Self-presentation and counterstereotypic gender strategies in social media campaigning: An example from Taiwan’s presidential election

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ABSTRACT
By employing a functional approach considering both topics and functions, this study explored and compared candidates’ presentation of textual and pictorial information in their social media campaigning through a combination of quantitative method and qualitative content analysis. Results indicated that the intentions of stereotype reversal were, to some extent, demonstrated in their discussions of policy and character issues. The female candidate emphasized policy but utilized emotional imagery as a neutralizer. By contrast, the male candidate more frequently discussed character issues and further softened the messages with emotional imagery. In terms of negative campaigning, the tactics accorded with their gender norms. The male candidate utilized both trait and issue attacks to challenge his rival’s stereotypical feminine strengths, whereas the female candidate ignored the attacks by defending her party or challenging the incompetence of the opposing party. The textual and pictorial messages that received numerous likes and shares featured similar sentimental tones. More discussions elucidate how candidates co-opt stereotypic and counterstereotypic gender strategies for different topics and functions in social media campaigning and this research transcends previous studies that focused on only one type of message, either text or imagery.

Introduction
Women used to be stereotyped as being less capable of dealing with tough political issues or weaker in character than men although women were increasingly securing various political positions (Wagner, Gainous, & Holman, 2017). Television had long been considered the dominant medium for challenging the stereotypical portrayals in the news media because televised advertising allows candidates to control the messages presented. However, this type of advertising can be intrusive and annoying (Burns & Lutz, 2006), which are qualities that limit its effectiveness.

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The evolution of online campaigning, through which a candidate has control over their image and message presentation (Johnson & Kaye, 2016), has enabled female candidates to challenge stereotypical expectations by exercising strategies similar to those employed by male candidates and vice versa (Meeks & Domke, 2016). Previous studies have revealed that strategies developed for campaign websites tend to employ reversed gender stereotypes (Banwart & Winfrey, 2013); however, studies of social campaigning on Twitter have demonstrated conflicting results (Wagner et al., 2017).

The emergence of social networking services has further increased the potential for candidates to fully control the political messages and images directly delivered to voters at no cost (Meeks, 2017). Facebook and LINE are both popular social networking service with many users. These services are primarily used for personal communication, but they are also utilized for political campaigning. The important political role of Facebook was first recognized during the 2008 US presidential election; since then, it has been popular for campaigning worldwide. As smartphones have become indispensable, LINE—an instant messaging app with social networking capabilities—has been widely adopted in Asia and grown into a global service with 217 million monthly active users (Statista, 2017). Because of its popularity, LINE offered official accounts for politicians in 2013, starting in Japan. In 2014, after LINE offered this service in Taiwan, politicians rushed to open official accounts and it was first applied to the Taiwanese presidential election. Predictably, social networking services have become ubiquitous in campaigns; thus, it is an ideal setting to study self-presentation in political communication.

However, the scope of studies comparing political candidates’ self-presentation strategies implemented on social media is limited. These strategies merit scholarly attention for several reasons. First, politicians increasingly campaign through Facebook and LINE because they have emerged as the most prominent social networks and offers direct communication with voters (Chen & Chang, 2017). Second, both services are critical tools for politicians to craft their messages because high social closeness and self-presentation are inherent in these social networking services (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media are superior to any other medium of campaign communication, such as direct mail or official websites, because they empower candidates to self-disclose and enable two communicating individuals to feel closely connected. Therefore, the self-presentation strategies employed by different genders are becoming vital for understanding this new political–social environment.

In the current study, we analysed male and female candidates’ self-presentation through textual and pictorial information and examined the features of messages with a high impact on electronic word-of-mouth—on the basis of likes and shares—during the mixed-gender 2016 Taiwanese presidential election. To conduct this analysis, we adopted functional approaches to campaign discourse (Benoit & Compton, 2014; Borah, 2016) and political imagery (Schill, 2012) and utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

**Literature review**

**Political self-presentation and counterstereotypic gender strategies**

What and to whom individuals communicate or express about themselves indicates self-presentation or self-disclosure, which are often more conspicuous online than offline.
Individuals strategically select their disclosures to agree with the presentation perceived to be admired by their audience (Shim, Lee-Won, & Park, 2016). By managing impressions, self-presentation strategies empower an individual to exhibit different facets of their identity to different audiences with congruity (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran, & Shahar, 2016). Individuals engaging in self-presentation try to ensure that their audience continues to view them in a favourable light, and they present themselves in a way that satisfies their audience’s expectations (Fox & Vendemia, 2016).

