects only the data of the Tweets received by two non-binary PPCs. Both of these PPCs represented the Green Party in seats where the Green Party were not anticipated to win and thus throughout the campaign, they probably remained relatively unknown and many of the neutral tweets were discussing personal topics and using Twitter as a conversational platform. Therefore, one should not use this data to make any firm conclusions regarding the treatment of non-binary PPCs on X and further research is needed in this area.

In summary, however, when looking at the differences between male and female MPs and their treatment on X, there were key differences, and this substantiates the remarks expressed in previous research such as Wagner's (2020) and Collingnon and Rudig's (2021). That said, whilst there were differences these were not stark and male and female PPCs did not face significant differences in treatment on X through the duration of this study and some differences could be attributed to the profile of the PPC and not gender.

Figures 11 and 12 highlight the categorisation of Tweets aimed at PPCs according to their ethnicity. When looking at the neutral Tweets received by BAME and non-BAME PPCs the data shows there is no variation in the percentage of tweets and this consists of the largest category for both groups. Similarly, negative tweets represent the second largest category, positive the third and abusive tweets are the smallest for each group. However, as with

gender, there are variations in the proportion of tweets in each category received by the two groups. For instance, non-BAME MPs receive a larger amount of negative, but, a smaller number of abusive tweets, whilst BAME MPS receive a larger proportion of positive tweets and abusive tweets.

FIGURE 11
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED
AT BAME PPCS

■ Abusive ■ Negative ■ Neutral ■ Positive

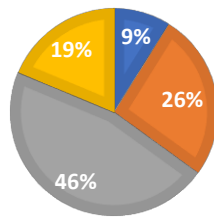
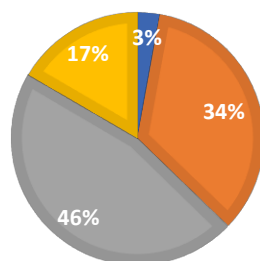


FIGURE 12
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED AT
NON-BAME PPCS

■ Abusive ■ Negative ■ Neutral ■ Positive



The contrast in the number of abusive tweets between the two groups is also relatively high, with a difference being at a level of 6%. This reflects the previous research in this area, as discussed in the earlier chapters, showing that BAME PPCs in general are more likely to be recipients of abuse than non-BAME PPCs. There may be some explanations for this mainly that they are more likely to receive racist and religious abuse. Of the BAME PPCs included in this study, all were of South Asian ethnicity, meaning that they may have faced Islamophobic and religious abuse (even though the BAME PPCs were not exclusively from Muslim backgrounds). In the UK Islamophobia has been reported to be on the rise, with a report finding that Islamophobic incidents in Britain doubled between 2012- 2022. (Faith Matters, 2023).

Moreover, the issue of Palestine has also led to a rise in hate towards BAME PPCs with Muslim Labour PPCs in particular facing criticism for supporting their party line despite the party's stance on Gaza. This decision was heavily criticised in the election campaign. This abuse has been two-faceted with these MPs facing a rise in Islamophobia and negativity on the one hand in addition to supporting the party line. This has also gained prominence since the October 7th attack by Hamas (Monetta, 2024). The data showed evidence of BAME PPCs receiving abuse in both these instances.

However, Figure 12 also shows that BAME PPCs were more likely to receive Positive tweets with 19% of tweets towards BAME PPCs being positive, contrasted with 17% targeted at non-BAME PPCs. In a similar vein, BAME MPs were less likely to receive negative tweets than non-BAME MPs with 34% of tweets aimed at non-BAME PPCs being negative versus 26% of tweets aimed at BAME PPCs being negative. This may suggest that while negativity was more often sent to non-BAME PPCs, people are more willing to use abusive or racially

abusive language to BAME PPCs when they want to address them negatively rather than a benign negative tweet.

