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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Leaders' rhetoric during crisis: gender differences in leaders' communication during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis

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## ABSTRACT

Leaders' communication with their publics is a key component in contemporary governance. This is especially true in times of crisis, in which the public relies on their leaders to provide them with the information they need, along with a sense of hope. Traditional studies of leaders' rhetoric and verbal communication have found gender differences that fit gender role stereotypes, while newer studies present a different reality – a double-voice in which politicians and leaders use both masculine and feminine rhetoric. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has provided us with a unique opportunity to examine this issue, focusing on leaders' rhetoric during a crisis. An analysis of 30 speeches made by 10 country leaders (five men and five women) during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis reveals that while leaders use some rhetorical strategies that fit gender communication expectations, they combine them with other strategies that are stereotypically used by the opposite gender. Our findings regarding men and women leaders' rhetoric during a crisis fit those of newer gender-rhetoric studies that present a usage of both masculine and feminine rhetoric by leaders.

## KEYWORDS

Leaders' rhetoric; gender; crisis; COVID-19

## Introduction

Rhetoric is one of the main tools used by leaders attempting to influence publics and gain political power. The leaders use rhetoric to enhance and preserve political, social and cultural structures, while conveying messages on various platforms. Leaders' rhetoric is used in times of crises and routine. Rhetoric plays a significant role in today's public sphere, as citizens are exposed to various messages daily and can be affected by them (Kochin 2009). The current paper examines public speeches by 10 world leaders during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the aim of examining gender differences in leaders' rhetoric during crisis. Gender differences in leadership are especially interesting in

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this context, as female leaders were presented as more successful at handling the COVID-19 crisis (Sergent and Stajkovic 2020).

Our analysis of leaders' speeches focused on the leaders' verbal communication, as it is the messages themselves that persuade and influence the audience (Hauser 2002). Verbal communication is especially important in situations that require the public's engagement, such as crisis, as the messages promoted provide the public with information and a sense of solidarity, among other needs (Caprara et al. 2006). Thus, our analysis examines the content presented in male and female leaders' speeches and their usage of rhetorical tools.

While traditional studies of rhetoric found gender differences that fit gender role stereotypes (Bass 1998; Schnurr 2009), newer studies (Cameron and Shaw 2016; Kenty 2016) have presented a different reality of a double-voice, in which politicians use both masculine and feminine rhetoric. The current study builds on that knowledge, while focusing on leaders' rhetoric during crisis. We aim to examine whether a crisis causes leaders to use their stereotypical gender rhetoric or further enhances the double-voice trend, in which both male and female leaders combine masculine and feminine rhetoric.

During a crisis, the public turns to its leaders to provide information, solutions and a sense of hope. Based on traditional stereotypes and past experiences, male leaders are perceived as capable of dealing with crisis situations, but since we are dealing with a different type of crisis – a health-related crisis that could emphasise the advantages of feminine leadership (Bauer, Kim, and Kweon 2020), we can expect both male and female leaders to combine masculine and feminine rhetoric in their addresses to their nations.

### **Crisis, leadership and rhetoric**

Crises are usually strongly related to uncertainty and turbulence (Waldman et al. 2001). Uncertainty arises in situations of new risk, such as during the outbreak of the emerging infectious disease SARS (Leslie 2006) or the COVID-19 pandemic, which created global health, political and economic challenges. Studies have revealed that, during crisis, the public seeks leaders that focus on a positive future and hope (Shamir, House, and Arthur 1993; Shamir and Howell 1999). Leader communication skills are particularly important in times of crisis, as people are looking for 'a beacon – someone who can guide them through hard times by communicating clearly what needs to be done' to resolve the situation (Stam et al. 2018, 4). During the COVID-19 crisis, the public turned to its leaders, seeking for information and reassurance. A leader's ability to motivate the public is grounded in its ability to create and promote a sense of shared social identity, while representing and enhancing their shared interests. One of the ways to achieve that goal is by using collective pronouns, such as 'us', and 'our', when presenting challenges and the ways to overcome them. The usage of collective pronouns increases the sense of

inclusion and belongingness, and improves the ability of the leader to be effective in its communication (Jetten et al. 2020).

