

The Vilification of the ‘Squad’. The Discursive (De)construction of Women in U.S. Far-right Media

Abstract: Back in June 2018, four first-term Democratic women of colour were elected to the 116th U.S. Congress. Known as the ‘Squad’, these women have since been fighting against racism, white rage and resentment, xenophobia, and imperialistic arrogance towards all minorities. However, their presence on the House floor has attracted intense scrutiny and fierce opposition from the conservative establishment and affiliated (far) right-wing media outlets who have been trying to demonize these liberal, nonwhite, young, female politicians through a persistent use of discursive vilification strategies. Against this background, and by using a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches, the present study explores how these strategies are expertly deployed in the headlines, images, and reader comments of the popular far-right *Breitbart News Network*, and posits that this representation of the Squad intentionally provokes a vitriolic response from *Breitbart*’s readership. The study also provides evidence that the consequences of this aggressive *stimulus-response* dynamic are symptomatic of an unmitigated antifeminist misogyny, and a wider manifestation of an extremist right-wing ideology which rejects liberalism and favors a curtailing of constitutional and human rights.

Keywords: *the Squad, Breitbart, right-wing extremism, stimulus-response dynamic, gender vilification*

The reason women are critiqued for being too loud or too meek, too big or too small, too smart to be attractive or too attractive to be smart, is to belittle women out of standing up publicly. The goal is to ‘critique’ into submission, and that applies to anyone challenging power.

Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, member of ‘the Squad’, *Twitter*, May 28, 2019

1. Introduction

On January 3, 2019, 117 women took office in the 116th U.S. Congress,¹ making this the highest number of women lawmakers on the federal ticket² since the so-called ‘Year of the Woman’ in 1992. More importantly, the victory of these women contributed to the make-up of the most diverse political class that the House had ever seen.³ Indeed, of the 102 women who won seats in the House of Representatives, 37 were elected for the first time, thus replacing men who had previously held these seats, 43 were women of colour, and 22 were caretakers or moms of small children. In the more recent 2020 elections for the 117th U.S. Congress, women make up just over a quarter of all its members, or

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/women-dominated-2018-primary-season-here-are-numbers-n909571>

² *History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives*, Office of the Historian, *Women in Congress, 1917–2006*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007. “Women on the Campaign Trail”, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Essays/Assembling-Amplifying-Ascending/Women-Decade/> (November 21, 2021).

³ See “One hundred twenty-five were elected to office”, *Politico* (2018), <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2018/women-rule-candidate-tracker/>; Li Zhou, “A historic new Congress will be sworn in today”, *Vox* (2019), <https://www.vox.com/2018/12/6/18119733/congress-diversity-women-election-good-news>.

144 of 539 seats; the highest percentage in U.S. history and a considerable increase from where things stood even a decade ago.⁴

Going back to the ground-breaking 2018 elections, individual Democratic candidates also achieved historic firsts: Ilhan Omar (D-Minnesota) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan) were the first two Muslim-American representatives; Ayanna Pressley was the first black democratic representative from Massachusetts; Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-New York) was the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. Cognizant of their momentous role as representatives of the people, these four women set up a coalition called 'the Squad' as a testament to their victory and commitment in a heavily contested environment which mostly favors male conservative candidates.⁵

The aim of this study is to provide evidence that the overwhelming 2018 victory of a Democratic-controlled House,⁶ propelled by a significant presence of Congresswomen, confirmed in the 2020 elections, catalyzed the attention of the Grand Old Party (GOP), or the Republican Party, and affiliated media outlets, such as the far-right *Breitbart News Network*, compelling them to build a negative campaign strategy against women office-holders believed to have jeopardized conservative stronghold on an almost 80% male-dominated Congress.⁷ In particular, the study sustains that the very nature of the antagonistic response towards the election of women has become an endemic feature of right-wing mainstream parties as they have progressively opened up to far-right political interferences, but also to a generalized gender conservatism which seems to have become the lingua franca of right-wing activists in recent years.⁸ Indeed, the nationalist, misogynist, racist, and xenophobic positions of the autocratic Right are increasingly permeating mainstream conservative politics both in the U.S. and Europe.⁹ An example of this political drift can be traced in the similarities that exist across the globe of how right-wing forces demonize gender and sexuality issues by appealing to a model of male supremacy, resulting in the oppression of the social, political and economic opportunities for women.¹⁰

The above argument is developed in this study by analyzing instantiations of dangerous or aggressive language in *Breitbart's* news headlines which are a demonstration of right-wing contempt and unmitigated fear of the ubiquitous 'other', in this case, the Squad women.¹¹ This entails investigating how the GOP, by instrumentalizing¹² the network's outsized role, now boasting a number of 31 million viewers,¹³ attempts to reestablish a sense of partisan identity among its audiences in order to create powerful opinion echo chambers and protect its status-quo in the political arena. By taking advantage of this popular far-right observatory, the study especially focuses on the GOP's

⁴ <https://www.usnews.com/news/elections/slideshows/the-women-of-the-117th-congress>.

⁵ Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Where Women Run: Gender and Party in the American States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

⁶ Ella Nilsen, "It's Official: Democrats Will Control the House", *Vox* (2018), <https://www.vox.com/2018/11/6/18024818/election-results-democrats-control-house>.

⁷ Danielle Thomsen, "Why So Few (Republican) Women? Explaining the Partisan Imbalance of Women in the U.S. Congress", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 40.2, (2015), 295-323; Kira Sanbonmatsu, "Women's Underrepresentation in the U.S. Congress", in Nannerl O. Keohane and Frances McCall Rosenbluth, eds., *Women & Equality, Deedalus*, 149.1 (Winter 2020), 40-55.

⁸ Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur and Suzanna Danuta Walters, "Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44.3 (2019), 541-560.

⁹ Jens Rydgren, "Radical Right-wing Parties in Europe: What's Populism Got to Do with It?" *Journal of Language and Politics* (June 2017), 1-12; Umut Erel, "Saving and Reproducing the Nation: Struggles around Right-wing Politics of Social Reproduction, Gender and Race in Austerity Europe", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 68 (2018), 173-182; Noam Gidron and Daniel Ziblatt, "Center-Right Political Parties in Advanced Democracies", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22 (2019), 17-35.

¹⁰ Graff et al. *Gender and the Rise of the Global Right*.

¹¹ Majid KhosraviNik, *Discourse, Identity and Legitimacy: Self and Other Representation in Discourses on Iran's Nuclear Programme* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015); Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage Publications, 2015).

¹² Ruth Wodak, *Politics of Fear*.

¹³ BREITBART NEWS, "Hillary Clinton Calls 31 Million Breitbart Readers 'Racist' Klansmen", *BREITBART* (2016), <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2016/08/25/hillary-clinton-calls-31-million-breitbart-readers-racist-klansmen/>.

averseness towards women politicians in general, and towards the Squad in particular, and attempts to provide evidence that women's political participation, which is contingent on the intersection of a multiplicity of issues such as gender inequalities, race, ethnicity, minority rights, and faith,¹⁴ determines not only a generalized right-wing, anti-gender ideology, but also a wider manifestation of dislike towards progressive politics.¹⁵ Prompted by alliances that are further to the right on the political spectrum,¹⁶ it seems that the GOP's priority is to distract the electoral base from other more pressing social and economic issues that they have systematically failed to address.¹⁷

It is against this background of acquiescence between mediatization of politics and structural shifts in political partisanship that the study builds its specialized corpus of discursive vilification practices against the Squad embedded in the headlines, reader comments and images collected from *Breitbart News Network*. This larger corpus was subsequently rearranged into three specialized subcorpora which were analyzed by applying a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Breitbart's vilification of the Squad, according to the study, is realized by means of a communication strategy which is discursively formulated as a *stimulus-response* dynamic. Shown in Figure 1, this construct posits that by attacking the Squad's personal, cultural and political identities through provocative verbal and visual stimuli contained in *Breitbart's* headlines and images, the news network compels their readers to respond by producing hostile comments. Ultimately, *Breitbart's* expectation is that these dialogic events will not only produce polling results in favor of the affiliated right-wing establishment,¹⁸ but also minimize the anxieties over unresolved critical issues.