During an election year in which male candidates dominated issues such as the economy, the budget deficit, and unemployment were pivotal, female candidates, in particular, were very likely to demonstrate the stereotypically masculine traits that were most closely related with competence on such issues (Bauer, 2017). Studies have demonstrated that voters do not spontaneously attribute feminine characteristics to female candidates (Bauer, 2015; Dolan, 2014), and others have indicated that they do not automatically associate masculine leadership characteristics with female candidates (Schneider & Bos, 2014). These findings suggested that voters have ambiguous expectations for female candidates that adhere neither to feminine nor masculine stereotypes. Therefore, female candidates might be able to overcome this vague perception through counterstereotypic gender strategies (i.e., by emphasizing masculine qualities; Fridkin & Kenney, 2015). The initial studies of the online self-presentation strategies employed by female and male candidates were conducted when campaign websites were commonly employed during the 2000 US election cycle (Banwart & Winfrey, 2013). The strategies utilized by female candidates diverged notably from the expected gendered stereotypes (Evans & Clark, 2015). However, no evidence demonstrated that women or men utilize gender stereotypes in Twitter microblogging or advertisements (Dolan & Lynch, 2017; Evans, 2016; Wagner et al., 2017). These conflicting results were probably obtained because the evaluations were based on either the issues or the negative messages by campaigns. Some studies have identified no positive or negative effects from utilizing counterstereotypes (Brooks, 2013), whereas others have indicated that female candidates were negatively affected if they violated gender norms (Cassese & Holman, 2017). Additional studies have demonstrated that these strategies positively affect female candidates, leading to improved evaluations, but have no discernible effect on male candidates (Bauer, 2017). Overall, because the strategies and effects of political self-presentation remain unclear, this study is warranted to obtain a deeper understanding.

**Functional approach of campaign discourse**

Campaign discourse to establish a candidate’s preferability serves three fundamental functions: acclaiming, attacking, and defending (Benoit, 2016). Acclaiming portrays a candidate favourably through positive statements that emphasize the candidate’s advantages, whereas attacking portrays an opposing candidate unfavourably through negative utterances that highlight his or her disadvantages. Defending explicitly responds to a prior attack on the candidate. These three functions work together to persuade voters that a candidate should be preferred to the opponent. However, attacking and defending have potential drawbacks. Attacking may enhance an opponent’s preferability or generate backlash from voters who abhor mudslinging, and defending may remind voters of a potential disadvantage or create the impression that the candidate is reactive rather
than proactive. By contrast, acclaiming has no drawbacks, and studies investigating political advertising have concluded that acclaiming is the most common function of campaign discourse (Borah, 2016; Wen, 2014).

Another essential dimension of political discourse is the topic of the political messages (e.g., policy and character). Campaign discourse focuses on policy or public domain problems and proposals to rectify these problems, and campaign discourse is also utilized to establish the candidates’ character, image, personality, competence, and values. Compared with the candidate’s character, voters perceive policy as a more critical determinant of a presidential vote. To explore the more complex implications, the policy is further classified into the subtopics of past deeds, future plans, and general goals (Benoit, 2016). Past deeds are concerned with the achievements of the candidates. Future plans are specific proposals for policy action, whereas goals refer to the end results rather than the means. The hypotheses and research questions of this study are based on the past finding that the strategy of reversing gender stereotypes is often employed on official campaign websites.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The female candidate uses more attacking texts than the male candidate on Facebook and LINE.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Female candidate’s campaign emphasizes policy over character, in contrast to that of the male candidate on Facebook and LINE.

Research Question 1: Do female and male candidates emphasize different subtopics of policy on their Facebook and LINE?