Successful leaders, such as Lincoln and Delano Roosevelt, understood how to provide stability and hope, even when they themselves were uncertain about the road ahead. They were honest and they celebrated small victories, even when the losses seemed large (Koehn 2017). A leader who is capable of being such a source of guidance can count on the endorsement of followers (Stam et al. 2018, 4). Similarly, the literature discussing health communication during crises points to the importance of transparency in conveying information to the public, as people seek useful information that explains what they should do to protect themselves and their surroundings (Holmes et al. 2009; Gesser-Edelsburg and Hijazi 2020). In addition, ‘announcements of public guidelines should reveal the rationale upon which they are based, and the information should be coherent, and anchored in facts’ (Gesser-Edelsburg and Hijazi 2020, 2996). Public confidence can only be built and established when leaders demonstrate caring and empathy, dedication and commitment (Gesser-Edelsburg and Hijazi 2020, p. 2986). The combination of providing the needed information alongside a sense of hope to the public as a key to successful leadership during a crisis was found to be universal and cross-cultural. Unlike cultural rhetorical leadership variations on a day-to-day life, in times of crisis, the public’s need for information and empathy is shared by different cultures (Stam et al. 2018).

While the literature on gender and leadership focuses mostly on crises in masculine issue areas – such as national security (in which men hold an advantage; see, e.g. Holman et al. 2019), public health issues are typically considered to be feminine issue areas. A key difference between the crisis spurred by the pandemic and other crises is that – unlike a national security crisis, which emphasises the need for masculine traits, such as strength – a health crisis calls for leaders to display feminine traits, such as compassion (Bauer, Kim, and Kweon 2020, 977; Johnson and Williams 2020). A recent study (Kantorowicz-Reznichenko, Dabrowska, and Kantorowicz 2020) examined whether female leaders are perceived as more competent to manage a pandemic crisis. Their expectation was that people will expect women leaders to be more competent than men, as the COVID-19 crisis can be perceived as a ‘feminine crisis’ (requiring compassion which is stereotypically perceived as a feminine quality). They claim that unlike in a national security crisis, where masculine leadership skills are an advantage, women had no advantage in the way people perceived their ability to manage a health crisis. Similarly, Piscopo (2020) suggested that female leaders’ success should be attributed to the fact that they lead stronger countries in terms of economy and political capacity. At the same time, Piscopo also pointed out that the pandemic performance of male and female leaders upends the traditional association among chief executive office, masculinity and effectiveness, as female leaders’ greater social concern and empathy

may have led them to better performance. In addition, Bauer, Kim, and Kweon (2020) found that the public tends to be more attentive to female leaders during a health crisis.

While many scholars have dealt with the issue of leadership rhetoric and gender, the literature lacks information regarding this topic in relation to crisis management. We aim to fill this gap, while focusing on the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Gender communication and politics**

Men and women are allocated different roles in society due to their gender, according to Gender Role Theory. Men are traditionally considered tough and strong, while women are often considered soft and conceding. These stereotypes create expectations regarding leaders' behaviour (Yarkony-sork 2018, 75–76). Stereotypically, 'effective' leaders are assumed to demonstrate authoritative, goal-orientated, assertive, adversarial, competitive and single-minded behaviour and language, singling out women who do not conform to these leadership standards (Bass 1998; Schnurr 2009; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018, 5).

Historically, and in line with the stereotype according to which politics is not for women, women were not allowed to run for parliament or vote (Andersen 1996). However, during the twentieth century, the participation of female politicians in governments globally increased steadily, but the proportion of women in leadership roles remains low (UN Women 2017).

Our analysis of leaders' speeches focuses on their rhetoric, in line with Aristotle's classic persuasion essay, – 'Rhetoric'. The essay offers speakers three distinct and powerful persuasive appeals: ethos, logos and pathos (). Ethos emphasises the speaker's credibility and trustworthiness. Logos refers to logic-based appeals, often using facts and figures. Finally, pathos is based on messages that appeal to the audience's emotions and are designed to sway listeners by triggering emotions such as fear, and anger, often through the use of humour, cynicism or empathy (Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, and Wolfsfeld 2015, 154–155; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018, 9).

The 'different voice' paradigm (Gilligan 1982), claiming that men and women use different languages and rhetoric, suggests that female leaders are inherently different in their language from their male counterparts. Studies focusing on gender communication exhibit different communication patterns for men and women. It appears that while men tend to use rational-logic-based arguments, women tend to be more emotional in their communication (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013; Grebelsky-Lichtman 2017). Women typically use more examples (Dow and Tonn 1993) and personal stories (Dindia and Allen 1992) in their rhetoric and tend to avoid presenting clear positions or stands, refine their words, and try to avoid sounding unambiguous (Dixon