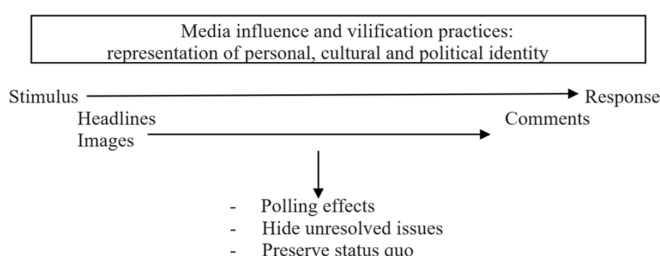


Fig. 1: The stimulus-response model for the vilification of the Squad

By considering the above premises and the structural units of the *stimulus-response* dynamic, the study's research questions are formulated as follows:

1. What are the linguistic and semiotic resources used by *Breitbart News Network* to discursively represent the Squad and its four members?
2. In what way do these resources contribute to the vilification of the Squad?
3. How does *Breitbart* construe a *stimulus-response* dynamic to persuade readers to engage in its vilification crusade?
4. To what extent is *Breitbart's* behavior towards the Squad representative of the Right's anti-gender ideology?

¹⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color", in Martha Albertson and Roxanne Mykitiuk, eds., *The Public Nature of Private Violence* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 93-118.

¹⁵ Gidron and Ziblatt, "Center-Right Political Parties".

¹⁶ Christopher Parker, "The Radical Right in the United States of America", in Jens Rydgren, ed., *Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2018), 630-649.

¹⁷ Diana Z. O'Brien, "Righting' Conventional Wisdom: Women and Right Parties in Established Democracies", *Politics & Gender*, 14.1 (2018), 27-55; Sanbonmatsu, "Women's Underrepresentation".

¹⁸ Ola Ogunyemi, "Introduction. Conceptualizing the Media of Diaspora", in Ola Ogunyemi, ed., *Journalism, Audiences and Diaspora* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1-14.

Section 2 presents a brief description of the political landscape within which the Squad's work is contextualized, of the mediatized nature of the response that the four Congresswomen have received, and of the assumptions that lie beneath the vilification practices.

2. Context of Study: The Political Spectrum and Far-right Political Shifts

The aggressive sentiment¹⁹ towards the Squad is better understood by giving a brief account of the recent right-wing political shifts and far-right pervasiveness in U.S. mainstream politics. As mentioned, both Europe and the U.S. have been witnessing an ongoing socio-political phenomenon of the emergence of far-right ideology in mainstream conservative parties,²⁰ for the most part attributable to an increasing rift between races and ethnicities, and between social classes and cultures. In fact, progressively blurred national boundaries in Western societies, mass immigration, loss of jobs, financial recession, and cultural backlash²¹ have created a growing discontent among large sectors of the population, reaching its peak especially among conservatives who increasingly fear an attack on their traditional values and on all social and political institutions, and constitute some of the main reasons why right-wing politics have pivoted toward authoritarian and extremist aspirations, such as xenophobia, misogyny, immigration control, and the defense of ethnic majority.²²

The Republican Party in the U.S., although less radical or extremist when confronted with European far-right or extreme right-wing parties, has also undergone a rightward shift especially following Donald Trump's election in 2016.²³ Trump has indeed played a pivotal role in intensifying the influence of far-right positions,²⁴ advocating issues such as political and economic protectionism, nativism, the defense of ordinary, working and middle-class people against the Washington elite, and nationalism, with his now former mantras of MAGA (Make America Great Again), and Keep America Great.²⁵ However, far-right infiltrations began long before Trump's election. Indeed, the Tea Party and the Alt-Right movements²⁶ provide insight into how extremist attitudes, such as strong animosity towards feminism, hostility towards multiculturalism and resentment towards unrestricted immigration, have encouraged the more traditional right-wingers to shift even further to the right on the political spectrum, consequently becoming an integral part of the American political landscape.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the Democratic Party is not immune to altering its party positions.²⁷ Indeed, progressive forces within the Party, such as the Squad members and supporters, have been challenging the more centrist establishment coalition, nudging it towards more liberal positions. During the 2020 presidential elections, which ushered in Biden's moderate camp of progressive politics, democratic candidates ran on tickets that proposed a number of controversial policies, such as decriminalizing border crossings, levying higher taxes on the wealthy and offering reparations to descendants of enslaved men and women, that were clustered under the socialist label in Trump's 2016 presidential race.²⁸

¹⁹ Bo Pang and Lillian Lee, "Opinion Mining and Sentiment Analysis", *Foundations and Trends in Information Retrieval*, 2.1-2 (2008), 1-135.

²⁰ Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition*, 39.4 (2004), 541-563; Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2007); Parker, "The Radical Right".

²¹ Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-nots and Cultural Backlash", *Harvard Kennedy School RWP* (2016), 16-26.

²² Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2019).

²³ Andrew Marantz, *Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation* (New York: Viking Press, 2019).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/keep-america-great-trump-unveils-2020-slogan-to-replace-2016-rallying-cry>.

²⁶ George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2017).

²⁷ Manifesto Project, "Project Description", <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>.

²⁸ US Politics and Policy, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/section-1-growing-ideological-consistency/>.

2.1 The Mediatization of Politics: About Breitbart News Network

Breitbart News Network is an American far-right provocative news platform founded in 2008 by conservative and anti-establishment commentators Andrew Breitbart and Larry Solov. Under the direction of Steve Bannon, Trump's chief adviser from January to August 2017, the website took on a more nationalist tone, but it was during Trump's 2016 presidential race that *Breitbart* received mainstream attention. *Breitbart News* has been accused of inflaming partisan tensions, formulating politically incorrect statements against minorities, and misleading readers by omitting or manipulating truthful contextualized information.²⁹ In particular, the *Breitbart* reader comments section displays an ever-expanding vocabulary of heavily connoted terms that are thought to contribute to the circulation of conspiracy theories, disinformation, hate speech, and nihilism.³⁰ Noticeably, these features are indicative of *Breitbart*'s assimilation and propagation of a populist style of communication which largely depends on an *us vs. them* polarization that pits the people against a privileged elite.³¹ With specific reference to this populist turn, although not discussed within the present context, it is the study's view that the Right's reactionary behavior against neoliberalism contributes significantly to the spreading of the populist radical agenda that is against gay marriage, abortion rights, gender ideology, and the ongoing globalization process that is grounded on the building blocks of modernity and inclusivity.³²

2.2 'Women-in-office': The Squad

The Squad is not a monolithic voice as its founding members are four different individuals who differently contribute to the group's definition. Ayana Pressley from Massachusetts has had extensive experience working for mainstream Democratic leaders. Rashida Tlaib, an American with Palestinian roots, is mainly interested in foreign policy issues which have, however, drawn criticism for her claimed anti-Israel sentiment. Ilhan Omar, a refugee from Somalia, has been vocal about the immigrant cause and Israel's treatment of Palestinians. AOC is the Squad's charismatic leader, and her contribution to the Squad is a significantly marked outspokenness, especially expressed through her savvy use of social media and bold proposals such as the Green New Deal and health care for all. Following their reelection in 2020, the Squad opened up their membership to the newly-elected New York educator Jamaal Bowman, and Missouri nurse and activist Cori Bush. The admission³³ of these two Representatives is not surprising as Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley has always sustained that "anyone who is interested in building a more equitable and just world is a part of the Squad". However, as these two new members are at the start of their political activity within the Squad, the study focuses only on the Squad's four founding members in order to better assess the nature of the response that these women have been receiving since the institution of their special unit.

As for their sobriquet, the term 'squad' comes from the Vulgar Latin *exquadra* or 'square', referring to the shape of infantry troops historically assembled in a square to fight.³⁴ Although

²⁹ Stephen Piggot, "Is Breitbart.com Becoming the Media Arm of the Alt-Right?", *The Southern Poverty Law Center* (April 2016), <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/04/28/breitbartcom-becoming-media-arm-alt-right>.

³⁰ Fiorina P. Morris and Samuel J. Abrams, "Political Polarization in the American Public", *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), 563-588; Monika Kopytowska, "Introduction: Discourses of Hate and Radicalism in Action", in Monika Kopytowska, ed., *Contemporary Discourses of Hate and Radicalism across Space and Genres* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017), 1-12; Emily Sydnor, *Disrespectful Democracy: The Psychology of Political Incivility* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2019).

³¹ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right*.

³² Ibid.

³³ @CoriBush (January 3, 2021). "Squad up" (Tweet) – via Twitter.