Functional approach of political imagery

Visual symbols play a crucial role in constructing political images. However, their importance was overlooked until the visual medium of television became the dominant source of political information. Because social media are gaining popularity and are capable of presenting multimedia content, visual communication has become essential (Dumitrescu, 2016). Social networking services stimulate the thoughts and emotions of users and influence their actions through the content they read and, even more so, through the images they see. Despite the crucial role of visual symbols, Schill (2012) has argued that political visual communication remains one of the least studied and least understood topics; therefore, the functioning of political visual symbols requires investigation. By reviewing the data on candidates’ use of images through the ‘image bite’, a concept similar to the sound bite, Schill provided a comprehensive assessment of political visual communication under 10 functions. Examples of utilizing the 10 functions in this study are illustrated in the appendix.

(1) Argument: images that act as enthymememes or implied arguments, with the audience filling in a portion of the evidence, reasoning, or claim to complete the argument.
(2) Agenda setting: attention-grabbing images that control the news agenda.
(3) Dramatization: visual symbols that enable candidates to give life to a policy or message and demonstrate its importance by facilitating narrative qualities.
(4) Emotion: visuals that can quickly indicate emotional state: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation.
(5) Image building: visuals that offer heuristic cues regarding the candidate’s background, personality, and demeanour and directly shape the candidate’s image.

(6) Identification: visuals that unite a candidate with a powerful source; higher identification of a viewer with the source leads to a higher influence of the source has on the viewer.

(7) Documentation: images that serve as evidence or proof of events or claims.

(8) Societal symbol: visuals that consist of iconic symbols associated with powerful cultural concepts such as flags.

(9) Transportation: visuals that transport the audience to a different time or place.

(10) Ambiguity: visuals that ‘say’ things by association or implication, mostly used for attacking.

Research into visual symbols in political communication is lacking, and the role of gender differences requires specific focus (Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015).

In response to the arguments presented, this study investigated the following research question:

**Research Question 2:** Are the functions of visual symbols differently emphasized on the Facebook and LINE between the female and male candidates?

Texts and images on Facebook do not function in isolation. They are interrelated and complement each other, resulting in an image that can automate the self-definition of candidates (Chadwick, 2017). Therefore, we posed the following research question:

**Research Question 3:** Do female and male candidates employ different communication strategies of self-presentation on their Facebook and LINE?

Furthermore, our study explored the features of successful self-presentation strategies employed on Facebook and LINE. The success of political communication through social networking services can be measured by the extent of public awareness and engagement. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention, indicated by the number of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’, is in accordance with the concept of awareness and engagement (Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2015). Therefore, we quantified success according to the number of likes and shares received by the candidates’ posts; furthermore, we utilized a qualitative content analysis to delineate the textual and pictorial features of the extreme outlier cases that had received a large number of likes and shares for both candidates.

**Research Question 4:** What are features of the messages produced by both candidates that received a large number of likes and shares?

Moreover, a content analysis of attacking and defending posts was conducted. Because attacking and defending messages have potential downsides, why and how the candidates used such messages was analysed by considering the timeline and interaction with their rival.

**Research Question 5:** What strategies were employed by the female and male candidates for attacking and defending messages?

**Methods**

In this study, we employed a quantitative content analysis to verify the two hypotheses and answer research questions 1 to 3; additionally, the qualitative content analysis was
used to answer research questions 4 and 5. The quantitative content analysis is widely used to reveal the textual elements of communication, but it omits the syntactical and semantic information embedded in the text. By contrast, the qualitative content analysis explores the meanings underlying messages (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2017). By employing both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, this study is able to provide a complete view of the self-presentation strategies used by candidates of different genders and their influences.

**Sampling**

In this study, we focused on the Facebook and LINE messages of the two candidates in the 2016 Taiwanese presidential election. These candidates were Eric Chu (male candidate), who was the chair of the Kuomintang party which was in power prior to the 2016 election, and Tsai Ying-Wen (female candidate) who is the chair of the Democratic Progressive Party. Both candidates were not incumbent. We downloaded all posts displayed on the candidates’ Facebook and LINE page within 2 months of the Election Day, but the posts shared with the candidates or those that included only a page link were excluded. A total of 68 Facebook and 35 LINE posts were collected from Tsai. In addition, 85 Facebook posts and 40 LINE posts were collected from Chu. All of the collected posts included text and imagery.

