

# **“We hate her and you too”: Polarized intersectionality in Italy throughout changing political scenarios**

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## **Abstract**

This article proposes a joint application of online network analysis and NLP techniques to explore dynamics of “polarized intersectionality”—that is, how (mis)representations of women that develop online and at the intersection of different axes of discrimination entwine with ideological and affective polarization. We look in particular at whether and how digital (mis)representations change together with political scenarios in which political parties, leaders, and partisan communities more in general swing from collaboration to hostility. Our analysis of two Twitter conversations that put women at the center of attention show that changing political scenarios generate different digital conversations which, in turn, reflect patterns of alliances and rivalry. Regardless of these changes, women are invariantly (mis)represented in narratives that are often weaponized against political enemies in ways that foster both ideological and affective political polarization.

## **Keywords**

Intersectionality, women’s misrepresentation, political polarization,

## **Introduction**

Extant research concerned with growing levels of political conflict within, across, and beyond political institutions focuses increasingly on polarization processes by looking at the level at which it occurs (mass, group, or political elites—see Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021) as well as at the ideological or affective logics driving it (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019).

Recent contributions enrich this overall landscape underlining how gender is not solely a variable structuring patterns of polarization (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Ondercin and Lizotte, 2021) but also a highly polarized domain per se especially online where discussions on gender-related issues are characterized by higher rates of digital content production and antagonism (Inguanzo et al., 2021). Thus, studies are multiplying that examine how gender is weaponized within an increasingly polarized digital public discourse (Inara Rodis, 2021). In this respect, the concept of “polarized intersectionality” (Pavan and Martella, 2021) was proposed to grasp the modes in which citizens, media outlets, political parties, and leaders (mis)represent women in the digital public discourse at the intersection of different axes of discrimination (e.g., their gender, ethnic origin, age, class, and religion) with the explicit intent to distinguish themselves from political opponents, attacking them, and dismantling their political visions and strategies.

This article aims at contributing to this line of inquiry by investigating how the weaponization of women’s (mis) representation in online discussions entangles with polarized antagonistic dynamics for how they develop in a context wherein political hostility and collaborations evolve rapidly and fluidly. We do so by exploring two online conversations that unfolded in the Italian Twittersphere and in which two women were put at the center of attention: Carola Rackete, the Captain of Sea Watch 3 who forced her way in the port of Lampedusa to rescue a group of migrants, and Silvia Aisha Romano, an aid-worker from a nongovernmental organization (NGO) kidnapped in Kenya and returned home converted to Islam. Occurring in 2019 and 2020, respectively, the conversations about Rackete and Romano link Italy’s stable high levels of online polarization (Urman, 2020) and systematically below-the-average levels of gender equality (EIGE, 2022) with its unique situation of “two populisms in power” (Bordignon, 2020: 20) for which the main populist party—the Five Stars Movement (5SM)—governed the country first allying with the League (the main right-wing party at the time) and then with the Democratic Party (DP; the main party of the center-left area).

We argue that looking at these two cases, albeit different among themselves and referred to a specific country, provides us with a useful entry point to understand how stereotyping attitudes that are transversal to the ideological spectrum (Pavan and Martella, 2021) and particularly frequent in online conversations (Inguanzo et al., 2021) entwine with fluid political antagonism—with women’s (mis)representations instrumentally crafted and circulated to sanction or, alternatively, defend

their “noncompliance” to gender and intersectional social norms (Sobieraj, 2020) and, at the same time, to defy and/or despise former allies and current political adversaries.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, we link extant reflections on political polarization with those on the instrumentalization of gender politics. Second, we discuss the polarizing nature of online discussions that put women at the center of attention and propose to advance reflections in this area by examining dynamics of polarized intersectionality throughout changing political scenarios. We then present our data and methods and illustrate the results of our analysis. Finally, we discuss our results and draw some conclusions.

### **Polarization, social and political identities, and instrumental uses of gender**

Political polarization has been seen as fed by two analytically distinct and yet substantively linked processes: ideological and affective polarization (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). Ideological polarization can be defined as a separation of politics into different ideological fields which can result from two main processes. On one side, increased ideological distance among political fronts (politicians and parties) (Levendusky, 2010). On the other, a tendency toward opinion alignment that does not necessarily reflect in ideological radicalization (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Both these processes seem to affect citizens by favoring the alignment of their opinions with those of preferred politicians and parties as well as their progressive distancing from other political forces/parties along cleavages that become more and more salient for their social identity.

Individuals’ identification with a political party/movement is at the heart of what has been called “affective polarization” (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2012), which occurs when citizens develop a sense of dislike and distrust against opposing partisans and groups perceived as politically, socially, and culturally distant (West and Iyengar, 2022). Political fractures of this sort and consequent distancing align with other sociodemographic and cultural cleavages based on ethnicity and gender (Mason, 2018) and thus set crucial contributions toward fragmenting the society in antagonistic and irreconcilable groups. Consistently, in a recent study, McCoy et al. (2018) define polarization as a “process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’” (p. 35). What the

authors envision is therefore a progressive shift- ing from ideological to affective polarization throughout new and multiple cleavages that support the construction of a social identity often in conflict with distant and unacceptable “others.”

As polarization processes increasingly pivot around social and individual identities (West and Iyengar, 2022), they tend to grow their roots and, at the same time, harden conflicts over gender-related issues. Particularly in contexts in which de-democratization trends are boosted by the electoral success of nationalist and populist parties (Ferree, 2021; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022), opposition to gender and sexual equality fuels polarization as conservative gendered social orders are frequently reclaimed “to delegitimize political opponents, liberal pundits, and civil society leaders as corrupt elites” (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022: 7). In turn, this instrumentalization ushers the subordination of gender politics to higher-level endeavors of constructing antithetical political identities and paves the way to the reproduction of systems of interlocked inequalities insofar as oppressive systems of gender relations intersect exclusionary “othering strategies” (Donà, 2021) that deeply ground within discriminatory visions of race, ethnicity, religion, age, and physical ability.