³⁴ Ben Zimmer, "'Squad': A Military Unit's Name Becomes a Political Label", *The Wall Street Journal* (2019), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/squad-a-military-unit-becomes-a-political-one->

acknowledging the militant connotations of the term, this study argues that it is more evocative of a special police detail with a specific mission to accomplish. Indeed, a police detail is part of a larger group or team, as in the case of the Squad, who are first and foremost members of Congress and, similarly to a police detail, they are trained to deal with enforcing special laws and invigilating their abidance. Yet, alongside the term's military or police undertones, it is also quite likely that when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or AOC, first started using this name just after the four women were elected into office in 2018, she probably intended it to mean a 'sisterhood' or a strong alliance who, at the time, had to stand up against Trump's frequent xenophobic attacks.³⁵ In fact, the Squad has notably faced discrimination directly from Trump who told them to go back to their own country³⁶ – although these women are all American citizens – implicitly associating their skin colour with non-citizen status. What is more, even their own Democratic Party has failed to give them the necessary support and criticized some of their bold policy proposals. The House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, for example, stated that the Squad had no real following in Congress, provoking a response from AOC who accused Pelosi of being "outright disrespectful" to single out newly elected women of colour.³⁷

The diversity of the Congress and of the Squad has particularly exacerbated the nativist far-right partisan politics of former President Trump whose narrative speaks of immigrants as individuals who are damaging the US economy by taking away jobs and opportunities from American citizens. Indeed, Trump's persistent attacks on four women of colour (Figure 2) have exposed a dangerous vein of racism running through the Republican Party which has strongly criticized the Congresswomen's positions by arguing that American values are being threatened by far-left politics.

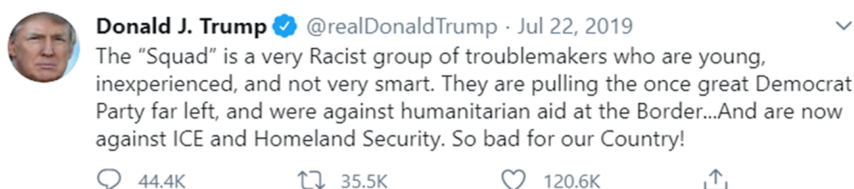


Fig. 2: Trump's Twitter attack on the Squad

2.2.1 The vilification of the Squad

Judging by this political landscape, it seems that before their appointment to office the Squad women have had to overcome a double hurdle consisting in being female and running for Congress, which has been a predominantly male enterprise throughout American history.³⁸ Clearly, the 2018 and 2020 elections have increased the presence of women in the Halls of Congress, but this presence is apparently coupled by an increased number of violent responses designed to reinforce women's traditional roles, and restrict their political participation, especially on the part of the Republican Party,³⁹ within which gender-essentialism, antifeminism and male superiority are still quite strong.⁴⁰

11563549724#:~:text=ln%20Vulgar%20Latin%E2%80%94the%20amalgam,and%20%E2%80%9Cesquade%E2%80%9D%20i n%20French.

³⁵ <https://www.standard.co.uk/insider/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-who-in-squad-b46342.html>

³⁶ <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-tells-congresswomen-go-back-where-you-came-from/>

³⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/06/opinion/sunday/nancy-pelosi-pride-parade.html>

³⁸ Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York U.P., 2006); Sanbonmatsu, "Women's Underrepresentation"; Melody Crowder-Meyer, "Gendered Recruitment without Trying: How Local Party Recruiters Affect Women's Representation", *Politics & Gender*, 9.4 (2013), 390-413.

³⁹ Pew Research Center, "Women and Leadership: Public Says Women are Equally Qualified, but Barriers Persist" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, January 2015).

The four Congresswomen, along with other women politicians, are victims of vilification through aggressive speech behavior which refers to a particularly goal-oriented and largely structured communicative process⁴¹ consisting in the selection of discursive strategies that include disregard, derision, threats, obscenity and falsehoods against their personal beliefs, values and judgments.⁴² Harm through aggressive language is usually inflicted on their positions on certain topics as well as on their physical appearance, which has long been used to automatically delegitimize not only their role as political representatives, but also their personal identity.⁴³ As shown in Figure 3, the Squad is often the subject of offensive cartoons that liken their behavior to that of loud, ravenous and alien-like creatures.



Fig. 3: Cartoon images of the Squad

These forms of harassment and intimidation, especially communicated through online media platforms,⁴⁴ are inherent practices of far-right political culture that serve to discourage the political participation of women and undermine their career by explicitly disregarding their opinions, contributions, and projects. This means that women are affected by intersectional discrimination,⁴⁵ or multiple forms of prejudice, such as their status as women of colour, migrant women, women from the LGBTQ+ community, and women of linguistic or religious minorities. It has been shown that these

⁴⁰ Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2011).

⁴¹ Dominic A. Infante, "Aggressiveness", in C. McCroskey and John A. Daly, eds., *Personality and Interpersonal Communication* (New York: Sage Publications, 1987), 157-192; Jaida Langham and Kinnis Gosha, "The Classification of Aggressive Dialogue in Social Media Platforms", *SIGMIS-CPR'18: Proceedings of the 2018 ACM SIGMIS Conference on Computers and People Research* (Buffalo-Niagara Falls, NY, June 18-20, 2018), <https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3209626.3209720>.

⁴² Infante, *Aggressiveness*; Emma Jane, "Online Misogyny and Feminist Diligantism", *Continuum*, 30.3 (2016), 284-297.

⁴³ Shannon Jenkins et al., *Why Don't Women Rule the World?: Understanding Women's Civic and Political Choices*, (Washington: CQ Press, 2020).

⁴⁴ Majid KhosraviNik and Eleonora Esposito, "Online Hate, Digital Discourse and Critique: Exploring Digitally-mediated Discursive Practices of Gender-based Hostility", *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 14.1 (2018), 45-68; Michele Zappavigna, "Language and Social Media: Enacting Identity through Ambient Affiliation", in Geoff Thompson et al., eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Systemic Function Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2019).

⁴⁵ Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins"; Graff et al., *Gender and the Rise of the Global Right*.

identitarian representations can seriously burden gender equality and reinforce marginalization and unequal access to public and political space.⁴⁶

3. Corpus

The specialized *BreitbartNewsNetwork_Corpus* comprises a total of 1,000 headlines (28,750 words), 1,000 reader comments obtained from the headline page (13,845 words), and 100 images. The datasets were extracted by using the network's search application and the seed words *Squad*, *Pressley*, *Omar*, *Tlaib*, *Ocasio-Cortez* and her moniker *AOC*, and by filtering the time range from January 2019, the beginning of the Squad's appointment to Congress, to July 2020, a year and a half into the Squad's House activity, and five months into the coronavirus pandemic. The choice of using their names as seed words was influenced by the necessity to gain insight into *Breitbart*'s response to the Squad as a unit but also as individual members. For the linguistic and semiotic analysis, this larger corpus was subsequently rearranged into three subcorpora: *Breitbart_Headlines* and *Breitbart_Comments* were used to conduct the former; *Breitbart_Images* was used to conduct the latter.

4. Methodology

Corpus-based⁴⁷ quantitative analysis was conducted by means of Sketch Engine's concordance application,⁴⁸ which is used in this study as a sentiment indicator that goes well beyond detecting the positive-negative polarization of opinion. The concordance lines, in fact, provide "the analyst with instances of a word or cluster in its immediate co-text"⁴⁹ that affords a more qualitative interpretation of the processes and qualities.⁵⁰ In the case in point, context is crucial in revealing different levels of aggressive language that can differ in the intensity of emotional tone, character, direction and force.⁵¹ For example, milder forms of aggression, that are often articulated as suggestions, insinuations, ironic expressions, rhetorical tropes, or even humoristic characterizations, can represent potentially damaging and belittling undercurrents used in mediatized political discourse that are not always straightforwardly classifiable as acts of vilification or speech aggression. In fact, they often go unnoticed, overlooked and unsanctioned, and are therefore more dangerous than those that are more evidently and transparently aggressive.⁵²

Concordance analysis was integrated with the socio-semiotic approach to MCDA⁵³ to explore the Squad's visual representation. It is this study's view that this approach particularly lends itself to the analysis of the Squad from an intersectional perspective as its metafunctions and resources go beneath the surface of the visual representation to reveal aesthetic, behavioral, and even psychological markers of identity that are expertly packaged by the media and manipulated according to their vantage point.

⁴⁶ Phyllis Rippeyoung, "When Women are Right: The Influence of Gender, Work and Values on European Far-Right Party Support", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 9.3 (2007), 379 – 397.

⁴⁷ Paul Baker et al., "A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press", *Discourse and Society*, 19.3 (2008), 273-306.

⁴⁸ Adam Kilgariff et al., "The Sketch Engine: Ten Years On", *Lexicography*, 1 (2014), 7–36.

⁴⁹ Baker et al., "A Useful Methodological Synergy?", 279.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Leonard Berkowitz, *Aggression: Its Causes, Consequences, and Control*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1993).

⁵² Margaret Rasulo, "Experience Doesn't Pay the Bills: Exploring the Identity-Populism Nexus in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Political Activism", in Massimiliano Demata and Maria Ivana Lorenzetti, eds., "Populism and Its Languages", *Iperstoria*, 15 (2020), 119-147.