**Coding**

The text of each post was coded as a function (acclaim, attack, or defense) under the main topic (policy or character). The policy was further divided into its aforementioned subtopics (past deeds, future plans, and general goals).

In addition, the imagery was coded as one of 10 functions, according to Schill (2012). The 10 functions were argument, agenda setting, dramatization, emotion, image building, identification, documentation, societal symbol, transportation, and ambiguity. These 10 functions have been explained in the Literature Review.

**Reliability**

To ensure a reliable coding process, we determined the intercoder reliability of an overlapping sample of 10% of the posts, which was used to calculate Krippendorff’s alpha; alpha values above 0.80 (Krippendorff, 2013) were considered satisfactory. For this study, the alpha values ranged from 0.821 to 0.928 for various coding aspects, confirming the reliability of the coding applied in this study.

**Qualitative content analysis**

Because political self-presentation on Facebook and LINE remains relatively unexplored, the qualitative content analysis was included in this study to gain insights. The qualitative content analysis was employed to explore the communicative characteristics of language with a focus on the content or contextual meaning of the text (Neuendorf, 2016). Furthermore, content analysis is regarded as a flexible method for analysing text data, and it
includes three distinct methods, namely the directed, conventional, and summative approaches (Crossman, 2018; Eliott, Forster, McDonough, Bowd, & Crabb, 2017; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The directed approach to content analysis utilizes existing theory or prior research as predictions about the variables. Thus, the key concepts of a coding scheme or the relationships between codes are determined (Babbie, 2016). This method was applied to code the sample postings based on the functional research in this study, which provided the statistics to explore the gender differences in the emphasis on topics and functions.

The conventional approach to content analysis allows the categories to be obtained from the data; researchers are immersed in the data to obtain discriminating perceptions, instead of using preconceived categories. As the process continues, coding labels emerge that directly reflect the text. These emergent categories are then organized into meaningful clusters (Patton, 2015). To answer research questions 4, the conventional content analysis was utilized to delineate the textual and pictorial features of the Facebook and LINE posts that were extreme outliers with numerous likes and shares.

The summative approach to content analysis surpasses the mere counting of certain words; it includes latent content analysis, which enables the interpretation of content. This type of analysis focuses on discovering the underlying meanings of words or content and interpreting the context of the word or phrase (Babbie, 2016). To answer research questions 5, the summative approach to content analysis was employed to investigate when and how the candidates used attacking and defending messages by considering the timeline and interactions with the candidate’s rival.

**Results**

H1, stating that the female candidate uses more attacking texts than the male candidate, was not supported. Table 1 illustrates the extremely high proportion (>90%) of acclamatory text posted on Facebook or LINE by both candidates. Although the other two functions were rarely employed, the male candidate posted more attacking texts than the female candidate on Facebook. The aforementioned H2 indicated that the female candidate contributed more posts on policy than on character, in contrast to the strategy of the male candidate. The results revealed that H2 was supported. As displayed by Table 1, both candidates stressed policy over character on Facebook, but the female contributed a much higher proportion of policy texts (85.3%) than the proportion contributed by the male candidate (56.5%). There was an evident contrast in topics of the two candidates on LINE. The female candidate had more posts concerning policy than character, whereas the male candidate’s post focused more on character than policy.

| Function   | Topic | Total |
|------------|-------|-------|
| Acclaiming | Policy | 65    |
| Attacking  | Character | 1     |
| Defending  | Female | 68    |
|            | Male   | 85    |

**Table 1.** Topics and functions of texts on Facebook.
The first research question compared the emphasis on the subtopics of policy between the female and male candidates. Table 2 displays the different emphases of the female and male candidates’ policy utterances on Facebook and LINE. Of the female candidate’s policy utterances on Facebook, 70.7% were focused on future plans, whereas future plans constituted the smallest proportion of the male candidate’s policy utterances (4.2%). By contrast, past deeds were the policy subtopic most emphasized by the male candidate on Facebook (58%). The female candidate’s policy utterances on LINE were mostly focused on general goals but without future plans, whereas equal numbers of the male candidate’s policy utterances addressed past deeds and general goals also without a future plan.