Moreover, extant literature suggests that political elites and media also play a key role by welding polarized political conflict and instrumental uses of gender. Indeed, leaders and political elites are often taken as a point of reference for tracing the contours of the “others” (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019) as they come to subsume all the hated and disliked characteristics that are associated with alterity. In this context, the “performance of gender” becomes crucial for the construction of otherness as it comes to subsume the bulk of the collective values held by candidates and their respective parties (Ferree, 2021; Utych, 2021). Relatedly, studies show that, especially online, affective polarization often pivots around prominent individuals (be they party leaders, celebrities, or renown public figures) and that conversation tones become much harsher when women (particularly those with a public profile) are the main objects of attention (Harmer and Southern, 2021; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020).

In parallel, media actively foster both ideological and affective polarization by adopting narrative styles and frames that contribute to the identification of “enemies” (Robison and Mullinix, 2016). Consistently, media selection and exposure have been found to be opinion self-reinforcing acts that further political polarization and intolerance toward adversaries (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017). In this respect, observers highlight

that women-stereotyped and biased representations are crucial in fostering partisanship and, thus, political antagonism. On one hand, mediated representations of gender are crucial for sustaining identity politics as the portrayal especially of women politicians tend to “reflect hegemonic discourses of identity politics that [. . .] are often used to construct inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries that differentiate between self and other” (Fiig, 2010: 47). On the other hand, media stereotyped representations of women cement sexist beliefs and attitudes both in women and men (Swami et al., 2010; Ward, 2016) which in turn have been connected with strongly polarized patterns of political participation both offline (Utych, 2021) and online (Inguanzo et al., 2021).

### **Fighting about and through gender in online spaces**

Against this background, a growing number of studies focus on the divisiveness of digital conversations centered on women and gender-related issues. Sexist messages online are found to be “strategic in nature” as they foster the polarization of social identities along a normative cleavage between acceptable and unacceptable gender behaviors which, in turn, builds on traditional beliefs and provides solid ground to enforce stereotypes and, hence, antagonism against nonconformant women (Felmlee et al., 2020: 17). Stereotypes against which women are evaluated tend to mirror biased media representation of female bodies, relationships, and morality, and function as a device to denigrate their capabilities and courses of action (Felmlee et al., 2020; Harmer and Southern, 2021; Swami et al., 2010). In this respect, an intersectional lens brings focus squarely to the exclusionary and anti-democratic potentialities of stereotypical representations that make a simultaneous use of gendered, racialized, homophobic, and Islamophobic imaginaries particularly to support nationalist, sovereigntist, and conservative political programs (Olufemi, 2020). Indeed, extant studies show how stereotypical misrepresentations are weaponized online even more harshly and frequently against women from minority groups (Inara Rodis, 2021; Sobieraj, 2020) targeting multiple aspects of their identities—for example, coupling misogyny with Islamophobia or racism (Harmer and Southern, 2021)—and thus reinforcing intersectional patterns of social exclusion (Felmlee et al., 2020). Women’s age and experience constitute two other important axes of intersectional discrimination so that, for example, in several countries, younger representatives of minority groups when first elected are more abused online than others (Ward and McLoughlin, 2020).

Although traditionalists become highly vocal and overrepresented on social media (Inguanzo et al., 2021), they often encounter the reactions of counterpublics that engage with and fight intersectional misrepresentations (Inara Rodis, 2021) by incrementing the production of opposing contents (Inguanzo et al., 2021) and thus avoiding the individualization and the silencing of discriminated targets (Eschmann, 2021). In this sense, online discussions triggered by or filled with intersectional (mis)representations take a highly polarized shape insofar as participants endorse and defend antagonistic visions of gendered social orders that are often articulated along a division between “Us” and “Them” that is typical of populist rhetoric (Donà, 2021; Martella and Bracciale, 2022).

Recent contributions underline how online conflicts pivoting around contrasting visions of gender mix with political polarization dynamics. In this respect, the concept of “polarized intersectionality” (Pavan and Martella, 2021: 382) has been proposed to grasp “the strategic tailoring of women’s [intersectional](mis)representations” to attack and delegitimize political enemies in a context in which digital media constitute pivotal polarized political spaces (Urman, 2020; Yarchi et al., 2021). To be sure, levels and repertoires of stereotypization and misogyny vary across partisan groups as they mirror and, at the same time, contribute to nurture antagonistic gendered social orders and imaginaries. At the same time, women’s (mis)representations online are often embedded in narratives that enclose direct attacks against political counterparts through which in-groups’ boundaries and identities are strengthened, unbridgeable distances from adversaries are marked, and attempts to dismantle unacceptable political visions and strategies are made (Pavan and Martella, 2021).

However, extant analyses remain quite static insofar as the weaponization of women’s (mis)representations is typically observed in a specific moment in time and with respect to context-specific adversarial arrangements. In fact, investigations of digital dynamics do recognize the fluidity not only of identity processes and practices that foster increased polarization (Mason, 2018) but also of online conversational environments, wherein changing patterns of attention-giving and content circulation unfold along a “multipolar schism” which reflects identity and values-based fragmentations (Bodrunova et al., 2019) while enhancing those “mechanisms of dehumanization, depersonalization, and stereotyping” that are proper of affective polarization (McCoy et al., 2018).

Building on these studies, our aim is to examine how polarized intersectionality dynamics vary within changing political scenarios and how they entwine with both ideological and affective political polarization

dynamics that occur when parties, leaders, and, more in general, partisan communities swing in-between relationships of political collaboration and hostility. Accordingly, our study addresses the following research questions:

*RQ1.* Do changing political scenarios translate in different conversational and ideologically characterized environments?

*RQ2.* What type of intersectional (mis)representations emerges in these conversations?