⁵³ David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (London: Sage Publications 2012); David Machin, "What is Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies?", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 10.4 (2013), 347-355; Theo van Leeuwen, "Critical Analysis of Multimodal Discourse", in Carol Chapelle, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* (London: Blackwell, 2013), 4002–4006.

Multimodal analysis draws on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL),⁵⁴ and specifically on the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions which Kress and van Leeuwen⁵⁵ align to their own representational, interactional and compositional model that studies not only language but other semiotic modes, such as images, photographs, diagrams and graphics. In more detail, the representational metafunction identifies two kinds of structures, the narrative and the conceptual, both used to distinguish what happens in the images. Narrative structures make use of vector lines and are realized by reactional, speech and mental processes, while conceptual structures trigger classificational, analytical and symbolic processes. The interactional metafunction can be examined from three aspects: contact (demand or offer achieved through gaze), social distance (intimate, social, or impersonal size of frame), attitude (involvement, detachment, viewer power, equality and representation of power perspectives), and modality (perceived truth-value of images according to eight modality scales that deal with degrees of the articulation of detail and colour). The compositional metafunction deals with the layout of the aspects on a page in order to discern whether these create or represent a coherent and cohesive whole. It is realized through three interrelated systems: information value (given or new, ideal, or real), salience (achieved through size, colour, tone, focus, perspective, overlap, and repetition) and framing.

MCDA draws on the above seminal work, but is more critically focused on the author's underlying choices. Machin and Mayr, referring to Fairclough and Wodak's work in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA),⁵⁶ describe this focus as the adherence to "the sense of being critical",⁵⁷ and "showing more clearly how [semiotic choices] make meaning as well as what they mean",⁵⁸ which consists in knowing about the contexts where these semiotic choices were produced, the social relations, and the shared ideology.⁵⁹

Data analysis is supported by the DHA⁶⁰ whose comprehensive approach to discourses analysis (DA) fine-tunes the critical perspective as its resources focus on the identification of social, historical, political, economic, psychological and other factors relating to the verbal and non-verbal communicative events. In particular, the study draws on the strategies of nomination (the linguistic identity of the social actors involved as well as the processes and actions), predication (the qualities and characteristics attributed to social actors, processes and actions), and mitigation and intensification (the illocutionary force of the linguistic instantiations). Elements of the argumentation and perspectivization strategies are not neglected, but subsumed in the analysis of particularly embedded rhetorical devices that reveal *Breitbart's* stance, judgements and viewpoints.

⁵⁴ Michael A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Arnold, 1985); Halliday and Christian Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁵⁵ Kress Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁶ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995); Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in Teun van Dijk, ed., *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 258-284.

⁵⁷ Machin and Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis*, 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 10.

⁵⁹ Per Ledin and David Machin, "Doing Critical Discourse Studies with Multimodality: From Metafunctions to Materiality", *Critical Discourse Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

⁶⁰ Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-historical Approach", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, Third Edition (London: Sage Publications, 2016), 23-61; John Flowerdew and John E., Richardson, "Introduction", in John Flowerdew and John E., Richardson, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-10.

5. Findings and discussion

The findings are reported according to the *stimulus-response* model (Figure 1), whereby the analysis of the stimuli contained in the headlines and images precedes the analysis of the responses in the reader comments.

5.1 Analysis of the *Breitbart Headlines* subcorpus: the *Squad*, *Ocasio-Cortez/AOC*, *Omar*, *Tlaib* and *Pressley*

Table 1 shows the raw and normalized frequency of a total of 438 concordance hits extracted from the *Breitbart Headlines* subcorpora. Figures 4 and 5 provide a small but representative sample of the first 10 *Squad* concordance lines (Fig. 4), followed by Figure 5 which illustrates the first 3 lines for *Ocasio-Cortez*, the first 2 lines for *AOC*, and the first 5 lines for *Omar*, *Tlaib*, and *Pressley*. For ease of reference, bold font is used to indicate the analyzed linguistic features.

Seed word	Raw frequency	(per million)
Squad	133	7,432.02
Ocasio-Cortez	86	5,899.71
AOC	78	5,054.01
Omar	66	4,901.04
Tlaib	43	2,234.08
Pressley	32	2,103.07

Table 1: Frequencies of headline search

1.	</s><s>Democrat Ayanna Pressley: 'The	Squad	Is Not an Insurgent Cohort of a Gang '.
2	Across America Petition Guatemalans Protest 'The	Squad	and Nancy Pelosi: 'We Will Send You Back!</s><s>' List of Racist statements by members of the 'Squad'
3	'Squad' Demands Vote-by-Mail, Benefits for Illegal Aliens in Relief Package Meet the #	Squad	Ocasio-Cortez Crew Takes on Pelosi Members of Squad hit Democrat Leadership, Trump, America
4	</s><s>Let's Hope 'The	Squad	Is the Face of the Democratic Party 'Because That's How We're Going to Win '
5	</s><s>Stephen Miller: 'The	Squad	Detests America as It Exists' African American Obama Admin Alums Back 'Squad': 'Nothing More Un-American ' than the Squad
6	Democrats Call for Increased Security for 'Squad' After Trump Rally 'Go back'?</s><s>Omar and the	Squad	are building strength at home Donald Trump: Democrats Too 'Petrified' to Confront 'Anti-USA, Pro-Terrorist' Squad
7	Rashida Tlaib After Pressley Endorses Warren:	Squad	Is 'Stronger than Anyone Knows' 'Squad' Member Ayanna Pressley Backs Elizabeth Warren for President
8	The Squad: President Trump Is 'Afraid of Women of Color' The	Squad	Reacts to Israel Fallout. AOC Pledges to Cease Trips to Israel Ocasio-Cortez: Republican Party Is 'Scared' of Us '
9	America 'Garbage': 'I Think That's Worse' than 'Deplorables' List of Racist Statements by Members of the	Squad	(So Far) Omar Accuses Trump of Racism, Islamophobia : 'This Is the Agenda of White Nationalists'</s>
10	</s><s> 'The four people in the so-called	Squad	that have done squat in Congress: want to make illegal immigrants eligible for coronavirus aid

Fig. 4: Squad headlines

Subsequent to a first manual reading of the concordances, five main representational frames emerged which are indicative of *Breitbart's* positionings against the Squad as a unit. They are as follows.

1. *The Squad is an undeserving gang.* By using the nomination strategy, 'the Squad' is called a **cohort** or a **gang** (line 1), and a **crew** (line 3) and, by using a predicate adjective, their behavior is described as being **insurgent** (line 1). In line 4, the Squad is the **Face** (metonymic expression) of the enemy or **the Democratic Party**, which is apparently so discrediting for the Dems that the Republicans are counting on it to win the elections (**That is How We're Going to Win**). In line 10, the accusation is that the **so-called Squad** (modification), or **the four people**, has accomplished nothing or **squat** (or Squad) in Congress.

2. *The Squad is racist.* In line 2, the Squad is accused of using **racist statements**, while in line 8 they are criticized for having a **fallout** with Israel, an unforgivable anti-Semitic act emphasized by **AOC's pledge** (behavioral process) not to visit the country.

3. *The Squad encourages illegal immigration.* In line 3, the Squad **demand**s (behavioral process) vote-by-mail and benefits for **illegal aliens**. This is *Breitbart's* attempt to highlight the bullying nature of the Squad but, at the same time, it is also an indication of *Breitbart's* exclusionary strategy as they criticize the leniency shown by the Squad towards those who do not belong and have no right to vote. In fact, the term **illegal immigrants** is also used in line 10, and here too the message is that the Squad wants to claim **coronavirus aid** for people who have no right to receive it.

3. *The Squad is a terrorist organization.* *Breitbart* believes that the Squad is **Pro-terrorist** (line 6). This is confirmed in line 9 where the Squad, and Ilhan Omar, are seemingly being ridiculed for accusing Trump of **racism** and **Islamophobia**.

4. *The Squad is un-American.* Perhaps the strongest accusation that *Breitbart* moves against the Squad is that of being anti-American: the Squad **Detests America** (line 5) (intensification), is '**Nothing More Un-American**' (line 5) (modification), '**Anti-USA**' (line 6) (modification), **America 'Garbage'** (line 9) (intensification).

5. *The Squad is frightening.* In line 6, through predication, *Breitbart* claims that even the Democrats are **Too 'Petrified'** (the inverted commas intensify the adjective) **to confront ... the Squad**. Also, they [the Squad] are '**Stronger than Anyone Knows**' (line 7), all the more reason to exclude them. In line 8, the Squad's claim that **President Trump is 'Afraid of Women of Colour'** is promptly picked up by *Breitbart* not only to ironize on the absurdity of this view, but also to hint at the Squad's accusations of racism.