This research also looked at the breakdown of the types of Tweets aimed at PPCs when looking at gender and ethnicity combined. This is shown in Figures 13 and 14. The graphs show that the level of abusive Tweets received by both BAME female and BAME male PPCs was the same, however, there are contrasts between the other categories.

FIGURE 13
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS
AIMED AT BAME FEMALE
PPCS

■ Abusive ■ Negative ■ Neutral ■ Positive

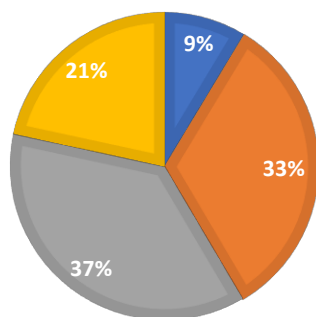
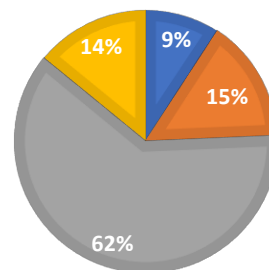


FIGURE 14
CATEGORISATION OF
TWEETS AIMED AT BAME
MALE PPCS

■ Abusive ■ Negative ■ Neutral ■ Positive



For instance, BAME females were likely to receive negativity and also positive tweets, whilst tweets to male PPCs remained more neutral. When considering this one has to be mindful of the fact that when broken down into gender and ethnicity, both these groups represented a small number of PPCs (3 and 5) and thus this data may be slightly skewed due to this. For instance, two of the male PPCs were from the Workers Party a smaller political party and thus would have been relatively unknown so may not have attracted widescale abuse, instead the tweets may have consisted of more neutral conversational style tweets. Conversely, the findings on the abuse faced by female PPCs fit with other findings in the

literature and illustrate the fact that female PPCs, particularly those from a BAME minority background and thus are subject to more abuse.

Ultimately, this research shows that female PPCs and BAME PPCs were subject to higher levels of abusive tweets in this study than their counterparts and this is consistent with what was found in the literature. BAME MPs experienced a significantly higher amount of abuse, while the abusive tweets aimed at female MPs were marginally larger.

RQ 4

Through the two weeks that the study took place, the Labour Party were the largest party featured in this study, with 1774 of the total tweets being aimed at Labour PPCs. The region of West Yorkshire is traditionally an area where the Labour Party are very electorally successful and this explains this score, with many of the Labour PPCs going on to be MPs and therefore being more prominent on social media. The Conservative Party were the second largest and 532 tweets recorded were aimed at Conservative PPCs. The third largest was the Green Party with 268 tweets aimed at Green PPCs and the fourth was the Liberal Democrats with 105 Tweets aimed at Lib Dem MPs. Several smaller parties that stood in the election including parties such as the Yorkshire Party, the Worker's Party, the SDP party and some independent candidates. When these candidates had a twitter account they were included in this study and categorised as 'other.'

Figures, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 show the categorisation of the tweets aimed at each of the political parties. As is shown by the graphs, the number of tweets received by PPCs that are directly abusive is relatively low for all political parties, however, there was more abuse aimed at the larger parties in general, with 5% of abusive tweets received by Conservative MPs being abusive and 4% of abusive tweets received by Labour PPCs being abusive.

Figure 15
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED AT
LABOUR PPCS

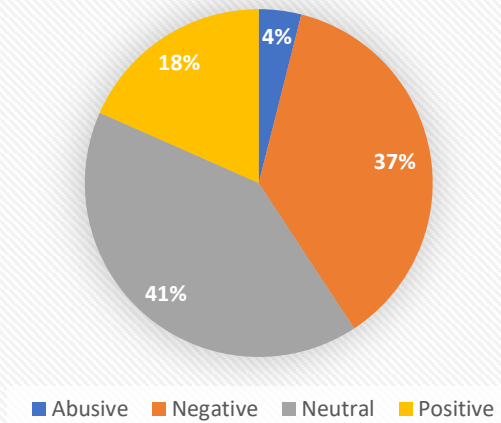


Figure 16
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED
AT CONSERVATIVE PPCS