and Foster 1997). Women are more apologetic in their messaging (Holmes and Stubbe 2003), do not often use single/first-person expressions (which represent ethos-based rhetoric), in line with their tendency to avoid self-promotion, speak in a modest way in public (Rudman 1998), and look for approval or confirmation for their arguments (Dolan 2010). In contrast, men present a more assertive discourse, making a stand while presenting clear arguments on the issues being discussed (Fox and Oxley 2003). Men often use single expressions, as self-promotion is more normative and acceptable for men (Miller et al. 1992; Rudman 1998), are more affective in mobilising their audience (Anderson-Nilsson and Clayton 2021), and present practical solutions to the problems raised in their messages (Gudykunst 1998). Generally, women present more empathy in their discourse (Garaigordobil 2009), while men are more assertive. Some have claimed that men use angry speech (Fox and Oxley 2003) that includes criticism, hostility toward others, and conventional masculine signifiers like strength and domination (Gustainis 1990; Johnson 2017).

Recent studies have presented a major change in gender rhetoric in general, and in political rhetoric in particular, combining the softer and more emotionally based trend stereotypically used by women with the more assertive logic-based discourse typically used by men (e.g., Kenty 2016; Yarchi and Samuel-Azran 2018). Baxter (2011) presented the notion of a ‘double-voiced’ rhetoric, in which both men and women integrate between various gender-oriented discourse strategies to affectively promote their messages. In the realm of politics, in the last three decades, we had witnessed a usage of double-voice by various male leaders, among them Clinton, Blair and Obama – as they combine between authoritative masculine voice and feminine aspects of empathy and emotions (Cameron & Shaw, 2016). Similarly, studies in the United Kingdom – focusing on 2015 General Election (Cameron and Shaw, 2016), and the United States – studying Hillary Clinton’s rhetoric during the 2016 US elections campaign (Kenty 2016) showed that female politicians combined authoritative voice with emotional voice. This integration of different gender-oriented rhetoric was found to be prominent in various Western democracies, such as the United States, England, Australia, Canada and Israel. Similar to male politicians, female politicians also use masculine verbal communication patterns, trying to mobilise their audiences, present solutions, and use single expressions and assertive speech (Grebelsky-Lichtman 2017). Thus, the rhetoric used and the topics discussed by both male and female politicians have become similar in recent years, while combining both gender-oriented strategies.

### **Research questions**

Following many years in which politics was considered to be a masculine occupation and politicians’ rhetoric was compatible to stereotypical gender roles, we have recently witnessed a change – according to which both male and female

politicians combine various rhetorical strategies, and the stereotypical gender language. Focusing on crisis management, the public is used to having masculine leadership and has perceived male leaders as more active and assertive in times of crisis. On the other hand, women tend to be more sensitive and use more positive rhetoric, providing faith and hope, which are better valued by the public during a crisis, as the public universally seeks information alongside a positive attitude and a sense of hope. Therefore, it appears that in order to succeed in their communication during a crisis, leaders need to combine stereotypical gender rhetorical strategies – emphasising logic-based appeals (while providing information) – with pathos-based appeals (reflecting a sense of hope and empathy) and ethos-based appeals (emphasising collective pronouns and a sense of shared social identity).

The COVID-19 crisis has provided an opportunity to examine whether the change we had witnessed in leaders' rhetoric holds in the reality of a global crisis, understanding that a combination of male and female stereotypical rhetorical strategies is expected to lead to better communication with the public. The current study examines differences between men and women leaders' rhetoric in their speeches to their respective nations during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the mixed results dealing with the issue, and the gap in the literature regarding leadership and gender-rhetoric during crisis, we will present research questions rather than hypotheses. Our research questions are:

- RQ: Are there differences between male and female leaders' discourse during the COVID-19 crisis?
- RQ1: Ethos – Are there differences in male and female leaders' usage of single and plural expressions, and other ethos-based strategies?
- RQ2: Pathos – Are there differences in male and female leaders' usage of emotions and storytelling strategies?
- RQ3: Logos – Are there differences in male and female leaders' usage of logical explanations and solutions?
- RQ4: Are there differences in the topics that male and female leaders focus on in their speeches?