1	Left Lashes Out at Lara Logan over AOC Critique: 'What on Earth Happened' to Her	Ocasio-Cortez	And Democrat Leaders, Suggest 'White Supremacists' Caused Violence at Riots
2	Socialist Revolution Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: Defund the Police 'Looks like a Suburb' Alexandria	Ocasio-Cortez	supports 'Defund the Police' Movement AOC is an Anti-American Marxist
3	Twitter Hashtag Calls For	Ocasio-Cortez	to Resign Over Border Misinformation
4	Leftist 'Squad' Is 'Very Racist' Report: Alternative 'Squad' of Moderate Democrat Women Form Task Force	AOC	Slams Redskins on #BlackoutTuesday: 'Want to Stand for Racial Justice?</s><s>Change Your Name
5	Ocasio-Cortez Suggests GOP Uses Illegal Immigration to Hide Racism	AOC	Accuses Trump of Harboring 'Inherent Racism' for Years
6	Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Rages over Reopening America Ilhan	Omar	Inexplicably Deletes Father's Day Message from 2013 Ilhan Omar's Dad Dies from Coronavirus-Related Complications
7	Democrats Stifle Leftists' Push to Defund Police: 'That's Stupid.' </s><s>Jeff Sessions, Ilhan	Omar	Spar on Twitter -- 'How's Your Brother, By the Way?' </s><s>Ilhan Omar: We Must 'Reject Any Attempt to Criminalize Peaceful protest
8	'Disturbing' Trump Has Failed -- He Is 'Glorifying Violence' Ilhan	Omar	Rages: Israel's 'Destructive Polices' Are 'Rubber Stamped' by Trump Administration AOC:
9	Americans Dying from 'Pre-existing' Racism, Inequity in Coronavirus Era Ilhan	Omar	This Is Not Going to Be the Country of White People' Ilhan Omar Hits Back at 'Racist Fool' Tucker Carlson for Calling
10	<s> Israeli Deputy FM said Ilhan	Omar	, Rashida Tlaib Will Be Denied Entry into Israel
11	<s>Democrat Rashida	Tlaib	Dances with Palestinian Flag at Victory Party Video of 'Knucklehead' Rashida Tlaib Being Forcibly Ejected by Security
12	Trump Detroit Speech Resurfaces<s> Rashida	Tlaib	Releases Apologetic Statement After Booing Hillary Clinton Democrat
13	<s> Democrat Rashida	Tlaib	Celebrates Primary Win with Anti-Israel Tweets
14	'I'm Not Going Nowhere' Until I Impeach Trump Rashida	Tlaib	New Office Map: Israel Renamed 'Palestine
15	<s> Democrat Rashida	Tlaib	: Islamophobia Is Very Much Among the Democratic Party
16	<s> Watch - Ayanna	Pressley	The Term 'Chinese Coronavirus' Is 'Painful' for Immigrants
17	</s><s> WE Americans don't need YOUR type. Ayanna	Pressley	Trump's Handling of Coronavirus 'Akin to War Crimes' Ocasio-Cortez, Pressley Boycott Trump's SOTU Address</s>
18	Dem Rep. Ayanna	Pressley	Black Folks Are 'Gutted,' 'Exhausted' — ' A Fire Hose That We're Drinking from Daily of Insult and Assault and Devastation'
19	The Ringo of the Squad Ayanna	Pressley	Endorses Warren. This isn't surprising
20	Democrat Ayanna	Pressley	Abuses of ICE' Resemble 'Auction During Slavery'

Fig. 5: Member of the Squad headlines

In lines 1 and 5 of Figure 5, the verbal process **suggest** refers to *Breitbart's* criticism of the allegations made by Ocasio-Cortez and other Democrats that **white supremacists caused violence at riots**, and that the GOP uses illegal immigration to hide racism.

The Squad's quarrelsome behavior is expressed by using material verbs. For example, AOC **slams Redskins** (line 4); she **accuses** Trump of **harboring** racism (line 5); she **rages** over reopening (line 6); Tlaib promises to **impeach** Trump (line 14).

In line 9, the strategy of fear-mongering is used to insinuate that Omar will change America which **Is Not Going to Be the Country of White People**; in line 12 Tlaib **boos** her own **Hilary Clinton, Democrat**. They are so disruptive, according to *Breitbart*, that Omar (line 10) and Tlaib (line 13) are denied entry into Israel, one of America's closest allies. *Breitbart* also reports (line 11) that Tlaib

disrespectfully danced with a Palestinian flag over her head, and that she **renamed Israel as Palestine** on her office map (line 14). In line 7, Tlaib had a **spar on Twitter** about the suspicion that she married her own brother so he could enter the US;⁶¹ in line 11, she is such a **knucklehead** at a victory event that she had to be **Forcibly Ejected** by Security. In line 19, Ayanna Pressley is called the **Ringo of the Squad**, an allusion to the famous member of the Beatles band, but probably intending the 'ring-leader of the gang.

Their anti-American attitude is claimed in diverse ways. For example, in line 2, by using existential processes that identify a person according to their qualities, ACO is a **socialist revolutionary** and an **anti-American Marxist**. *Breitbart's* anti-Americanism calls Pressley out in line 20 because she falsely stated that the **'Abuses of ICE' Resemble 'Auction During Slavery'**. In lines 8 and 18, by mentioning Omar in the former and Pressley in the latter, *Breitbart* accuses them of vilifying President Trump of committing a series of atrocities such as **glorifying violence**, allowing **Black folks** to be **gutted, exhausted**, and covered by **Insult and Assault and Devastation**. In line 7, even the **Democrats** seem to be fed up with the Squad as they try to **stifle leftists' push to defund the police**, which they think **is stupid**. *Breitbart's* stance on the Squad and its members can be summarized by the headline in line 17 where a clear *us vs. them* polarization is enacted: **WE Americans don't need YOUR type**.

As discussed above, the vilification of the Squad is not necessarily performed by using highly violent language, but it is often enacted by using allegations, insinuations, suggestions, hints and ridicule. In this case, *Breitbart's* *stimulus-response* strategy apparently consists in launching a knowingly provocative opinion as ammunition and wait for the expected vitriolic response, counting on the probability that the same opinion is left unexpressed in the minds of many right-wing voters, politicians, and far-right media readers.

5.2 Analysis of the *Breitbart* Images subcorpus

The specific MCDA resources afforded by the three metafunctions and specifically applied in the analysis of the images are as follows:

1. Representational: narrative/conceptual;
2. Interactional: vectors, gaze, smile, hand/arm gestures, high/low modality;
3. Compositional: information layout, salience, colour and tone, vestemics.

5.2.1 *The Squad*

In images 1, 3, and 4 of Figure 6, the women are pictured as a group. While this aspect usually conveys unity among social actors, *Breitbart's* intention is to convey a different view. From the interactional perspective, the women adopt what is called a deceptive gaze which consists in looking away from the viewer in sign of dismissal.⁶² Also, although they are standing next to each other, their role is delegitimized by their behavior. In fact, they are either smiling, smirking, grinning, looking down (images 1,3,4), or awkwardly looking at some other object in the distance (Tlaib in images 3 and 4). A conceptual view is also evident: the women are standing in a row which means that *Breitbart* considers them as being 'the same', on the same level, or without an individual identity.

⁶¹ Grace Panetta, "Here's Everything We Know about the Persistent but Unproven Rumors that Rep. Ilhan Omar Married Her Brother, which Trump Repeated at a Recent Rally", *Insider* (2019), <https://www.businessinsider.com/unproven-allegations-ilhan-omar-married-her-brother-explained-2019-7?IR=T>.

⁶² Andrew Bayliss and Steven Tipper, "Predictive Gaze Cues and Personality Judgments: Should Eye Trust You?", *Psychological Science*, 17 (2016), 514-520; Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.



Fig. 6: the Squad

The headline in image 2 states that the Democrats are petrified by the Squad. In fact, although Ilhan Omar is being welcomed by Nancy Pelosi in what looks like a Hall of Congress, the hand behind Omar's back is not to be perceived as a vector⁶³ of guidance or acceptance. In fact, the Speaker of the House fails to establish eye contact with the Congresswoman who, in turn, is pictured with her back turned away from the viewer which is, once again, a delegitimation gesture towards the entire Democratic Party, also emphasized by the act of defiance or dismissal of the individuals in the crowded background who are looking away from her. From a compositional perspective, the use of vestemics⁶⁴ also captures the viewer's attention. First and foremost, Omar's Hijab is a cultural vector used by *Briebart* to foreground the Congresswoman's religious and ethnic identity rather than her role as the people's representative. Particularly revealing is the stark difference between Pelosi who is wearing an unmissable turquoise outfit with accessories, and Omar's dark and unattractive outfit, befitting for someone who is considered an 'outsider' or the 'other'.