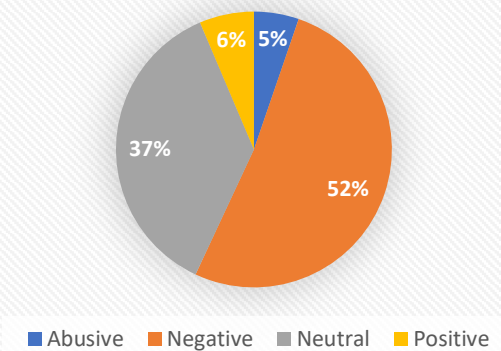


Figure 17
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED
AT GREEN PPCS

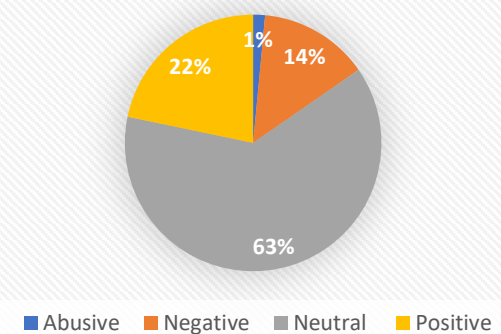


Figure 18
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED
AT PPCS FROM OTHER PARTIES

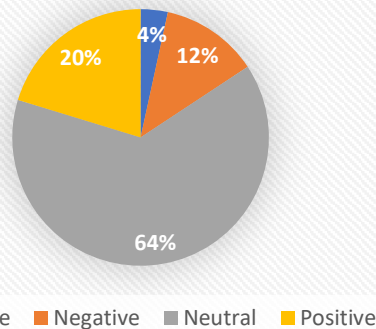
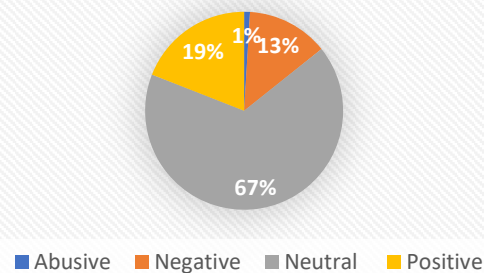


Figure 19
CATEGORISATION OF TWEETS AIMED
AT LIB DEM MPS



This can be explained by the fact that the Labour and Conservative PPCs fighting elections in West Yorkshire being much more well-known than the other political parties and thus they are more likely to receive trolling or hate. PPCs representing the Lib Dem or Green parties received a low number of abusive tweets, with 1% of their tweets being abusive. This may be because both political parties had candidates that were less well-known as opposed to the fact that these parties were less likely to receive abuse and perhaps more research should be done on the profile of a PPC and the abuse that they receive. When it comes to PPCs from other political parties a surprisingly high number of tweets that they received were scored as abusive (4%) when compared to the Green Party and the Liberal Democrat

Party. This could be explained by the fact that some of these candidates were from parties like the Worker's Party or were Independent Candidates who were standing as protest candidates and thus when they were tweeting their intention was to attract controversy and thus their tweets received hostile replies. For example, the independent PPC standing in Bradford south used Twitter throughout the campaign as a forum to tweet inflammatory remarks aimed at the other parties and the incumbent MP.

In addition, when one examines negative tweets received by PPCs similar trends can be identified; with the Liberal Democrat Party and Green Party both receiving a lower number of negative tweets than the two main parties, similarly PPCs from other parties also received a relatively low number of negative tweets to the Labour and Conservative Parties, showing that higher level of abuse received by Independent PPC doesn't translate to negativity. When it comes to the Labour and Conservative Parties, whilst both parties received a higher number of negative tweets, the negative tweets aimed at Conservative PPCs were significantly higher, being 12% higher than the negative tweets received by Labour MPs. This can be explained by the context of the election and the general negativity nationally surrounding the Conservative Party in the run up to the 2024 General Election.