*RQ3.* What type of antagonism do women's (mis)representations fuel and, eventually, in what ways do they contribute to polarization processes?

## **Data and methods**

To answer our research questions, we compared two online discussions that occurred in Italy between 2019 and 2020 and explicitly focused on two women who suddenly rose to public attention. The first case refers to Carola Rackete, the Captain of Sea Watch 3, who entered Italian waters on 26 June 2019 and forced her way into the port of Lampedusa on 29 June 2019 to rescue migrants' lives. The second case concerns the release on 9 May 2020 of Silvia Aisha Romano, an NGO aid-worker kidnapped in Kenya and returned home converted to Islam.

Massive attention toward these two women was mainly motivated by the fact that their experiences resulted to be challenging in several respects. Rackete's choice to dock in Lampedusa against the orders of the Italian government (and, more particularly, of the back-then Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini) evidently disrupted the "classic feminine personality stereotype" based on warmth, niceness, and lack of competence (Felmlee et al., 2020: 18). Similarly, Romano's choice to convert to Islam openly challenged stereotypes of Muslim women as subjugated and deprived of their autonomy while putting in question the privilege of White Christian women (Olufemi, 2020). Moreover, with their actions, both women challenged diffused populist arguments on migrants as a "threat": directly helping them (Rackete) and choosing "their" religion (Romano), the two women took a rather clear position with respect to a highly polarizing issue for Western countries (McCoy et al., 2018; Martella and Bracciale, 2022).

Interestingly, Rackete and Romano's challenging behaviors and, therefore, the discussion they triggered, occurred in two divergent

political scenarios. Rackete indeed docked in Lampedusa in June 2019 disobeying the orders of a government jointly led by the right-wing League and the populist 5SM and opposed by the left-wing DP. Only a few months later, in May 2020, Romano’s release and conversion became a matter of public discussion while the government was jointly led by the DP and the 5SM, with the League sitting instead at the opposition.

We choose to monitor these two conversations on Twitter due to its importance for political and media elites in the Italian hybrid media system (Bracciale and Cepernich, 2018) and cuing on widespread recognition of its polarizing effect (Yarchi et al., 2021). Tweets were downloaded via the full archive search API for academic research<sup>1</sup> if they contained any of the following keywords:

- CarolaRackete OR Carola Rackete OR Rackete (from 25 June 2019 to 2 July 2019);
- SilviaRomano OR Silvia Romano OR Aisha (from 9 May 2020 to 17 May 2020).

In total, we collected 9,576 original tweets including Carola Rackete’s keywords, which originated an overall volume of 188,690 retweets, and 17,142 original tweets including Silvia Aisha Romano’s keywords which in turn originated an overall volume of 264,367 retweets. In our analysis, we focused exclusively on retweet actions as they emerge in literature as the clearest indication of polarized communities on Twitter (Conover et al., 2011).

Following previous works (Pavan and Martella, 2021), we constructed a unimodal weighted network in which tweets are linked if they were retweeted by the same user(s). To identify main semantic areas within these structures, we employed the Clauset et al. (2004) algorithm and broke the giant components into communities.<sup>2</sup> To further assess actual levels of disconnection between network areas, we compared densities within and between communities (Borgatti et al., 2013) and considered as separated those with internal and intra-community density levels, respectively, higher and lower than the giant component’s value.

We derived the overall political leaning of these semantic communities starting from the presence of tweets authored by political parties, Italian and European parliamentary members, leaders, and media accounts that are main providers of cues for ideological and affective polarization (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019; Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017). We then analyzed texts within each community through Top2Vec technique



(Angelov, 2020), a topic modeling based on sentence embeddings<sup>3</sup> and density clustering (Hdbscan), to identify the different topics feeding the discussions.

Following Yarchi et al. (2021), we removed inconsistent topics to then classify remaining ones manually with respect to two dimensions that intertwine the different position-taking and actions in a polarized debate with the category of gender:

- (i) The main subject targeted in the topic, distinguishing:
  - the two women (Carola Rackete and Silvia Romano);
  - political elites (distinguishing among government, leaders, actors, and parties);
  - media;
  - institutions (i.e. judiciary, President of the Republic, Italian Finance Police, etc.);
  - political communities (“them” as political opponents, i.e. right or left-wing-ers, “leghisti,” “piddini,” etc.);
  - others (“them” as other groups, i.e. immigrants, haters, NGOs, etc.).
- (ii) the main aim in the topic, distinguishing between:
  - news report, distinguishing if the report is generally neutral (N), positive (POS), or negative (NEG);
  - support, when the subject(s) of the topics are supported or endorsed;
  - defense, when the subject(s) of the topics are defended or protected;
  - attack, when the subject(s) of the topics are criticized or disapproved;
  - discredit, when the subject(s) of the topics are belittled or discredited.

To reach a perfect agreement on topic labels, subject, and aim categories, the team held several independent coding sessions and regular comparison meetings (Neuendorf, 2019).

**Table 1.** Network overall and community measures.

	Carola Rackete semantic network	Silvia Aisha Romano semantic network
Nodes (N)	9,576	17,142
Edges (N)	854,383	1,855,780
Nodes in giant component (n)	8,957	16,006
Edges weight mean	2.4	1.9
Community 1 nodes (n)	2,928	4,527
Community 2 nodes (n)	5,629	8,255
Community 3 nodes (n)	—	1,930