There are two meaningful details to discuss in image 3 which is most probably a congressional hearing. Firstly, from a compositional perspective, the image presents a three-layered background where the back, the center and front layers are not meshed together, but the women placed in the middle seem to be separated from the rest. According to this code, a social actor surrounded by a series of rectangular objects or layers is usually perceived as being decontextualized compared to one that is surrounded by a series of circular enclosures which convey acceptance.⁶⁵ In the same image, the three women are not gazing at the viewer but elsewhere: AOC and Pressley are looking at the person

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

who is being interviewed; Tlaib is looking at an unknown object. Regarding the interviewee, the three women are looking at him defiantly (AOC), with a smirk (Pressley) or with disinterest (Tlaib), and the out-of-focus image of his head in the foreground is most likely *Breitbart*’s way of suggesting that their confrontational interrogation methods are similar to those used by socialists and communists, as stated in the headline.

5.2.2 Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC)

Images 5 and 6 of Figure 7 are about AOC. Image 5 contains a double picture of given and new information.⁶⁶ The picture on the left (given information) is the ironic rendition of AOC’s proposal in the headline to defund the police. In fact, according to the Representative from the Bronx, neighborhoods would look like the suburbs with a limited police force. In all response, the image presents a context that looks more like a crowded suburban street with protesters. The picture on the right (new information) is occupied by AOC’s entire face. It is a centered low-modality composition in which she is making the defunding proposal. Her hand is a vocal vector used to emphasize not only what she says, but how she says it, with a full open mouth and arched eyebrows, indicating anger or defiance. In image 6, the headline accuses AOC of not paying her taxes, but the image is a sarcastic rendition of these words. In fact, instead of being angry at this accusation, AOC is seemingly proud of what she has done, confirmed by the hand-to-ear gesture that confidently fixes her hair behind her ear. Her gaze, turned away from the viewer is, once again, a sign that she is dismissing the accusation. This is a derisive image of AOC who, according to *Breitbart*, is probably thinking she is going to get away with it.



Fig. 7: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

5.2.3 Rashida Tlaib

Image 7 in Figure 8, although seemingly innocuous, is a denigrating representation of Talib as her cultural identity is particularly under attack. In fact, the headline states that she is more Palestinian in the Halls of Congress than anywhere else, which is, according to the far-right news network, an

⁶⁶ Ibid.

unacceptable affirmation for a newly-sworn in American representative of the American people. Indeed, the background is occupied by US flags or symbolic attributives and carriers of her birth identity. In this circular composition, her arm is used as a vector towards the flags as she is swearing loyalty and service to the US on the Bible, or perhaps the Koran, which are also symbolic attributives of faith.⁶⁷ Yet, surrounding her figure, as if protecting her from the flags, is a group of people who look like immediate family members. In terms of vestemics, the woman who is assisting her is dressed in traditional Palestinian attire as if to highlight her primary identity. Once again, not only does *Breitbart* question this uncanny double identity, but also her ability to serve the US without bias or prejudice. And, if there were any doubts left in the minds of Americans, image 8 is unequivocal: Rashid Tlaib is anti-American as she hates Trump enough to sell her promise to impeach him.



Fig. 8: Rashida Tlaib

5.2.4 Ilhan Omar

Figure 9 is a double picture featuring Jeff Sessions, former Republican senator and Attorney General, and Ilhan Omar. The first salient element in this image is, once again, the compositional layout of information, but this time the low modality, inexistent background does not afford contextual clues of the communicative event that might explain the headline. Session on the left represents the known, the secure, the law and the unmistakable truth; on the right, Omar is the unknown, the new, the unruly and the untrustworthy. Indeed, the position of her tightly closed lips indicates that she is probably guilty as accused by Session, or has probably been caught red-handed. Their gaze seems to convey this dynamic as Sessions is looking straight at the viewer, while Omar is looking downward. Yet, there is another less evident element of interest in the compositional layout of the picture which speaks of racial prejudice, namely the white/black split frames. At first glance, one does not necessarily perceive it, but the vestemics of the images are revealing. The truth-searching white man in a suit and tie, white hair neatly combed back, is also wearing reassuring eyeglasses on his nose which are vectors that symbolize knowledge and search for truth. The black woman on his right has only one earring in sight and is not wearing a typical hijab as do most Muslim women, but a turban which is both a male

⁶⁷ Ibid.

accessory and a recent fashion trend in the Muslim world.⁶⁸ Thus, to the far-right reader of *Breitbart*, the turban becomes a symbol of defiance of tradition, of disrespect, and a representation of the ‘other’ who is considered not American. The same feature of un-Americanness is emphasized in the close-up shot of Omar in image 10. She is pictured without any background details and wearing a very traditional Somali headscarf,⁶⁹ gazing upwards in search of those drones that Trump is accused of sending to Somalia to spot *Jihadis*, thus suggesting that she is a member of the terrorist organization.



9. JEFF SESSIONS, ILHAN OMAR SPAR ON TWITTER — ‘HOW’S YOUR BROTHER, BY THE WAY?’ (7 Jun 2020)	10. ILHAN OMAR COMPLAINS TRUMP IS DRONING JIHADIS IN SOMALIA ‘TO DEATH’ (16 May 2019)
	

Fig. 9: Ilhan Omar

5.2.5 Ayanna Pressley

The narrative that is prevalently told in the images of Ayanna Pressley is related to her rapport with Party politics. As mentioned in the introductory sections of this paper, Pressley is the Squad member who knows her way around partisan dynamics. In image 11 (Figure 10), Pressley is a ‘minority woman’, whose lack of gaze distances her from the viewer. Indeed, as a member of a minority, she cannot be acknowledged, and an upward smirk instead of a straight full smile, the latter a typical sign of openness,⁷⁰ seems to convey *Breitbart*’s wariness of Pressley and of the constituents she represents. In addition, the ‘wave’ metaphor in the headline intensifies the image of a Democratic take-over, and specifically on the part of women politicians. With reference to her open-palm hand gesture, a pragmatic resource that usually indicates an invitation to cooperate,⁷¹ in this picture, the palms are raised and in full view as if deploying a defense mechanism, and perhaps an unwillingness to establish an understanding.⁷² In image 12, the headline content is contrasted with the visual representation of the Congresswoman. The American flags behind her clearly identify her as a political representative; her red dress and the red flag stripes are symbolic attributives which represent and intensify this

⁶⁸ Shounaz Meky, “Under Wraps: Style Savvy Muslim Women Turn to Turbans”, *Alarabiya News* (2014, updated 2020), <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/life-style/fashion-and-beauty/2014/10/09/Under-wraps-Style-savvy-Muslim-women-turn-to-turbans>

⁶⁹ Jill Leet-Otley, “(Mis)understanding the Hijab: the Spirit and Strength of Somali Girls”, *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education Studies of Migration, Integration, Equity, and Cultural Survival*, 14.1 (2020), 43-54.

⁷⁰ Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*.

⁷¹ Alan Cienki and Cornelia Müller, “Metaphor, Gesture and Thought”, in Raymond W. Gibbs, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2008), 483-501.

⁷² Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2004).

alliance. Yet, her gaze is not directed at the viewer, once again a sign of delegitimation which, according to *Breitbart*, is confirmed by the absurdity of her statement as she shuns the president's institutional role, and her own, as representatives of the American people.

11. US MINORITY WOMEN RIDE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY WAVE (5 Sep 2018)	12. AYANNA PRESSLEY: I WILL ALWAYS CALL TRUMP 'OCCUPANT OF THE WHITE HOUSE,' NOT PRESIDENT (15 Jul 2019)
	

Fig. 10: Ayanna Pressley

The sample images analyzed above best portray the visual stimuli that *Breitbart* expertly uses to pit their readers against the Squad. These can be coded according to the same frames that were identified in the headline analysis, namely: *the Squad members are an undeserving gang*, *the Squad is racist*, *the Squad encourages illegal immigration*, *the Squad is a terrorist organization*, *the Squad is un-American*, and *the Squad is frightening*.

5.3 Analysis of the *Breitbart* Comments subcorpus

Breitbart's 31 million readers are a testimony of the network's influence on certain sectors of the general public who, through their comments and dialogic dynamic, spew an outflow of dangerous speech that often escalates into sheer hatred, as discussed in the following small but representative selection of 30 concordance lines out of the 318 extracted from the reader comments, and illustrated in Table 2. Figures 11 and 12 of the *Breitbart* Comments subcorpus show the breakdown of the 30 lines according to the 6 seed words or the names of the Congresswomen: the first 10 lines for the *Squad*, the first 3 lines for *Ocasio-Cortez*, the first 2 lines for *AOC*, and the first 5 lines for *Omar*, *Tlaib*, and *Pressley*. As mentioned, these comments represent the response to the headlines and images previously analyzed and discussed.