## **Method**

In order to expand our understanding regarding gender differences in leaders' rhetoric during crisis, we examined speeches by 10 world leaders (five men and five women) during the COVID-19 crisis. For each leader, we analysed three speeches made during the first wave of the pandemic. The first speech was made in the first stages of the pandemic in the leaders' country, the second a few weeks later – when the number of the country's COVID-19 cases was

the highest (in the first wave of the pandemic) – dealing with the consequences of the crisis, and the third was the speech in which the leader had presented the country's exit strategy (of the first wave). Examining three speeches made in those different phases provides us with better control over occurrences within the pandemic. In total, 30 speeches were analysed: 15 made by female leaders and 15 by male leaders. We selected those world leaders in an attempt to provide a wide understanding of leaders' rhetoric during crisis. In an attempt to control for differences between the leaders, we ensured that we had a representation of both male and female leaders who hold similar ideologies and lead countries with similar geographical locations and cultures. Special emphasis was given to the issue of the leaders' political ideology, as the literature suggests that different rhetorical strategies of left/liberal leaning versus right/conservative leaning politicians (e.g., Samuel-Azran, Yarchi, and Wolfsfeld 2018; Wichowsky, Shah, and Heideman 2022). In an attempt to control for the political leaning, we made sure to select equal number of leaders from each political ideology to represent each gender. Our sample includes two female and two male leaders who are more conservative in their views; one female and one male leader who are centre parties' leaders; and two female and two male leaders who are more liberal in their views. Thus, we should not expect ideology to play a role in the gender differences we present. Nonetheless, we had run the analysis focusing on left-right ideology, but the findings did not present significant differences.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 below presents the leaders examined and the information about their analysed speeches.

In order to code 30 speeches, made by 10 leaders in seven different languages, we used the assistance of six coders who are native speakers of the language of each leader's country. The coders underwent training (using leaders' speeches in English, which were not part of our sample) and reliability examination (of three speeches in English, with an agreement level of not lower than 84% for each category). During the coding process, the coders used both the video and the written text of each speech. Due to the relatively low number of cases examined, we cannot refer to statistical significance in our results section. Regardless, we feel that the findings below can help us better understand gender differences in leaders' rhetoric during crisis.

In line with our research questions, we collected data about the various rhetorical strategies used by the leaders, as well as the topics they present in their speeches, combining qualitative and quantitative measurements. Table 2 presents the various rhetoric variables used in our analysis.

In addition to rhetorical differences, we sought to identify whether male and female leaders dealt with the same issues in their COVID-19 speeches. In the analysis, we examined the main and secondary topic the speech focused on: health, security, economy and employment, welfare or mental health, education, international relations, internal issues (interactions between various groups in the society) or other.

**Table 1.** Leaders' speeches.

Leader	Country	Gender	Date	Number of words	Duration (minutes)
Justin Trudeau <sup>a</sup>	Canada	Male	11 May 2020	1903	29:45
			1 April 2020	2100	32:39
			14 May 2020	2432	34:26
Jacinda Ardern	New Zealand	Female	15 March 2020	1003	6:54
			1 April 2020	5296	33:58
			18 May 2020	1544	9:37
Donald Trump	US	Male	9 March 2020	455	2:40
			29 March 2020	3274	24:08
			17 April 2020	2851	18:30
Angela Merkel	Germany	Female	18 March 2020	1623	12:43
			23 April 2020	3421	27:54
			13 May 2020	661	4:40
Tsai Ing-wen	Taiwan	Female	22 January 2020	1079	5:16
			30 January 2020	1438	7:08
			7 February 2020	606	2:50
Lee Hsien Loong <sup>b</sup>	Singapore	Male	12 March 2020	1334	11:27
			3 April 2020	1746	23:43
			7 June 2020	2350	22:00
Mette Fredriksen	Denmark	Female	6 March 2020	1352	9:30
			11 March 2020	1791	16:46
			6 April 2020	2596	25:40
Emmanuel Macron	France	Male	13 March 2020	3480	27:10
			25 March 2020	3462	27:45
			14 June 2020	2129	19:45
Erna Solberg	Norway	Female	10 March 2020	831	6:40
			24 March 2020	873	6:44
			7 May 2020	850	6:18
Binyamin Netanyahu	Israel	Male	14 March 2020	1895	16:32
			1 April 2020	1356	14:35
			18 April 2020	1142	12:04

<sup>a</sup>Trudeau's speeches are longer as he translates parts of his messages to French (the number of words reflects the English messages).

<sup>b</sup>Loong's speeches are longer as he translates parts of his messages to Mandarin (the number of words reflects the English messages).

Because our analysis examines whether (or not) leaders are using various rhetorical strategies in their public speeches and, as such, most of our variables are nominal, we mostly used Chi-squared tests as our statistical tool (the percentages presented across the results section represent the number of speeches in which the rhetorical strategy was used, and not the amount of time it was used in each speech). When possible, we conducted a *T*-test.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

In line with the study's goals, this section begins by examining the differences between male and female leaders' usage of ethos in their COVID-19 speeches, followed by the analysis of their usage of pathos and logos. We also deal with differences in the leaders' content by examining the topics presented in their speeches. Our analysis is primarily descriptive, in line with the data and variables we had collected for this study.