Following extant approaches (Bodrunova et al., 2019; Conover et al.,

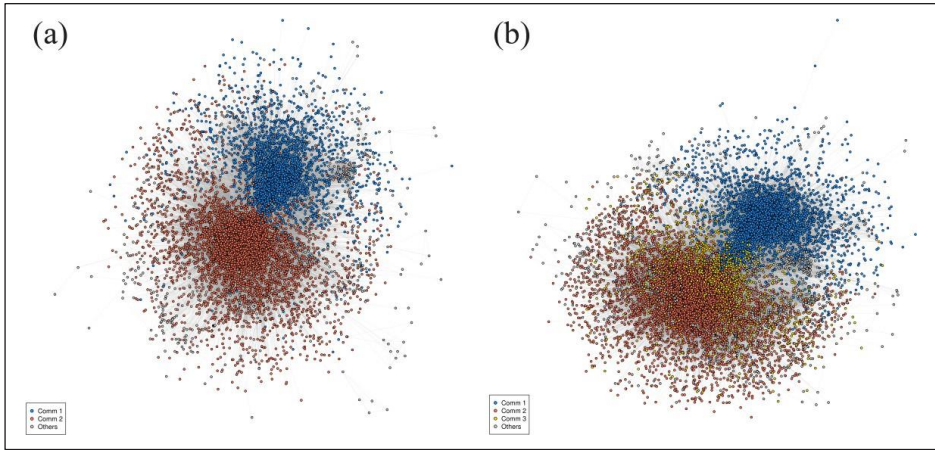
2011), we identified polarization based on both network properties (clustering structure and ideological leaning) and attitudes expressed in texts by identified communities. Consequently, to understand how women’s (mis)representations entangle with ideological and affective polarization, we interpreted specific combinations of aims and targets (e.g. discredit or explicit attacks on political communities) as a sign of political animosity toward the outgroup and thus as a contribution to affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2012; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). Similarly, we considered attacks and discredit toward political actors such as leaders, parties, members, and government as a cue of increased ideological distance among political fronts or alignment to one’s party’s position (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021). We then examined qualitatively women’s (mis)representations looking at topics grouped by aims.

## Results

### *Semantic communities and their alignment with political alliances*

The two unimodal networks show the presence of a giant component, including more than 90% of the nodes (Rackete: 93.5%; Romano: 93.4%). The community-finding algorithm identified two main communities within the Rackete’s semantic network and three in the Romano’s one (Table 1). Values of the density study show that communities in Figure 1 are well separated regardless of the intensity of the relationships among nodes. Ultimately, these communities of tweets constitute independent corpora that can be explored individually (Table A1 in Online Appendix).

To identify the political leaning of each community, we analyzed the distribution of media and political tweets (including leaders, Italian and European parliamentary members, and relevant politicians and groups who run in the 2018 general elections). As shown in Table A2 (Online Appendix), the two semantic communities in the Rackete network are neatly ideologically connotated. Indeed, while the first one includes tweets by right-wing parties and their preferred media outlets<sup>4</sup> (i.e. *Libero*, *La Verità*, *il Giornale*, and *Mediaset Tgcom 24*), the second one contains tweets by left-wing parties and close media outlets (i.e. *la Repubblica*, *il Corriere della Sera*, *il Manifesto*, *Tg3*, etc.). Almost all tweets by members of the 5SM and their favorite media outlets (i.e. *Tg La7* and *il Fatto Quotidiano*) belong to the first community, thus reflecting the party’s alliance with the League in the “yellow-green” government in place at that time.



**Figure 1.** Semantic communities in Carola Rackete (a) and Silvia Aisha Romano (b) networks.

Similarly, the first and the second communities in the discussion about Romano are ideologically oriented to the right (C1) and to the left (C2) along with their preferred media outlets (Table A3 Online Appendix). However, here a third community emerges that contains tweets by 5SM members and close media (*il Fatto Quotidiano*, *il Fatto Blog*, etc.). Also in this case, the overall community structure reflects that of the governmental coalition in place in 2020 (the “yellow-red” government formed by left-wing parties and the 5SM). Still, the correspondence here is less neat as the 5SM community “stands in between” separating from that of its former political ally yet without fully merging with the left-oriented one.

This notwithstanding, several elements suggest that changes in government alliances do in fact translate in different conversational and ideologically characterized environments (RQ1). Indeed, the changed geometry of the governmental coalition from the Rackete to the Romano case seems to have increased the ideological distance (Levendusky, 2010) between users who retweeted 5SM and right-wing contents, as shown by the shift from a bipolar to a tripolar network in which users retweet political actors and media messages based on specific ideological leanings. In other words, while in the Rackete’s case, users of Community 1 retweeted both center-right and 5SM accounts (as the League and the 5SM were allied in governing the country), in the Romano’s case, this “communality of sources” disappears almost entirely, and two separate communities of tweets emerge in connection to the cracking of the “yellow-green” alliance.

Moreover, the League-5SM government fell few weeks after Rackete’s case, and its precariousness mirrors in the scarce presence of tweets by 5SM in the first online conversation compared to its livelier activity in the debate on Romano when the 5SM was enjoying renewed strength as a governmental force.

**Table 2.** Tweets’ aims in Carola Rackete network.

	Tot topic	Aim	% aim comm	% aim tot	Target	% target comm	% target tot	Tot comm				
C1	9	attack	51.1	17.2	woman	13.9	4.7	2,863				
					woman_other	12	4					
					institutions	11.5	3.9					
					party	7.8	2.6					
					government	4.3	1.4					
	7	discredit	18.7	6.3	actors	1.7	0.6					
					woman	8.1	2.7					
					woman_other	4.5	1.5					
					actors	4.7	1.6					
					institutions	1.3	0.4					
C2	3	news report	30.2	10.2	N	30.2	10.2	5,629				
					9	attack	30.5		20.2	leader	15.5	10.3
	haters	9.1	6									
	community	2.8	1.8									
	institutions	1.9	1.3									
	media	1.3	0.8									
	1	defend	3.0	2.0						woman	3	2
	5	discredit	7.9	5.2						leader	6.9	4.6
										institutions	1	0.6
	10	news report	19.3	12.8	N	13.6	9					
POS					5.7	3.8						
15					support	39.2	26.0	woman	32.8	21.7		
	woman_other	6.4	4.3									

N: neutral; POS: positive.