Seed word	Raw frequency	(per million)
Squad	84	6,987.71
Ocasio-Cortez	75	5,184.67
AOC	51	3,527.68
Omar	45	2,881.25
Tlaib	35	2,469.64
Pressley	28	1,989.63

Table 2: Frequencies of reader comments

1	When Muslims are in the majority, there are no minority rights.</s><s>Remember Americans: The Jihad	Squad	are not here to "thank" this country. </s><s>They are here to destroy it. </s><s>
2	Q: What does (The Jihad)	Squad	Omar Ocrazio , Jihadi Jane and Taliban Tlaib have in common?</s><s>A: They all hate Whitey. </s><s>
3	These " woman of color " don't like white people Looks like the Jihad	Squad	has a plan.</s><s>Insult America repeatably which announces their hatred for America. </s><s>
4	these days GLOBALISM means DEATH! </s><s>Bernie Sanders Endorses the	Squad	as Democrats Angle to Keep House Majority . Thanks Bernie, just in case people weren't sure that you were a loudmouth radical communist malcontent
5	Guatemalans Protest 'The	Squad	Please keep them there, We'll pay you to keep em. even furnish a couple of even furnish a couple of cages
6	TRUMP 2020 Say what you want about the squawk	Squad	, i will give credit where it is due..... they proved to Americans that any one can serve in Washington
7	I thought i had just an average intelligence , Thanks to the squawk	Squad	i feel like an intellect, for the hate they speak of i feel like Jesus
8	terrorist Women Against Trump The Tw AT	Squad	Good call!</s><s> Or Terrorist Whiners Against Trump. </s><s> I'm not sure I'd validate some of them as "women". </s><s> The Jihad Squwad.....
9	Remove them from their positions and expelled from the country along with all of the foreign imports that voted them into office.</s><s>	Squad	Demands Vote-by-Mail and Benefits for Illegal Aliens in Relief Package!!! And we the people "demand" three out of the four of you go back to your native country,
10	Cheating by Mail would just "elect" more anti-American rejects already on the Jihad	Squad	.. We don't need anymore members of the Jihad Squad.

Fig. 11: Comments about the Squad

The first 10 concordance lines presented in Figure 11 convey an image of the Squad as a terrorist group, which relates back to the headline and the image stimuli. By repetitively categorizing them as **the Jihad**, **Jihad Squad**, **the squawk Squad**, **the Jihad Squwad**, and even **the TwAT Squad** (nomination) (lines 1,2,3,6,8,10), the *Breitbart* reader-interlocutor cannot refrain from drawing a parallelism between the cultural identity of the four Congresswomen and their affiliation to terrorism, thus insulting all members of their respective communities. For the same reason, their names are distorted by using distinct behavioral allusions (predication), as in line 2 where Ocasio-Cortez becomes **Ocrazio**, Rashida Tlaib becomes **Taliban Tlaib**, and either Ilhan Omar or Ayanna Pressley becomes **Jihadi Jane**. The other discursive representations are realized by using behavioral verbs to denote a sentiment of hate against white people, such as: **they hate Whitey** (line 2); **These "woman of colour" don't like white people** (line 3). In the minds of *Breitbart* readers, the Squad also seems to hate America as testified in the following lines: they are **not here to thank this country** (line 1); they are here **to destroy it** (line 1); **they insult America** (line 3); **Demands Vote-by-Mail** (line 9). Explicit predicates state that the Squad members are **racist** (line 3), **terrorist whiners against Trump** (line 8), **foreign imports** (line 9), of **average intelligence** (line 7) as **anyone can serve in Washington** (line 6), and **anti-American rejects** (10).

Readers are quick to take *Breitbart's* bait as they pick up on a loaded term and formulate their comments regardless of the issue raised. For example, when discussing globalism (line 4), the comment is against Bernie Sanders whose **loudmouth radical communist malcontent** is to blame for the Democratic majority in the House. Also, when discussing the Guatemalan comment against Nancy Pelosi and the members of the Squad, instead of concentrating on the reasons behind the protest, the comment states **that cages should be furnished** for the four women (line 5). The Vote-by-mail

possibility, another cogent issue ahead of the 2020 presidential election, is seen as a **benefit for illegal aliens** (9).

1	</s><s>28 MAY 2020 Nolte:	Ocasio-Cortez	THIS BOLSHEVIC BIMBO IS A TAX CHEAT yet she wants you SUCKERS to pay MORE TAXES! How does this IDIOT survive this SCANDAL?
2	taking one freedom at a time AWAY from the citizens until they had NONE. </s><s>Meet the #Squad:	Ocasio-Cortez	Crew want reparations... and muslims enslaved white Americans in Africa. Will muslim Americans pay reperations for them?
3	America with defunded police looks like is what Africa looks like, not what the American suburbs look like	Ocasio-Cortez	sees most Americans as foreigners to neutralize
4	When you are part of the social justice sacrifice system. </s><s>	AOC	is making \$15,000 a month from taxpayers to spread her hatred for America and the NY Dems will keep voting for her over and over
5	This is a rare quality you don't see much in main stream media in over a decade. </s><s>	AOC	is a devout Stalinist. </s><s>She represents totalitarianism and wants to bring a Venezuela style socialist police state to the US
6	It seems to me William Barr should have enough evidence by now to charge	Omar	with a bunch of crimes. </s><s>This should be as easy as buying insurance from Geico.
7	They entered the U.S. ILLEGALLY claiming to be part of the	Omar	family who had been granted asylum. </s><s> she came here and we fed her, we clothed her, she got welfare , she got school , she got healthcare
8	/s><s>Ellison:	Omar	and Tlaib are Muslim Brotherhood. </s><s>They are using the same Divide and Conquer tactics they used on the Middle East
9	He's absolutely right and	Omar	is a dangerous idiot that was given power due to misguided immigration that has built up pockets of 5th columnists
10	this is not going to be the country of white people. </s><s> " That's what the Shithole-American	Omar	haters like her should be nowhere near power in a free country!! </s><s> The Democrat party has morphed from the party of JFK to the party of terrorists
11	Another Anti-American immigrant who needs to go back where she came from Rep. Rashida	Tlaib	Just another bought and paid for lobbyist of the red lipstick industry. GTH Rashida. Git back in yer Handjob.
12	if anyone hasn't figured this out yet... </s><s>Rep. Rashida	Tlaib	(D-MI) is the ring Leader..... </s><s>Tlaib doesn't want to be the face of the group because she knows she is repulsive...
13	</s><s> What a racist, dummy	Tlaib	liar , hates America , supports terrorists ,
14	We are sitting by and watching our country be taken over by one of the craziest religions ever created.	Tlaib	Supports Sharia Law EVERYWHERE! We are just a step behind England.
15	Her attack on people of faith , per se is rather an attack on a people of a certain faith. I don't think	Tlaib	would have had any problems about her own religious group praying.
16	she is free to renounce her citizenship and be Somali ambassador to US ant time she wants Calling	Pressley	a US Representative is hurtful to me. </s><s>She's not even an American.
17	Trump's Handling of Coronavirus 'Akin to War Crimes' ...Ayanna	Pressley	Oh darn! This means we won't be able to watch her sit there and roll her eyes and play with her phone like a high school drama queen?
18	Muslim immigrant Rashida Tlaib After	Pressley	Endorses Warren: 'Squad' Is 'Stronger than Anyone Knows' Strong??? </s><s> Smelling perhaps, but no other definition of the word works
19	as a woman, I am appalled at the eyebrows	Pressley	and others think look good. </s><s>They are worth a good laugh at times! 😊 Claims she alopecia.
20	the Squad Is Not an Insurgent Cohort of a Gang' Ayanna	Pressley	Get over yourselves. </s><s> OF: How about four angry, self-righteous lesbians

Fig. 12: Comments about the Squad members

Line 1 of Figure 12 establishes AOC's identity as that of a **BOLSHEVIC BIMBO** (nomination). She is also **A TAX CHEAT**, an **IDIOT**, and a **devout Stalinist** (predicate nominatives), and she **represents totalitarianism** (metonymic depiction). *Breitbart* accuses AOC of using a double standard

when dealing with issues that are important to her. For example, in line 4, her proposal to raise taxes is met with an attack claiming that she is earning a higher salary than most people, knowing the taxpayer will foot her bill. In line 1, she is accused of **evading taxes** which is unacceptable for a US Congresswoman. Also, her opinion of Americans, according to *Breitbart*, likens them to **foreigners** (line 3) who must be stopped, which is an interesting turn of phrase as this is how Trump views most immigrants coming into the country.