Our first research question (RQ1) deals with the differences between male and female leaders' usage of ethos in their discourse. Tables 3 and 4 present

**Table 2.** Study variables.

	Variable	Description	Categories
Ethos-based strategies	Single expirations	The number of times the leader talks about him/herself and his/her achievements	
	Plural expirations	The number of times the leader talks about his/her government and their achievements	
	Role description	Does the leader describe his/her roles in life?	Yes/No (+role description)
Pathos-based strategies	Usage of emotions	Does the leader use emotions in the speech?	Yes/No
	Salient emotion	Which emotion is the most salient?	Positive/Negative/Both
	Apologies	Does the leader apologise?	Yes/No
	Using a story	Does the leader use a story in the speech?	Yes/No
	Story's focus	What is the focus of the story?	Personal/Professional/Other
Logic-based strategies	Usage of logical explanations	Does the leader use logical explanations/reasons?	Yes/No
	Logical to base claims	Does the leader use logical statements to base his/her arguments?	Yes/No
	Relate to other events	Does the leader relate to other events (past or present)?	Yes/No
	Comparison to other countries	Does the leader compare his/her country to other countries?	Yes/No
	Presenting solutions	Does the leader display solutions?	Yes/No
Other strategies	Usage of metaphors	Does the leader use metaphors?	Yes/No
	Negative metaphors	Does the leader use negative metaphors?	Yes/No
	Positive metaphors	Does the leader use positive metaphors?	Yes/No
	Promotion-oriented words	Does the leader use a promotion-oriented words?	Yes/No
	Positive reinforcement	Does the leader use a positive reinforcement towards the public in his/her country?	Yes/No
	Prevention-oriented words	Does the leader use prevention-oriented words?	Yes/No
	Negative reinforcement	Does the leader use negative reinforcement towards the public in his/her country?	Yes/No

differences in various ethos-based strategies, such as usage of single and plural expressions, and the description of the leaders' role in their speeches.

As presented in Table 3, the evidence suggests that men tend to use both single and plural expressions more frequently than women in their speeches (the *T*-test differences in plural expressions are significant despite the low number of cases measured). Those differences remain the same while controlling for the number of words in the leader's speech.<sup>3</sup> It appears that male leaders talk more about themselves or their government and their achievements than female leaders while communicating with the public during a crisis. This

**Table 3.** Differences between male and female leaders in their usage of single and plural expressions.

Variables		<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>T</i>
Single expressions	Male leaders	15	17.20	17.185	1.254
	Female leaders	15	11.13	7.463	
Plural expressions	Male leaders	15	51.67	38.755	2.095*
	Female leaders	15	27.80	21.069	

\**P* < .05.

**Table 4.** Differences between male and female leaders in their usage of ethos and pathos-based strategies.

	Male leaders	Female leaders	$\chi^2$ ; $\phi/Rc$
Role description	13.3%	33.3%	1.677; 0.236
Emotions	100%	86.7%	1.728; 0.253
Salient emotion is negative	13.3%	6.7%	1.292; 0.218
Salient emotion is positive	60%	80%	
Salient emotion is both negative and positive	26.7%	13.3%	
Apologies	26.7%	6.7%	2.160; 0.268
Using a story	46.7%	26.7%	1.429; 0.208

finding fits our expectation regarding gender-based rhetoric, as self-promotion is typically more prominent and acceptable for men, while women tend to be more modest in the public sphere (Miller et al. 1992; Rudman 1998).

Interestingly, as presented in Table 4 below, female leaders (33.3%) tend to describe their role in a more prominent way (compared to only 13.3% in men's speeches). While examining the type of roles presented, it appears that women emphasised professional roles, such as head of state, minister and a member of the decision-making team. The evidence suggests that, in contrast to the gender stereotype, women leaders put forward their professional experience. A possible explanation could be that, due to the strong connotation between male characteristics and leadership, especially during crisis, women feel a need to justify their leadership by emphasising their professional experience. This finding fits those of previous studies (e.g., Kantorowicz-Reznichenko, Dabrowska, and Kantorowicz 2020) suggesting that women leaders need to emphasise their function and professional experience in order to communicate messages effectively. Thus, our findings regarding the usage of ethos-based strategies exhibit mixed results. In line with the stereotypical expectation, male leaders present their achievements in a more salient way, while women have a higher tendency to present their professional role. Next, and in line with the second research question (RQ2), we examine the usage of pathos-based strategies: usage of emotions and the type of emotion used, and the usage of apologies and stories in the leaders' speeches. The findings are presented in Table 4.