*Subjects and aims of topics in the conversation*

*The conversation about Carola Rackete.* With respect to the (mis)representations that emerged in the conversation about Carola Rackete (RQ2), it is possible to notice that the right-wing leaning community (C1, Table 2) is strongly engaged in the effort of attack- ing and discrediting the captain along with other subjects (specifically, migrants, NGOs, and pro-migrants elites, C1 topics 12,<sup>5</sup> 13,<sup>6</sup> 17<sup>7</sup>) and

institutions (mainly attorneys and the broader judiciary system, C1 topic 3<sup>8</sup>). When attacked, Rackete is framed through a wide repertoire of stereotypes that focus on her aspect, “dubious” morality, distance from idealized visions of femininity and civil citizenship, and are flanked by incursions into her private life. Rackete’s bold stand “in a male dominated space” (Sobieraj, 2020: 10) like the Italian political scene is sanctioned by depicting her as a criminal who is breaking Italian laws, does not respect Italian institutions, is smuggling immigrants in the country, and, therefore, deserves tough sanctions (C1 topic 2). Interestingly, attempts to discredit her take neat, gendered, and intersectional connotations, as Rackete’s gender is insistently stressed through the label “capitana”—a clearly gendered connotation to stress her alterity to the “normal” figure of a male ship captain—and she is narrated as a “liar,”<sup>9</sup> a “bull,”<sup>10</sup> a “Miss” (see Note 5), in cahoots with pro-immigration elites, who is abundantly paid by NGOs (C1 topic 13), or as the white, rich, rasta, and bored<sup>11</sup> daughter of a former officer who trades weapons (hence, a hypocrite, C1 topic 10<sup>12</sup>).

At the same time, attacks against Rackete are launched instrumentally from the right-wing leaning community seeking to exacerbate levels of ideological polarization, particularly by discrediting political actors who support her (RQ3). Indeed, although there are no explicit attacks or attempts to discredit political outgroups—a typical trait of affective polarization (West and Iyengar, 2022)—Community 1 tweets mention Rackete in the context of what are in fact direct attacks against institutions, particularly the judicial system that did not convict her (C1 topics 6<sup>13</sup> and 19<sup>14</sup>), and the DP, whose members jumped on board of the SeaWatch 3 and are therefore accused to be “traitors” (to the homeland) disobeying the orders of the Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (C1 topics 4,<sup>15</sup> 7, 18<sup>16</sup>).

Tweets in the left-wing community (C2) instead mention Rackete in two main ways: on the one hand, showing explicit support for the captain and her actions (C2 topics 1, 2, 3, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 25, 29, 32, 33, and 39); on the other, to discredit or criticize Matteo Salvini (C2 topics 0, 5, 15, 28, 31). While most topics reveal different facets of this support (pleas for sustaining economically SeaWatch and legal expenses, moral support on “having done the right thing,” etc.), in several cases, Rackete is almost glorified, and her courage,<sup>17</sup> determination, intelligence, and skills as captain (in this community, often used in a male connotation) are paraded and, sometimes, directly contrasted with the slimness of the profile of the “captain” of the League, Matteo Salvini, who is instead accused of not knowing how to be a minister,<sup>18</sup> of having fled from

prosecution (unlike Rackete who faces willingly the consequences of her acts),<sup>19</sup> or who is mocked after the decision of the Agrigento attorney to not validate Rackete’s arrest.<sup>20</sup> Flanking targeted attacks against Salvini are those against broadly identified “haters” (C2 topics 4, 17, 22, and 27)—although a slight juxtaposition to “right wingers” (and hence some traces of affective polarization, i.e. C2 topic 10<sup>21</sup>) sometimes appears. Here, it is worth noticing that both offline<sup>22</sup> and online,<sup>23</sup> Rackete was the subject of sexist and violent hate speech, such as wishing her to be raped,<sup>24</sup> which in turn generated numerous outraged reactions, sometime stumbling into body shaming.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, a twofold pattern seems to emerge from tweets of the left-wing leaning community. On one hand, the production of a hyper-positive and supportive narrative about Rackete configures, as outlined by previous studies (Inara Rodis, 2021), as a direct counteraction to attacks she received. On the other hand, however, her frequent comparison with “the captain of the right” Matteo Salvini suggests that this restorative strategy enmeshes with an instrumental use of her greatness and courage (RQ2) particularly to mark ideological differences with the opposed political community and to belittle its leader, the Minister of Interior (RQ3).

*The conversation about Silvia Aisha Romano.* The (mis)representation of Silvia Aisha Romano (RQ2) crafted by the right-wing community (C1, Table 3) clearly pivots around her religious conversion. Indeed, joint attacks to Romano and other actors (particularly, “Islamists,” C1 topics 8, 16, 20, 23, 25, 45) or exclusively against her for having converted to Islam and Al Shabaab,<sup>26</sup> for her wearing a jilbab<sup>27</sup> and for meaning to return to Africa<sup>28</sup> (C1 topics 1, 16, 20, 23, 24, 28, 32, 42) amount almost to 20% of all direct attacks. While not being the only target (Community 1 tweets also attack “the left” for supporting the aid-worker—see C1 topics 30 and 47), the “converted” Romano is nonetheless the subject of the largest portion of discrediting tweets. Not only her conversion is equated with a direct endorsement of Islamist terrorism. Her gender and age are also recalled to doubt the intentionality of her choice: victim of her kidnappers, young, and naive,<sup>29</sup> she was plagiarized and forced to convert,<sup>30</sup> to dress like an oppressed Muslim woman,<sup>31</sup> and to become “a friend” of Islamic terrorists who were abusing her while she thought they were treating her well.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, Romano is intersectionally (mis)represented as an “incapable traitor” who thinks has made a free choice but, in fact, does not realize she has been forced to choose Islam over her Italian and Christian roots.