In addition, when considering positive tweets aimed at PPCs from the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green Parties and the other smaller parties the level of positive tweets received by PPCs remained fairly consistent, with the number of these being between 18% and 22%, conversely when considering, the tweets aimed at the Conservative Party only 6% of these were ranked as positive, again showing a national rejection of the party, as previously suggested. In terms of neutral tweets, the Green Party, Liberal Democrat Party and the other smaller parties received a much larger proportion of tweets scored as neutral than their other party counterparts and this could also be explained by the fact that the parties were not expected to win seats and thus were using X more in an informal, conversational manner.

To summarise, when it comes to determining whether their political party is a factor that leads to online abuse of PPCs, it is clear that both the Labour and Conservative Party were

in receipt of a higher number of abusive tweets than their smaller party counterparts and the Conservative Party received more negativity and less positivity. This follows the national mood during the Election where the Conservative Party were anticipated to perform very poorly and there was a large rejection of their policies. However, rather than links between the political party of a PPC and the level of abuse, there seems instead to be links between the prominence of a PPC and the abuse they received, and this should be considered also.

Conclusions

In summary, this dissertation studied the abuse on X amongst Prospective Parliamentary Candidates in West Yorkshire constituencies during the 2024 General Election. In doing this the main aims of the research were to establish the extent of abuse faced by PPCs, and to determine whether factors such as a candidate's gender, race or political party had a role to play in the level of abuse that they received and to gain an understanding into the key issues of the Election. In addition, whether any of these topics led to an increase in the level of abuse received by PPCs; particularly to establish whether Palestine and tensions relating to the Israel/ Gaza war had a role in escalating any abuse received within this area.

When studying the level of abuse of PPCs during this election in relation to RQ2, it was established that although there was a relatively low level of abusive tweets found in the content analysis, there was a lot of hostility and negativity towards PPCs. Similarly, when looking at the type of abuse received this was wide-ranging and included xenophobic, misogynistic, ageist and violence and intimidation, however, mainly the abuse centred around a PPC's political party and in general this was a recurrent theme throughout the election. Although the level of abusive Tweets was low overall, one has to be mindful of the fact that the study may have not detected all abusive sent to PPCs during the election, as online this can often be deleted and reported more or less straight after it was detected. This

study also does not account for abuse that has taken place offline and perhaps further research is needed within this remit to gain a full understanding of the scale of abuse received by politicians on X in 2024.

Moreover, RQ3 examined the characteristics of PPCs and the role that this had on the level of abuse received. Some results that highlighted that certain characteristic impacted the level of abuse received. For example, when studying the ethnicity of PPCs, this study found that PPCs from BAME backgrounds received more abuse than white PPCs and this abuse was prevalent amongst both genders this linked to other findings in this study where it was determined that Islamophobic abuse and abuse targeted at South Asians in particular was higher. Similarly, this study found that when looking at the gender of PPCs, female PPCs received a higher level of abuse than their male counterparts, but this margin was very small. This study also looked at two PPCs who identified as non-binary, but this sample size was too small to make any meaningful conclusions on this and perhaps more research should be devoted to this topic in the future.

RQ 1 looked at the topic that led to the highest amount of abuse was party politics and many of the abusive and negative tweets received by PPCs were received about their political party and campaigning activity. The ongoing conflict in Israel/ Palestine was anticipated to be a large topic in relation to the abuse received and although it was significant, it was clear that party politics was more significant, particularly disdain towards the two largest parties and their policies at the time of the General Election.

Finally, RQ4 examined the political party of a PPC and the impact that this had on the level of abuse they received, it was found that more abusive and negative tweets were aimed at the Labour and Conservative Parties, this can be explained by their size and the higher profile of the PPCs, however, whilst both received negativity, the Conservative Party received a high amount of hostility, illustrating once again the resentment towards the Party during the election. The significance of the profile of PPCs was not fully considered during

this research and it is hoped that this will open avenues for future research in this area and further attention by policymakers into the impact that this has on individual policies.