Male (100%) and female (86.7%) leaders both tend to use emotions in their messages. While examining the type of emotion used, the evidence suggests that while both genders use more positive emotions, women are more likely to use positive emotions than men (80% for women compared to 60% for men). The presentation of negative emotions was found to be more salient for male leaders (13.3% versus 6.7% for female leaders). It appears that the usage of emotions, a prominent pathos rhetorical strategy, is widely used by all leaders, while women were more positive than men.

In addition, and in contrast to gender stereotypes, male leaders (26.7%) tend to be more apologetic than female leaders (6.7%), although this rhetorical method is not widely used by either gender. Another interesting finding had

to do with the usage of stories; men are more likely to use storytelling than women (46.7% in comparison to 26.7%), and the gender differences are not only in the frequency of this rhetoric method, but also in the content: while men tell mostly professional stories (57.1% of their stories focus on professional issues) – presenting discussions with world leaders, professional meetings and interactions with the local leaderships, women stories focus on various topics (75% do not focus on professional aspects), such as past events, or the public's mood. In line with stereotypical gender roles, we can see that while men focus mostly on professional topics, women interact differently with the public. Here too, we see mixed stereotypical gender usage. While the focus of the leaders' story fits our gender expectations, we found, surprisingly, that men use apologies more frequently than women. In line with our third research question (RQ3), we move to an examination of the leaders' usage of logic-based strategies, presented in Table 5.

Again, the findings of logical-based rhetoric do not always fit the stereotypical gender expectations. Female leaders tend to use logical explanations significantly (93.3%) and logically base their claims (80%, marginally significant) more than men (46.7%). Female leaders' emphasis on logical argument, which contradicts the stereotypical gender rhetoric, can be explained by the type of crisis we are dealing with – a health-related crisis, in which women may have more experience in and feel more confident in dealing with. In addition, women are more likely to acknowledge limitations in their qualifications and may therefore be more likely to seek outside expertise to inform their decisions, hence using more logic-based argument (Fox and Lawless 2011; Bauer, Kim, and Kweon 2020; Funk 2020; Barnes, Beall, and Holman 2021).

In addition, as shown in Table 5, Male leaders are more likely to relate to other events (73.3% compared to 53.3% by women), and especially to compare their country to other countries (a strategy used 73.3% by men in comparison to only 46.7% by women leaders). Interestingly, both genders place a lot of emphasis on presenting solutions in their speeches, while women (100%) tend to do so slightly more than men (86.7%). The findings regarding logic-based strategies also indicate mixed gender rhetoric, which fits with the double-voice gender rhetoric. In addition, we had examined the usage of various rhetorical strategies, such as metaphors, promotion and prevention-oriented words. Scholars (e.g., Campbell 1963; Frogel 2006) had argued that those

**Table 5.** Differences between male and female leaders in their usage of logic-based strategies.

	Female leaders	Male leaders	$\chi^2$ ; $\phi$
Logical explanations/reasons	46.7%	93.3%	7.778 <sup>**</sup> ; 0.509 <sup>**</sup>
Logical explanations to base claims	46.7%	80%	3.589 <sup>#</sup> ; 0.346 <sup>#</sup>
Relate to other events	73.3%	53.3%	1.292; 0.208
Comparison to other countries	73.3%	46.7%	2.222; 0.272
Presenting solutions	86.7%	100%	2.143; 0.267

<sup>#</sup> $p < .1$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ .

rhetorical strategies have a mental and figurative side, while they include both pathos and logos, as they combine the usage of emotions and information presented to the public. The findings are presented in Table 6.

Similar to the findings regarding the leaders' usage of emotions (presented in Table 4), when focusing on metaphors (Table 5), men (73.3%) tend to use metaphors more than women (50%), while men use more negative metaphors (66.7% compared to 33.3% by women – marginally significant). Negative metaphors include natural disasters (such as tsunamis or storms), sports (terms such as 'different ball game', 'galloping toward us') or war. Interestingly, leaders frequently used war-related examples and words to describe the COVID-19 crisis (in 60% of men speeches and 50% of women speeches). Women use positive metaphors (such as talking about the governments' policies as the 'wheels' that will allow the people to carry the load) more than men (26.7% compared to 6.7% by male leaders).