**Table 3.** Tweets’ aims in Silvia Romano communities.

Com m	Tot. topic	Aim	% aim comm	% aim tot	Target	% target comm	% target tot	Tot comm		
C1	2 4	attack	39.5	12.0	woman_other	11.8	3.6	4,413		
					government	10.2	3.1			
					woman	7	2.1			
					institutions	3.8	1.1			
					others	1.8	0.5			
					community	1.7	0.5			
					actors	1.4	0.4			
	leader	1	0.3							
	media	0.8	0.2							
	1 4	discredit	30.8	9.3	woman	12.9	3.9			
					government	7.4	2.2			
					leader	6.3	1.9			
					woman_other	3	0.9			
					government_other	1.2	0.3			
NEG					13.4	4				
N					12.3	3.7				
POS	1.5	0.4								
C2	1 2	news report	27.2	8.2	leader	2.5	0.7	8,255		
					haters	28.2	15.9			
	2 3	defend discredit	10.2	5.7	actors	7	3.9			
					woman	10.2	5.7			
	1 0	news report	33.0	18.7	community	8.8	5			
					leader	2.6	1.5			
	2	support	10.3	5.8	POS	27.5	15.6			
					N	5.5	3.1			
	C3	5	attack	47.9	6.3	woman	5.8		3.3	1,930
						actors	4.5		2.5	
						haters	24.8		3.3	
		7	news report	52.1	6.9	community	12.2		1.6	
						actors	10.9		1.4	
							POS		32.6	
N							15	2		
					NEG	4.5	0.6			

NEG: negative; N: neutral; POS: positive.

Evident traces of the changed political scenario (RQ1) can be found here by looking at the higher percentage of tweets that in this community attack or discredit the Italian government. Pivoting around political parties now at the opposition of the “yellow-red” government, tweets in Community 1 mention Romano in a completely instrumental way, in fact blaming the government for having paid millions of euros for her ransom<sup>33</sup> and, consequently, for financing the Islamist jihad<sup>34</sup> (C1 topics 0, 3, 9, 21, 40). Similarly, Romano becomes the excuse to criticize individual party members and the mainstream media, accused of diffusing false information on her rescue.<sup>35</sup> Paralleling diffused attempts to mark distances from Romano, her choices, and a government colluded with Islamic terrorists, tweets in Community 1 also support, albeit with much less intensity, its political leader Matteo Salvini, by reporting insistently his statements on the rescue (C1 topic 14). Consistently with what has emerged from previous studies (Pavan and Martella, 2021), the intersectional delegitimization of Romano is strategically weaponized by tweets in C1 against political enemies and, more particularly, to flag an ideological distance with the “yellow-red” government (RQ3).

Within the left-wing leaning community (C2), now part of the government coalition, the public defense of Romano’s choice to convert to Islam is the main “positive” act performed through tweets (10.3% of tweets in the community, C2 topics 3 and 12). While direct support for her and her choices is minimal with respect to that expressed for Rackete (5.8% against 32.8%), her public defense passes through claims of her freedom to choose her religion or, at least, not to be criticized in light of the experience she went through.<sup>36</sup> However, her freedom of choice is not always framed as an absolute right but, rather, as something that should not be criticized in light of the hypocritical “conversion” of voters from the South of Italy to the League<sup>37</sup> or of the past “sympathy” that the fascist regime expressed toward Islam.

More relevant appears to be instead the tendency to mention Romano to defy political adversaries (RQ3). In this case, attack tweets are as frequent as in C1 (both with respect to the community and total tweets) but much more concentrated on two targets: generic haters<sup>38</sup> and individual party members—especially Alessandro Pagano<sup>39</sup> and Nico Basso<sup>40</sup>—two members of the League who, respectively, defined Romano a “neo terrorist” and asked to “hang” her (C2 topics 6 and 22). At the same time, targets of discredit in this community become more specific: while tweets in Community 2 continue to attack Matteo Salvini,<sup>41</sup> aversion is overwhelmingly directed against members of the opposed political



community (labeled as “leghisti,” “fascioleghisti,”<sup>42</sup> right-wingers) and their newspapers<sup>43</sup> (C2 topics 7, 11, and 16).

Similar trends characterize the public recount of Romano in the third community formed by tweets of the 5SM and its supporters where she is recalled mostly to perform two equally relevant functions. On one hand, to report the news of her rescue (C3 topics 0, 6, 7, 8) and, considering that the 5SM was chairing the Ministry of Foreign affairs, almost always in a positive way (although some doubts emerge about the ransom payment and Romano’s conversion,<sup>44</sup> C3 topics 1, 9, and 11). On the other hand, almost half tweets attack, in order: generic “haters” (C3 topics 2, 5, 10), opposed partisans (particularly, League’s supporters, C3 topics 3 and 4) and, along the same lines as Community 2, individual party members of the League who publicly attacked Romano.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Community 3 shows more doubts than the previous one especially about Romano’s conversion, which is often seen as a result of imprisonment rather than a free choice.

Ultimately, the two communities joined in the “yellow-red” government activate to contrast digital gendered and Islamophobic attacks against Romano thus confirming once more that increased production of oppositional content is a common counteraction strategy against sexism, racism, and gender-based hostility (Eschmann, 2021; Inguanzo et al., 2021). However, the defense of Romano is somehow clouded by two elements. First, her (mis)representation as a young and naive woman, which feeds doubts on the intentionality of her conversion (RQ2). Second, the high amount of mentions she receives in what appears to be a conversation predominantly ruled by mechanisms of affective polarization, where nothing is systematically said to reclaim her freedom of choice, and tweets are instead mainly aimed at discrediting political opponents from the right and their supporters (RQ3).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, we investigated the interplay between women (mis)representations within digital discussions and political polarization dynamics in the context of evolving political scenarios. We examined two cases which, albeit different, allowed us to better disentangle how stereotyping and sexist attitudes and political antagonism entwine. Our exploration was guided by three main research questions: first, whether different political arrangements and alliances mirror within online discussions, and generate different conversational and ideological environments; second, what types of (mis)representations emerge in these