The second research question investigated the emphasis on the 10 functions of visual symbol employed by the female and male candidates. Figure 1 reveals the different pattern of imagery employed by the two candidates on Facebook. The male candidate’s imagery contained a much higher proportion of emotion, image building, and identification than the other functions. The female candidate employed various functions overall, but the proportion of emotion was slightly higher.

Conversely, Figure 2 reveals the similar pattern of imagery employed on the two candidates on LINE. Both candidates utilized only some of the 10 functions, with an emphasis on image building, followed by emotion.

The third research question examined how the female and male candidates structured text and imagery to present themselves in posts. On Facebook, the female candidate utilized different imagery according to the text topic. Figure 3 demonstrates that policy texts were mostly combined with emotional imagery, and character texts were frequently combined with argumentative imagery. By contrast, the male candidate utilized similar patterns for texts concerning policy and character. Chu employed mostly emotional and image-building visuals for both topics. Thus, the topic did not strongly influence the structuring of posts for the male candidate’s Facebook page. However, the strategies employed by both candidates on LINE were similar (Figure 4). Image building was the most utilized visual for both policy and character topics by the male candidate. Image building also accounted for the highest portion of visuals for policy topics posted by the female candidate, but emotional visuals were generally employed for the character.

To address the fourth research question, we observed the textual and pictorial features of posts with many likes and shares. We first identified extreme outlier cases. Table 3 lists the statistics regarding the likes and shares received for both candidates. The most liked post by the female candidate on Facebook (110,000 likes) received nearly twice as many likes as the most liked post by the male candidate (57,211); the difference on LINE approximately fivefold (2758 vs. 456). The most shared posts by the female candidate on both

| Table 2. Emphasis on sub-policy. |
|----------------------------------|
|                                  |
|                                  |
| **Sub-policy**                   | **Total** |
| Past deed | Future plan | General goal |       |
|-----------|-------------|--------------|-------|
| Facebook  |             |              |       |
| Female (Tsai) | 13 (22.4%) | 41 (70.7%) | 4 (6.9%) | 58 |
| Male (Chou) | 37 (77.1%)  | 2 (4.2%)    | 9 (18.8%) | 48 |
| LINE      |             |              |       |
| Female (Tsai) | 1 (4.8%)   | 0            | 20 (95.2%) | 21 |
| Male (Chou) | 7 (50%)     | 0            | 7 (50%)   | 14 |
Facebook and LINE were shared approximately twice as many times as the most shared posts by the male candidate.

Figure 5 indicates that the extreme outlier cases with numerous likes on the female candidate’s Facebook were Cases 58 (110,000 likes), 54 (100,000 likes), and 49 (78,036 likes); those on the male candidate’s Facebook were Cases 142 (57,211 likes), 104 (49,004 likes), 151 (48,102 likes), and 115 (46,365 likes). The extreme outlier cases with a high number of likes on the female candidate’s LINE were Cases 183 (2758 likes) and 179 (2438 likes), and no extreme outlier cases were found for the male candidate’s LINE.

To answer the fourth research question about the textual and pictorial features of successful messages, we employed the conventional approach to content analysis, which enables researchers to identify meanings from the text without preconceived theories. The top two highly liked Case 58 and 54 on the female candidate’s Facebook were posted immediately before the election day and both messages asked the audience to vote. Both posts included phrases such as ‘finally the last mile’, ‘your vote matters to our country’, and ‘take the responsibility’. Visuals focused on the candidate speaking with confidence to a crowd of supporters at a campaign rally in the rain. Case 49, on the other hand, appealed to the emotion of homesickness to remind the audience of
their hometown time instead of directly asking people to return home to vote. The electoral law of Taiwan requires the public to vote in their original domicile and many college students attend university in other cities. Case 49 used the phrase ‘hometown is calling’ repeatedly with imagery of a young man riding a motorcycle.