As for the usage of promotion and prevention-oriented words, and reinforcements, the analysis reveals that men tend to use both promotion-oriented (in 100% of their speeches, a significant difference) and prevention-oriented words (80%) more than women (73.3% for promotion-oriented and 66.7% for prevention-oriented words), while both genders use promotion-oriented words in a more prominent way. Interestingly, positive reinforcement is often used by both genders, while the women used it in all of their speeches, and the men used it in 86.7% of their speeches. As a mirror image, the women did not use negative reinforcements at all, while the men used it in 33.3% of their speeches (significant difference). While the findings regarding empathy exhibit mixed results in terms of gender, it appears that male leaders use intimidation (prevention-oriented words and negative reinforcements) more frequently than women, in line with gender stereotypical expectations.

The last stage of our analysis focuses on the topics emphasised (RQ4), in an attempt to examine gender differences in the speeches' content. Table 7 presents both the main and secondary issues presented.

Since our study focuses on leaders' speeches during the COVID-19 crisis, it is not surprising that most speeches deal primarily with health issues (100% of female leaders and 80% of male speeches – with marginal significant

**Table 6.** Differences between male and female leaders in other rhetorical strategies – metaphors, intimidation and empathy.

	Male leaders	Female leaders	$\chi^2$ ; $\phi$
Metaphors	73.3%	50%	1.675; 0.240
Negative metaphors	66.7%	33.3%	3.333 <sup>#</sup> ; 0.268 <sup>#</sup>
Positive metaphors	6.7%	26.7%	2.160; 0.268
Promotion-oriented words	100%	73.3%	4.615*; 0.392*
Positive reinforcement	86.7%	100%	2.143; 0.267
Prevention-oriented words	80%	66.7%	0.682; 0.151
Negative reinforcement	33.3%	0%	6.000*; 0.447*

\* $p < .1$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

**Table 7.** Differences between male and female leaders in the topics of their speeches.

	Male leaders	Female leaders	$\chi^2$ ; $\phi/Rc$
<i>Main issue:</i>			
Health	80%	100%	3.333 <sup>#</sup> ; 0.333 <sup>#</sup>
Other	20%	0%	
<i>Secondary issue:</i>			
Welfare or mental health	28.6%	13.3%	4.526; 0.395
Health	14.3%	0%	
Security	0%	6.7%	
Economy and employment	50%	73.3%	
Internal issues	7.1%	6.7%	

<sup>#</sup> $p < .1$ .

differences). More interesting is the secondary issue presented. The most salient issue, for leaders of both genders, was ‘economy and employment’, as the pandemic has serious economic implications worldwide. This topic was more prominent in women’s speeches (73.3%) than men’s (50%). Men also put a lot of emphasis on ‘welfare or mental health’ (28.6%, compared to 13.3% of women’s speeches). While men did not talk about security issues, women leaders did so in 6.7% of their speeches. Here too, in contrast to stereotypical gender issues, men placed more emphasis than women on mental health, while women emphasised security.

## Conclusions

Leaders’ communication with their publics is a key component in today’s governance. This is especially true during crisis. Various studies have dealt with communication and rhetorical strategies of male and female leaders, following the rise in women’s leadership positions around the world – a field that has been (and, in many ways, still is) considered to be masculine. Traditional studies found gender differences that fit gender role stereotypes, according to which men are more assertive and tend to use self-promotion and rational arguments, while women tend to be more emotional in their communication, speak in a modest way in public, and use more empathy in their discourse. Newer studies present a different reality of a double-voice, in which politicians and leaders use both masculine and feminine rhetoric, combining logic-based and emotional-based strategies. The goal of our study was to examine whether a crisis makes leaders use their stereotypical gender rhetoric or further enhances the double-voice trend, in which both male and female leaders combine masculine and feminine rhetoric. This is especially important, as in a time of a crisis, the double-voice rhetoric should be more prominent, since the public seeks information, a sense of social identity and a sense of hope – which combines both stereotypical gender rhetorical strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has provided us with an opportunity to examine this issue as it has influenced many nations around the world simultaneously

and the countries' leaders (most of whom are men) had communicated the situation to their publics in the form of speeches. Analysing 30 speeches made by 10 country leaders (five men and five women) during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis enabled us to examine this topic and gain a better understanding regarding leaders' rhetorical gender differences during a crisis.