In conclusion, the 2024 General Election was unique in many respects and because with each passing Election, we become more and more connected and social media becomes more prominent so, it was the election where online presence was the most significant to date. Unfortunately, this meant that it became particularly toxic as the instantaneous nature of X made PPCs more accessible than ever before and thus more susceptible to abuse. It is hoped that this research will open up future avenues for those wanting to understand abuse and negativity in 2024 and the key drivers of this abuse as social media becomes ever more prevalent on the political stage.

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Appendices-

Appendix 1- Coding Manual-

Question 1- What is the Political Party of the recipient of the Tweet

1. Labour
2. Conservative
3. Lib Dem
4. Green
5. Reform UK
6. SDP
7. Worker's Party
8. An Independent Candidate
9. Other Party
10. Yorkshire Party

Question 2- What is the gender of the recipient of the Tweet?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Other

Question 3- What is the ethnicity of the recipient of the Tweet?

1. "Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh"
2. "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African"
3. "Mixed or Multiple"
4. "White"
5. "Other ethnic group"
6. Unknown

Question 4- What is the overall sentiment of the Tweet?

1 – Positive- A Tweet in support of the candidate and their political activities.

Example:

2- Neutral – A Tweet where neither positive or negative sentiment is used and it is unclear on the poster's intentions, they may be questioning the PPC on an issue, or expressing their views but without a sentiment that gives an indication either way:

[REDACTED]

4. Negative but not abusive- These types of Tweet do not contain any abusive terms or toxicity, but, are being negative towards the PPC. n/a

Example:

5. Abusive- Involves the abusive keywords listed in Appendix B and used directly targeted at the PPC. For instance:

Please note that when a Tweet heavily alludes to key words but may not include any of them- it can still count as abusive depending on it's nature. For instance, the below Tweet is clearly derogatory and misogynistic abuse aimed at a female politician.

6. Mixed

Please note that a Tweet containing one of these words, but not aimed at the PPC does not count as an abusive Tweet in this study as it is looking at abuse targeted at PPCs themselves.

Question 5- If the Tweet is abusive, what type of abuse does it involve?

1. Misogyny/ Sexism
2. Racism/ xenophobia
3. Religious Abuse
4. Homophobic Abuse
5. Ableist Abuse
6. General Violence and intimidation
7. Abuse around their political party
8. Ageist Abuse
9. Multiple levels of Abuse
10. Other

Question 6- If the Tweet is a reply to a Tweet by the PPC and is abusive what is the topic of the original Tweet?

1. International Affairs
2. Economy
3. Immigration
4. Environmentalism
5. Party Politics
6. Personal Topic
7. Campaigning Activity
8. Health Services
9. Crime
10. Transport and Infrastructure
11. Military and Defence
12. Endorsement of another candidate
13. Other

Question 7- If the Tweet is a reply to a Tweet by the PPC and is negative what is the topic of the original Tweet?

1. International Affairs
2. Economy
3. Immigration

4. Environmentalism
5. Party Politics
6. Personal Topic
7. Campaigning Activity
8. Health Services
9. Crime
10. Transport and Infrastructure
11. Military and Defence
12. Manifesto Pledges
13. Other

Question 8- If the Tweet is a reply to a Tweet by the PPC and is positive/ neutral what is the topic of the original Tweet?

1. International Affairs
2. Economy
3. Immigration
4. Environmentalism
5. Party Politics
6. Personal Topic
7. Campaigning Activity
8. Health Services
9. Crime
10. Transport and Infrastructure
11. Military and Defence
12. Parliamentary Activity
13. Other
14. Local Issues

Question 9- If the abusive Tweet contained reference to a political issue- what issue was discussed?