The most liked case on the male candidate’s Facebook (Case 142) was a message of his appreciation to an old lady who supported him and showed great concern for him. This revealed that the public had deep expectations for him. An image of the candidate standing in front of a large screen showing the photograph of the old lady with him was utilized. The other three outlier cases with many likes on the male candidate’s Facebook had a common theme. Cases 104, 151, and 115 were all messages calling for solidarity with words such as ‘solidarity’, ‘pride’, and ‘victory’ and all three messages included images of the national flag. Thus, messages with a direct or metaphorical sentimental appeal and those with a focus on national rather than personal issues are likely to receive likes on Facebook.

The most highly liked case on the female candidate’s LINE (Case 183) was a message defending herself against the TaiMed Biologics scandal, which was revealed by the ruling party, using a picture of her profile with a tough expression. The other outlier,
Case 179, was a message encouraging the female candidate to persever until the final day of the election with a picture of her waiting for a train. The male candidate’s LINE included no outlier cases with a high number of likes. In contrast to Facebook, messages with a focus on personal issues tended to receive likes on LINE.

As shown in Figure 6, the extreme outlier cases with many shares on the female candidate’s Facebook were Cases 54 (8150 shares), 43 (7540 shares), 58 (6490 shares), and 49 (6110 shares). Case 54, 58, and 49 were also outlier cases with a high number of likes that were already discussed. The message of Case 43 disclosed empathy with the public regarding low salaries and economic problems and promised to provide a better future. The visuals were a group of labours riding motorcycles on their way to work. The most shared messages on the male candidate’s Facebook were Cases 97 (3264 shares) and 151 (1810 shares). Case 97 was posted during the New Year of 2016 to celebrate the national birthday with visuals showing the candidate’s healthy and cheerful characteristics through photographs of societal symbols the male candidate saluting the national flag alongside some children. Case 151 was also an outlier case with a high number of likes that was already discussed.

The most shared case on the female candidate’s LINE, Case 183 (2294 shares), was also one of the highly liked cases already discussed. On the male candidate’s LINE, the outlier case with a high number shares was Case 191 (1723 shares), which expressed the candidate’s concern for the day-care plans for the elderly and children with visuals of happy family members in a cartoon style.

Figure 3. Both candidates’ self-presentation strategies on Facebook.
To answer the fourth research question concerning the textual and pictorial features of posts with a large number of likes and shares, we can make two conclusions according to the differences in platform and gender. First, personal issues tended to be highly liked and shared on LINE, whereas policy issues were highly liked and shared on Facebook. Second, the highly liked and shared messages were very likely to have a sentimental tone in both text and imagery. The female candidate utilized a sentimental appeal metaphorically, whereas the male candidate often directly employed a sentimental appeal, for example by exciting patriotism with the national flag.

For the fifth question, we observed both candidates’ strategies for attacking and defending messages. To answer the question, this study applied the summative approach to content analysis which focuses on discovering the underlying meanings.

Table 3. Statistics of likes and shares.

| Platform | Post | Average | Max  | Min  | SD   |
|----------|------|---------|------|------|------|
| Like     | FB(Female) | 68  | 28,346.24 | 110,000 | 8690 | 21,539.76 |
|          | FB(Male)   | 85  | 21,185.76 | 57,211  | 9306 | 9924.39   |
|          | LINE(Female) | 35 | 1444.23   | 2758    | 915  | 389.16    |
|          | LINE (Male) | 40 | 302.52    | 456     | 158  | 75.76     |
| Share    | FB(Female) | 68  | 1414.19   | 8150    | 204  | 1673.11   |
|          | FB(Male)   | 85  | 637.82    | 3264    | 100  | 512.33    |
|          | LINE(Female) | 35 | 436.97    | 2294    | 57   | 471.64    |
|          | LINE (Male) | 40 | 75.98     | 1723    | 7    | 268.35    |

To answer the fourth research question concerning the textual and pictorial features of posts with a large number of likes and shares, we can make two conclusions according to the differences in platform and gender. First, personal issues tended to be highly liked and shared on LINE, whereas policy issues were highly liked and shared on Facebook. Second, the highly liked and shared messages were very likely to have a sentimental tone in both text and imagery. The female candidate utilized a sentimental appeal metaphorically, whereas the male candidate often directly employed a sentimental appeal, for example by exciting patriotism with the national flag.