Our results suggest that during a crisis, leaders used a double-voice gender rhetoric. Some of the findings fit our stereotypical gender expectations. For example, and similar to previous studies (Rudman 1998), men tend to use more self-promotion in their speeches than women do. They glorify their actions and achievements, as seen in their usage of singular expressions and plural expressions presenting their government actions, as well as their tendency to glorify their country in comparison to other countries in the same situation. Women tend to use more positive emotions and metaphors than men, emphasising their empathy to their public (in line with the findings of Garai-gordobil 2009). At the same time, we found some results that contradict gender expectations and previous findings. Despite the fact that male discourse is considered more rational (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013), female leaders were more likely to use logic-based rhetoric and to use logical explanations to base their claims. They also tend to offer solutions more than male leaders. In terms of their usage of singular and plural expressions, women leaders tend to use collective pronouns (such as 'we' or 'us') more than singular expressions. Male leaders were more likely to be apologetic (in contrast to the findings of previous studies, e.g., Holmes and Stubbe 2003), and use storytelling persuasion practices that were previously attributed to women (Dindia and Allen 1992). This evidence suggests that while leaders are using some rhetorical strategies that fit the gender communication expectations, they combine them with other strategies that are stereotypically used by the opposite gender. Thus, our finding fits those of newer gender-rhetoric studies, in which leaders use both masculine and feminine rhetoric.

Focusing on leaders' communication during crisis, it is not surprising that female leaders were seen as more successful than male leaders (Sergent and Stajkovic 2020)<sup>4</sup> as they were able to provide the public with necessary information, based on logical argument and presenting solutions, and at the same time promote a more positive rhetoric (while presenting more positive emotions and metaphors). Both strategies were found to be useful in promoting messages during crisis (Shamir and Howell 1999; Holmes et al. 2009; Stam et al. 2018). It appears that female leaders have adopted parts of the male discourse and rhetoric, while communicating with their public during the COVID-19 crisis, but did so with empathy and a positive attitude, all of which appear to have helped them manage the crisis better than male leaders.

The findings of our study add to the verbal communication component, and to some extent contradict those of a recent study focusing on gender leadership differences of non-verbal communication behaviour during the COVID-19

crisis. Grebelsky-Lichtman and Katz (2020) found that male leaders' non-verbal communication included competition, warning, threatening and scaring behaviours, such as finger-pointing gestures, sharp movement and angry facial expressions, while female leaders presented emotional communication, empathy, optimism, eye contact and flexible expressions, as well as round hand movements, extensive facial expressions and expressive voice. Those findings suggested that leaders' non-verbal communication during crisis mostly fits gender expectations. Our finding adds the verbal communication – rhetorical strategies aspect, which exhibits a mixed stereotypical gender rhetoric by both genders. Regarding the differences between the verbal and non-verbal communication, according to Grebelsky-Lichtman and Katz (2020), male leaders presented non-verbal communication that fits their gender stereotype, and their verbal communication in our study to a large extent supports that, as they use negative communication compared to female leaders. A possible explanation could be that dealing with health issues, which is not a typical comfort zone of male leaders, led them to use more traditional body language. On the other hand, and similar to previous findings (Grebelsky-Lichtman 2017), female leaders' verbal communication was not compatible with their non-verbal communication. They were able to present rational messages, enhance the sense of their public's social identity, and use supportive tone and positive attitude, rhetorical practices that were found to be effective, especially during crisis.

As presented in the method section, the main limitation of our study is the relatively low number of speeches analysed ( $N = 30$ ; with  $m = 1896$  of words and  $m = 16$  min per speech), which limited our ability to present the statistical significance levels of our findings. That being said, we feel that this analysis of the leaders' rhetorical strategies, while examining three speeches of each leader in different stages of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, can provide us with a wide understanding of gender differences in leaders' rhetoric during a crisis, a topic that has not received sufficient scholarly attention. Future studies could examine a wider range of cases, which would allow them to examine the issue, while controlling for other important factors, such as the leaders' ideology, years in office and other leader-related variables that we could not control for due to the low number of leaders examined.

## Notes

1. The only difference (marginally significant) found in the analysis of political ideology was in the politicians' usage of positive reinforcement, in which liberal leaders used that strategy in all of their speeches, while conservative leaders used it in only 83.3% of their speeches.
2. The details regarding the statistical test used in each analysis appear at the top part of each table.
3. Using a regression model.

4. Other studies (e.g. Bosancianu et al. 2020; Piscopo 2020) have claimed that the ability of leaders to better deal with the COVID-19 crisis should be attributed to other issues (such as leading high-capacity countries or countries with high institutional trust and low bureaucratic capacity) and not the leader's gender.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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