Conclusively, Ocasio-Cortez's **Crew** (line 2) basically takes **AWAY freedom from citizens until they have NONE** (intensification) (line 2), and this includes the **defunding of the police** proposal, which, according to the reader in line 3, makes neighborhoods **look more like Africa rather than a suburb**, as claimed by AOC. The **Crew** also wants reparations, but the comment hits back by claiming that since **Muslims enslaved white Americans in Africa**, the question is: **Will muslim Americans pay reparations for them?**

According to the *Breitbart* readers, Omar (line 6) has most certainly committed **a bunch of crimes** (intensification), including **entering the US illegally**, and **favoring her entire family** (line 7). This is based on the opinion that illegal immigrants do not only commit fraudulent acts, but are also ungrateful like Omar, who was **fed, clothed, taken care of and educated** in this country (line 7). Predication in reader comments raises the level of aggression to construct the representation of Omar as **a dangerous idiot** (line 9), and a **shithole american** (line 10), and **a hater** (line 10). The hate is not only directed at Omar, but also at the Democratic Party, which **has morphed into the party of terrorists** (line 10). Membership categorization (nomination) is also evoked by naming Omar and Tlaib as members of **the Muslim Brotherhood** (line 8).

Rashida Tlaib is **another anti-american immigrant** (explicit predicate) (line 11), although she was born in the US. In the same line, she is also accused of being **bought and paid for** by a red lipstick industry, a nod to AOC who also wears signature red lipstick. By calling her out directly, she is then told to **GTH** (go to hell), and **Git back in yer Handjob**, most probably an unfortunate misspelling of the headscarf worn by Muslim women, the Hijab.⁷³ Rashida is also **a ring-leader** (12), but not overtly, according to the toxic comment which states that her not wanting to be in the limelight is because **she is repulsive** (12), and she is **a racist, dummy and a liar** (predicate nouns). Tlaib **supports Sharia Law EVERYWHERE** (line 14), and this is probably a harsh response to the headline news which reports that she was denied entry into Israel. Continuing on the topic of religion, she is accused of attacking **people of faith** who do not belong to her **own religious group** (line 15).

Pressley is **free to renounce her citizenship** (line 16), and **be something else but not a US representative**, which, according to this comment, is hurtful (16), and **she is not even an American** (line 16). Once again, the belief that although she was born in the US, the colour of her skin probably rules out her 'Americanness' (line 16). When there is a national or local issue to discuss, the comment swerves towards the personal. For example, the Coronavirus crisis criticism against Trump is met with the denigration of Pressley's actions such as **playing with her phone** (line 17), and **rolling her eyes** (line 17), probably to indicate her dismissal of this important issue. With a series of modification and intensification devices, she is a **high school drama queen** (line 17), she is a **smelling Muslim immigrant** (line 18) and, along with her other three colleagues, **a self-righteous lesbian** (line 20). The remark in line 19 is particularly offensive as it refers to Pressley's complete loss of hair due to a serious health problem called **alopecia**.

Personal identity, culture, religion, ethnicity, and health are some of the issues that the reader-commentators bring to the surface in their vilification of the Squad. More interestingly and perhaps

⁷³ The word hijab comes from the Arabic word *hajaba*, which means to hide or screen from view or to cover. Sometimes the word hijab refers specifically to a woman's headscarf; sometimes it is used more generally to refer to the practice of wearing modest clothing in accordance with religious beliefs. <https://www.aclu.org/other/discrimination-against-muslim-women-fact-sheet>.

less evidently, by analyzing the escalation of the toxic level of the language, the intensification of negative traits and attributions (predication), and the disparaging membership categorizations (nomination),⁷⁴ the message that is perceived is that *Breitbart* aims polarize the country by instilling fear of the 'other'. As hypothesized earlier in this study, this fear is triggered by the frequent use of *us* vs. *them* discursive strategies which pit the Squad and their progressive agenda against the rest of the American population. Some of these expressions are: **they are here to destroy it; they all hate Whitey; We Will Send You Back; we don't need anymore members of the Jihad Squad; we are sitting by and watching our country be taken over; We'll pay you to keep em [them]**.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the global discussion about the global rise of rightward turns by arguing that they are generated by the pervasiveness and overlap of gendered, racialized, and nativized discourses⁷⁵ which are mainly advanced by the deeply conservative and far-right political agendas of diverse institutions.⁷⁶ To corroborate this argument is the evidence provided by *Breitbart News Network* which exposed three underlying core narratives that dominate these discourses. The first narrative suggests that right-wing establishments and their media affiliations favor stability and preservation of the *status quo* over social change. The second narrative is rooted in the Right's defense of limited government intervention regarding corporate and elite strongholds such as taxation, immigration flows, and economic benefits for minorities. The third narrative, and perhaps the most recurrent, conveys the message that in all political and social matters, the Right chooses obedience and conformity (oneness, sameness, nativeness, whiteness, maleness, etc.) over freedom and difference (respect, diversity, equality, justice, gender rights etc.).

The identification of these narratives also provides insight into the Republican Party's gender conservatism which, in this case, is discursively conveyed via *Breitbart's* far-right lexicon. In fact, the study's findings indicate that vilification discourses against gender justice and equality, even when not outwardly expressed, have ferocious online articulations, also known as e-bile,⁷⁷ and should therefore be understood as a type of hate speech fueled by antifeminist and antiminority positions, supported by a return to antimodern discourse.⁷⁸

In addressing the more specific issues raised by the research question regarding the vilification strategies triggered by the *stimulus-response* dynamic, the analysis of the linguistic and visual data provides evidence that the Squad and its members are discursively represented as a clan of rejects, illegals, terrorists and Marxists. These anti-American accusations are denounced in nearly all of the headlines and images, and are used as primary stimuli for vilification, consisting of an overwhelming majority of clickbait-like allusions, provocations, allegations and other forms of linguistic and visual rhetoric that are predicated almost exclusively on attention-seeking soundbites primed to receive the vitriolic responses from the readers. In particular, the Squad images provoke a generalized sentiment of doubt, suspicion, mistrust and lack of credibility, mostly related to idiosyncratic features that include behavior, vestemics, and gestures that are aptly captured and skillfully presented. Indeed, when the social actors are women, there seems to be no possible and genuine political critique outside a discourse in which identity features, including physical appearance, are perennial objects to be

⁷⁴ Matin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach", in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (London/CA/New Delhi: Sage 2016), 23–61.

⁷⁵ Kathleen Blee, "Similarities/Differences in Gender and Far-Right Politics in Europe and the USA", in Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, Andrea Petö, eds., *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe: Gender and Politics* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 191–204.

⁷⁶ Graff et al., *Gender and the Rise of the Global Right*.

⁷⁷ Emma Jane, "'Your a ugly, whorish, slut': Understanding E-bile", *Feminist Media Studies*, 14.4 (2014), 531–546.

⁷⁸ Karen Stenner, "Psychological Inquiry Three Kinds of Conservatism", 20.2–3 (April–September 2009), 142–159.

evaluated, exploited and humiliated for the clear purpose of controlling the narrative on women office-holding.⁷⁹ As mentioned, the comments are an escalated version of the vilification process triggered via the headlines and images which also reveal *Breitbart's* ulterior motive, or the attempt to convince readers that everything is disintegrating. This implies that the media outlet wants their followers to feel enraged and insecure in the face of advancing socialist disaster; they want them to feel that their only hope is the intervention of conservatism in all of its political ramifications.

As a final and more general remark, the global Right, according to Graff et al.,⁸⁰ has agendas that rely on a militant, aggressive and misogynistic brand of gender politics which is largely marketed on (social) media networks. By considering the evidence presented in this case study, it seems that the red thread narratives of right-wing discourse enable media demonization of liberal, nonwhite, young, female politicians, through which the Right attempts to 'purge' America from the presence of the 'other', an entity that activates the fear of a browning America and of a female-led Capitol Hill, and sharpens the sense of loss of the country's demographic control; this is when white America becomes far more right-wing and far more anti-gender. It is a *stimulus-response* dynamic that the Squad knows only too well, and Congresswoman Pressley just about wraps up this agenda when she states: "I encourage the American people and all of us in this room and beyond to not take the bait. This is a disruptive distraction from the issues of care, concern and consequence to the American people".⁸¹

⁷⁹ Jane, "Online Misogyny"; Gill Rosalind, "Post-postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times", *Journal of Feminist Media Studies*, 16.4 (2016).

⁸⁰ Graff et al., *Gender and the Rise of the Global Right*.

⁸¹ Rick Sobey, "Pressley Responds to Trump Tweet: Don't Take the Bait", *Boston Herald* (2019), <https://www.bostonherald.com/2019/07/21/pressley-responds-to-new-trump-tweet-get-off-the-ride/>.