For the fifth question, we observed both candidates’ strategies for attacking and defending messages. To answer the question, this study applied the summative approach to content analysis which focuses on discovering the underlying meanings.
of the content and interpreting the context associated with the content. Studies based on the functional theory have revealed that attacking and defending text have the potential drawback of generating voter resentment and thus were utilized less often. Corresponding to this perspective, we found that the attacking and defending message employed by both candidates accounted for a small portion overall. As Table 1 displayed, the female candidate utilized one attacking and one defending message on her Facebook, and the male candidate posted five attacking and no defending messages (due to none attacking toward him). Through cross examination, we found that the male candidate’s strategy was to maintain a stable attack during our sampling span. In November 2015, when we started sampling, the male candidate posted two attacking messages arguing his rival’s ignorance in promoting Taiwan joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and her unpractical social housing policy. A message disputing the female candidate’s claims regarding labour leave was posted three weeks later. Again, approximately three weeks later, the male candidate posted a message contesting his rival’s empty words in the second and final TV debates and the other accusing the female candidate’s policy of allowing pork imports from the USA despite concerns about Clenbuterol. All five texts named the female candidate instead of her political party. All the messages had texts attacking the female candidate with an imagery of the male candidate’s profile for a direct contrast to his rival (feminine vs. masculine) except for the last one displaying a picture of pigs as a satire on her pork import policy (feminine vs. obedient or incapable). His overall attacking strategy was to utilize both trait and issue attacks to

Figure 5. Box plot of eWom by like.
challenge his rival’s stereotypical feminine strengths. Conversely, the female candidate’s strategy was very conservative. She did not defend any attack made by the male candidate. The only defensive message by her was to claim that legislator candidates nominated by her party were highly qualified against some suspicious argument in the media. The only attacking message she posted was utilized immediately after the male candidate posted the third attacking message. However, she accused the ruling party, instead of the male candidate, of incapability, and the visuals featured an atmosphere of home sweet home.

The male candidate’s attacking strategy became less aggressive on LINE. Only one message blamed the female candidate for her absence in the Talk to Youth activity, which was sponsored by 47 universities. The female candidate did not defend against this accusation either. The only defending message by her was to clarify her innocence in the TaiMed Biologics scandal. This message was already discussed as an outlier case with numerous likes and shares. The female candidate also utilized one attacking message accusing the incapability of the ruling party and current president Ma rather than attacking the male candidate, which was similar to the attacking text on her Facebook. The imagery depicted people walking on the street in a rally.

To answer the sixth research question about the two candidates’ strategies for utilizing attacking and defending messages, we found they were conducted in accordance with their gender norms. Furthermore, attacking and defending texts regarding policy were employed on Facebook, whereas personal issues were featured on LINE.