contexts; and, third, how these (mis)representations are put at the service of political antagonism feeding processes of both ideological and affective polarization. With respect to our first concern (RQ1), our results seem to confirm previous studies (Bodrunova et al., 2019) that highlight how communication and attention flows online tend to reproduce offline polarized political settings. The shift from a bipolar to a tripolar system in our semantic networks reflects the changing Italian political scenario, with the conversation about Rackete unfolding within two main semantic communities separating tweets of the government alliance—League and 5SM—from messages by the left-wing opposition, and the one about Romano taking place in a different setting where the new alliance between the 5SM and the DP emerges albeit more at the semantic than at the structural level. In this sense, our reconstruction of the two online discussions reflects the difficulties of re-arranging and aligning political identities of actors that swing between relationships of political collaboration and hostility—mostly because of the 5SM and its supporters who endorse “contradictory or elusive views on policy issues that cut across traditional cleavages” (Mosca and Tronconi, 2019: 1277) and thus enable them to renegotiate rather quickly their alliances and oppositions.

Our study also confirms previous insights on how online discussions that center on women, their bodies, and choices are highly polarized and filled with attacks, hostility, and a wide range of intersectionally stereotyped (mis)representations (Harmer and Southern, 2021; Inguanzo et al., 2021; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020). At the same time, it shows that conflict remains high regardless of variations in the patterns of governmental alliances and invariantly unfolds at the crossroads between two main dimensions: one pertaining to opposed gender norms endorsed by political actors, and the other tied to political hostility, ideological distance, and affective dislike for political adversaries.

More specifically, looking at the dynamics of (mis)representations of both Rackete and Romano (RQ2), we can notice that the clashing of divergent visions of gender follows a pattern that remains constant: right-wing political actors and partisan communities always elaborate and circulate ferocious intersectional (mis)representations about women who are accused to embody noncompliant gender models and behaviors; while more left-wing leaning parties and their supporters respond to these attacks coalescing within “defending counterpublics” that aim at opposing intersectional discrimination (Inguanzo et al., 2021; Ward and McLoughlin, 2020).

Mixing strategically biased visions of gender, age, class, geographical

provenance, and religious choices, the two women are publicly narrated by tweets in the right-wing communities as “unattractive” because their physical appearance does not adhere to feminine stereotypes (Felmlee et al., 2020; Swami et al., 2010), as incapable because of their age (Ward and McLoughlin, 2020), as immoral because of their private lives (as shown, for example, by allegations focused on Romano’s alleged sexual relationships with the “enemies” or on Rackete’s father) or because of their alleged association with immigration and terrorism (Harmer and Southern, 2021). Overall, intersectional (mis)representation of the two women are carefully crafted to denounce and sanction their extraneousness with respect to the conservative and Islamophobic social order envisaged by right-wing political actors and their supporters.

However, our results also suggest that, contrary to what emerges from existing accounts (Inguanzo et al., 2021), responses to these attacks do not necessarily entail the correction of biased and stereotyped representations and the public circulation of fairer and more empowering narratives. In both conversations, communities that respond to the attacks coming from the right-wing do so by resorting to other stereotypes which are at times used to “justify” the choices of the two women and other times to explicitly attack political opponents. In this sense, the narratives constructed by left-wing leaning communities in both discussions and, albeit to a lesser extent, by the 5SM in the Romano case can do little, if anything at all, to dismantle the stereotyped, oppressive, and mortifying representations pushed forward by more conservative ideologies. Often, more than being concerned with reversing the narrative on the two women, responses to intersectional (mis)representations seem to be aimed at defying political opponents, as shown, for example, by the persistence of doubts on Romano’s conversion especially in the 5SM community that accompany attacks to its former political allies.

Controversies about Rackete and Romano speak even more loudly to the instrumental use that all actors and partisan communities make of the two women. By examining the type of polarization that are fed by intersectional (mis)representations (RQ3), our study shows that in fact both ideological and affective distancing do increasingly align with cultural cleavages such as ethnicity and gender (Mason, 2018), and thus highlights the importance of intersectional aspects in the construction of “political otherness” in an increasingly polarized context.

In both conversations, all communities of tweets weaponize Rackete and Romano against political adversaries and government actors in a way that contributes to rise general levels of ideological and affective polarization. Indeed, in the conversation about Rackete, intersectional

(mis)representations are used by the right-wing community to discredit not only the captain but also members of the DP who show her support; a similar instrumental use of Rackete is made by the left-wing community, which celebrates her greatness with the intention to belittle Matteo Salvini. Similarly, Romano's conversion and physical appearance function particularly for the right-wing community as intersectional devices to exacerbate ideological opposition against the government led by the 5SM and the DP for its unacceptable choice of paying for her ransom.

Importantly, the noncompliance of the two women and their actions are taken as a starting point in both discussions to directly attack and discredit adversaries and to showcase growing hostility against rival communities perceived as politically, socially, and culturally distant (West and Iyengar, 2022) and are often reduced to their individual members or leaders (Druckman and Levendusky, 2019). Still, levels of affective polarization appear to be higher in the conversation about Romano in connection with two elements. On the one hand, the increased ideological distance between the 5SM and the League, and their reversed government role (which brings the latter to attack the "yellow-red" government and the former to defend it). On the other, the consonance between the centrality of Islamophobia for actors on the center-right and Romano's noncompliance. Responses to attacks against Romano resort to harsher tones and display a more precise association between extraneous "others" that have to be alienated (McCoy et al., 2018) and specific political parties and areas—as shown by the shift from attacks against generic "haters," more prevalent in the Rackete debate, to the punctual identification of enemies primarily with "leghisti," "fascists," "sovereignist," and "right-wingers." Interestingly, our results show that affective polarization is mainly generated in communities that activate to counter the biased and stereotyped representation of women, thus clarifying that in highly polarized context, sexist, racist, and Islamophobic attacks continue to be collectively checked and challenged (Eschmann, 2021; Inguanzo et al., 2021) but in fact could generate a different sort of "othering" strategy centered on political incompatibility.