1. International Affairs
2. Economy
3. Immigration
4. Environmentalism
5. Party Politics
6. Personal Topic
7. Campaigning Activity
8. Health Services
9. Crime
10. Transport and Infrastructure
11. Military and Defence
12. Political Stance4
13. Other
14. None Discussed

Question 10- If the Negative Tweet contained reference to a political issue- what issue was discussed?

1. International Affairs
2. Economy
3. Immigration

4. Environmentalism
5. Party Politics
6. Personal Topic
7. Campaigning Activity
8. Health Services
9. Crime
10. Transport and Infrastructure
11. Military and Defence
12. Other
13. None Discussed
14. Gender and Rights
15. Local Issues
16. Parliamentary Activity

Abusive Words-

Bint Bitch Bloody Bugger Chav Cow Crap Damn Douchebag Effing Feck Ginger Git Minger Pissed
Pissed off Sod off Uppity

Bastard Bellend Bloodclaat* Bumberclat* Dickhead Shit Shite Son of a Bitch Twat

Fuck Motherfucker

Arse Balls Bawbag* Choad*

Arsehole Beaver Bollocks Clunge Cock Dick Fanny Knob Minge Prick Pussy Snatch Tits

Cunt Gash Japs eye Punani Pussy hole

Bang Bonk Frigging Ho Tart

Jizz MILF Shag Skank Slag Slapper Spunk Tosser Wanker Whore
Cocksucker Cum Nonce Prickteaser Raped (in a sporting context) Slut

a Karen Boomer Gammon Libtard* Nat* Remoaner Snowflake TERF
Femi-nazi Yoon*

Antisemite

Islamophobe

Racist (When seemingly unwarranted)

Cracker Freshy* Jew Jock Nazi Oriental Taff Uppity

Bud Bud* Chinaman Coconut Coloured Curry Muncher Honky Jap Kraut Monkey Paddy Sheep
Shagger Slope Tinker

Ching Chong Chinky Coon Darky Gippo Golliwog Golly Half-caste Jungle Bunny Kike* Negro Nigger
Nig-nog Paki Pikey Raghead Sambo Spade Spic Uncle Tom Wog Yid Terrorist

Fairy Mincing Nancy Pansy Queen Transsexual

Bender Bent Bummer Fag Homo Lezza Ponce Poof Queer that's Gay

Batty Boy Butt Bandit Chick with a Dick Dyke Faggot Fudge Packer Gender Bender He-She Muff Diver
Rugmuncher Shemale Shirt Lifter Tranny

God Goddamn Jesus Christ Jew

Bible Basher Fenian* Hun Muzzie* Papist Prod* Taig* Tarrier*

Kike* Yid

Cretin Div Handicapped Looney Mental Mentally Challenged Nutter Special Tone deaf Wheelchair bound

Deaf and dumb Dwarf Flid* Midget Moron Psycho

Cripple Invalid Mong Retard Schizo Spastic Window Licker

Fat Ugly

- • Bitch
- Slut
- Whore
- Cunt
- Feminazi

• **Racism/ Xenophobia:**

- Nigger
- Spic
- Chink
- Towelhead
- Kike

• **Religious Abuse:**

- Kafir
- Infidel
- Heathen
- Bible-thumper
- Raghead

• **Homophobic Abuse:**

- Faggot
- Queer
- Dyke
- Sissy
- Pansy

• **Ableist Abuse:**

- Retard
- Cripple
- Spaz
- Invalid
- Lamé

• **General Violence and Intimidation:**

- Threats of physical harm
- Incitement to violence

- Death wishes
 - Graphic descriptions of violence
 - Stalking behavior
- **Abuse around their political party:**
 - Traitor
 - Fascist
 - Communist
 - Sellout
 - Puppet
- **Ageist Abuse:**
 - Old fart
 - Geezer
 - Hag
 - Wrinkly
 - Boomer

Evil

Vile

Useless