Figure 6. Box plot of eWom by share.
Discussion

Understanding candidates’ self-presentation has become critical because elections have become highly candidate-centric in the current social networking era; using Facebook and LINE, candidates can personally present themselves to their audiences. Our results indicated four critical findings. First, both female and male candidates employ a safe self-presentation strategy. In accordance with some research conclusion, they emphasized acclaming over attacking and defending, because voters perceive acclamatory messages more positively, whereas attacking and defending are likely to give the impression of negative mudslinging (Benoit, 2016; Borah, 2016). Second, the gender reversal strategies are demonstrated in their discussions of issues. For example, the female candidate emphasized policy, specifically future plans rather than a general goal. By contrast, the male candidate utilized a higher proportion of character massages. It is noteworthy that the female candidate utilized imagery as a neutralizer to her messages. She often used emotional imagery for policy texts and argumentative imagery for character texts. Whereas, the male candidate utilized emotional imagery as a softener for both character and policy messages. Third, the strategies that candidates use to attack rivals and defend against attacks correspond to their gender norms. For example, the male candidate aggressively attacked his rival by addressing her directly by name and stereotypically associating visuals of his own profile as a contrast. Conversely, the female candidate utilized only one attacking message accusing the ruling party of incapability, and she made no response to her rival’s attacks on her personality and policies. According to some study implications, the female candidate’s use of conservative attacking and defensive strategies without violating gender norms appears to be a suitable approach to avoid negative outcomes. That is, female candidates may experience a voter backlash from counterstereotypically employing negative messages (Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014) or acting against feminine norms when challenged on feminine issues (Windett, 2014). In addition, both candidates launched attacks concerning policy on Facebook, whereas attacking texts on LINE were about personal issues. Although Facebook and LINE are both social networking services, they are applied differently for campaigning. Fourth, the features of messages evoking strong eWOM intentions, as indicated by the numbers of likes and shares, are similar for Facebook and LINE. They often include both text and visuals and focus on the candidate in a sentimental tone. This result contrasts with the common public demand for substance, but it corresponds with the findings of Leuprecht and Skillcorn (2016) that the influential language employed by politicians has characteristics such as ‘increased positivity’, ‘complete absence of negativity’, ‘increased abstraction’, and ‘lack of reference to the opposing candidate(s)’. Moreover, policy texts tend to be liked and shared on Facebook and character issues on LINE. This may be because many LINE users are young.

Because this study considered both text and imagery with a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative content analysis when analysing political self-presentation, this research transcends previous studies that focused on only one type of message, either text or imagery. However, our study has numerous limitations that can be addressed in further research. First, we examined only Facebook and LINE pages from Taiwanese candidates; therefore, our study might be culturally biased. Second, we evaluated the success of the candidates’ self-presentation strategies through the quantitative measurement of likes and shares as well as through the qualitative analysis of outlier cases. However,
strategies were not explored across different times. Investigating the difference in strategies over time may explain the contrast between the sentimental tone of both texts and visuals in successful messages and the public value of substance. Furthermore, the qualitative measurement of the tone of citizens’ opinions and feedback is equally vital for the measurement of a successful message. Because social networks have become crucial in the political context, politicians must employ social media more proactively to enter into dialog and discussion with citizens (Grčič, Babac, & Podobnik, 2017). The importance of communication capability and social media will certainly increase in the future; therefore, further studies are required to address the more specific topics of successful self-presentation strategies and interactivity with users.

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Notes on contributors

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Appendix. Illustration of coding by the functional approach of political imagery

**Argument**

A picture of a little girl in plain dress eating something in a bowl with a happy and satisfied smile was utilized for an argument about the male candidate’s capability in fulfilling social welfare

(Resource from Chu’s Facebookpage)

**Agenda setting**

Both candidates introduced the poster of a documentary named *Song of the Reed* to draw attention to the issue of ‘comfort women’ abused by the imperial Japanese army because this documentary featured accusations about this issue by four women who had been forced into sexual slavery during the Second World War

(Resource from Chu’s and Tsai’s Facebookpages)

(Continued)
Dramatization
An image of the female candidate in the form of a cute animated warrior guarding food safety illustrated her concern for such policies.

Emotion
A picture of a smiling young girl holding up a tablet showing the words ‘I am in Seoul and I will vote for enlightening Taiwan’ conveyed the emotions of joy and anticipation.

Image building
A picture of the male candidate leading a crowd of officials paying respect to the late president Chiang Ching-kuo in a formal worship fostered his image as the party successor.

Identification
The female candidate often utilized pictures depicting pedestrians or labours. These pictures identified the female candidate as a politician who cares about the general or lower class public.

(Continued)
Documentation

A picture of the male candidate’s visit to an incense factory demonstrated his concern about declining industries

(Resource from Chu’s Facebookpage)

Societal symbol

Both candidates used flag-raising photographs to signify patriotism

(Resource from Chu’s Facebookpage)

Transportation

A photograph of a protest march for democracy 20 years ago transported viewers to the site and promoted patriotic emotions associated with these events

(Resource from Tsai’s Facebookpages)

Ambiguity

The male candidate used an picture of a pig with some innocent look to attack the female candidate’s policy of allowing pork imports from the USA despite concerns regarding Clenbuterol

(Resource from Chu’s Facebookpage)