In conclusion, our study indicates that tendencies toward intersectionally (mis)representing women and different forms of political polarization not only interact but, in fact, mutually reinforce thus nurturing dynamics of polarized intersectionality that persist throughout changing political scenarios. Indeed, reasoning in terms of polarized intersectionality allowed us to show that the intentional weaponization of women is structural, insofar as it does not seem to depend on specific

arrangement of political alliances which, nonetheless, provide political actors with a map to orient their attacks. Crucially, our study shows that polarized intersectionality provides a lens to complement current insights that insist on the misogynistic politics endorsed by right-wing and far right actors. To be sure, direct attacks originate more often at the hands of right-wing actors who aim at restoring traditional gendered social orders breached by the courageous choices of women such as Rackete and Romano. However, directly engaging in intersectionally violent dynamics is also the most common strategy enacted by those who wish to counter mechanisms of social exclusion but, in fact, end up discursively producing new ones.

Trapped in between (mis)representations that are either crafted to reclaim conservative and oppressive gendered orders or to attack political adversaries, women and their experiences are always instrumentally rewritten when not directly silenced. Empty expressions of support which do not address the substance of intersectional discrimination, even when produced in big quantities, prove to be only a weak response to hyper-vocal intersectional hostility, which is instead dealt with by stressing ideological distance and augmenting overt expressions of dislike, distrust, and refusal against political enemies.

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## **Supplemental material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## **Notes**

1. <https://developer.twitter.com/en/docs/twitter-api/tweets/search/api-reference/get-tweets-search-all>
2. To determine the best community structure based on modularity value, the algorithm takes into account also edge weight.
3. Sentence embeddings were calculated using BERT universal sentence encoder multilingual large model, <https://tfhub.dev/google/universal-sentence-encoder-multilingual->

large/3

4. For media outlet audiences in Italy, see Roncarolo and Mancini (2018).
5. <https://twitter.com/DSantanche/status/1145660766542073857>
6. <https://twitter.com/DiegoFusaro/status/1144300918021808128>
7. [https://twitter.com/\\_DAGOSPIA\\_/status/1146006085473579008](https://twitter.com/_DAGOSPIA_/status/1146006085473579008)
8. <https://twitter.com/LegaSalvini/status/1146358784383754240>
9. [https://twitter.com/\\_DAGOSPIA\\_/status/1145268978245427201](https://twitter.com/_DAGOSPIA_/status/1145268978245427201)
10. <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/italia/13478749/sea-watch-carola-rackete-bulla-non-eroina-nicola-quatrano-ex-pm-ricatto-migranti-contro-matteo-salvini-italia.html>
11. <https://twitter.com/DSantanche/status/1144649523920330752>
12. <https://twitter.com/DiegoFusaro/status/1144679580000751616>
13. <https://twitter.com/CandianiStefano/status/1146298700618182657>
14. <https://twitter.com/Corriere/status/1146361560497082368>
15. <https://twitter.com/LucaCastellini/status/1145945930149126145>
16. <https://twitter.com/ElioLannutti/status/1145350568086528001>
17. <https://twitter.com/ilfattoblog/status/1144177289497915392>
18. <https://twitter.com/RominaMura/status/1143948694007533569>
19. [https://twitter.com/ferrazzi\\_andrea/status/1144920436393828352](https://twitter.com/ferrazzi_andrea/status/1144920436393828352)
20. <https://twitter.com/neXtquotidiano/status/1146384775797776384>
21. <https://twitter.com/alfredobazoli/status/1144953267081887744>
22. <https://twitter.com/neXtquotidiano/status/1145363894271131649>
23. <https://twitter.com/InOndaLa7/status/1145774534945099777>
24. <https://twitter.com/ultimenotizie/status/1144961645397065728>
25. <https://twitter.com/AlessiaMorani/status/1144985987111673857>
26. <https://twitter.com/tempoweb/status/1260209469792948226>
27. <https://twitter.com/VittorioSgarbi/status/1260296895144042499>
28. [https://twitter.com/Libero\\_official/status/1260099570727518210](https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1260099570727518210)
29. <https://twitter.com/CaioGCM/status/1260091829418147841>
30. <https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1260507663055687684>
31. <https://twitter.com/Adnkronos/status/1260203535750365184>
32. [https://twitter.com/Libero\\_official/status/1259883459482451969](https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1259883459482451969)
33. [https://twitter.com/\\_DAGOSPIA\\_/status/1260151667695259649](https://twitter.com/_DAGOSPIA_/status/1260151667695259649)
34. <https://twitter.com/VittorioSgarbi/status/1259459224465260545>
35. [https://twitter.com/Libero\\_official/status/1261188382023090176](https://twitter.com/Libero_official/status/1261188382023090176)
36. <https://twitter.com/Corriere/status/1259825020265791488>
37. The League was born as a regionalist party pursuing the secession of Northern Italy from the “unproductive” South.
38. <https://twitter.com/agorarai/status/1260105931062415361>
39. <https://twitter.com/davidefaraone/status/1260489435709308930>

40. [https://twitter.com/potere\\_alpopolo/status/1260196472437571584](https://twitter.com/potere_alpopolo/status/1260196472437571584)
41. <https://twitter.com/marattin/status/1260620693361831938>
42. <https://twitter.com/globalistIT/status/1259502423464464384>
43. [https://twitter.com/ale\\_moretti/status/1259824607374295041](https://twitter.com/ale_moretti/status/1259824607374295041)
44. <https://twitter.com/ElioLannutti/status/1259461074753028098>
45. [https://twitter.com/v\\_casa\\_camera/status/1260507826742575107](https://twitter.com/v_casa_camera/status/1260507826742575107)

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