

THESIS

“CUT HER SOME SLACK.”: EXAMINING TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
ECOFEMINIST DIGITAL OPINION LEADER #AOC AND THE #GREENNEWDEAL

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## ABSTRACT

### “CUT HER SOME SLACK.”: EXAMINING TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ECOFEMINIST DIGITAL OPINION LEADER #AOC AND THE #GREENNEWDEAL

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez holds a unique and captivating spot in the political arena in 2020. At the forefront of the nonbinding resolution, the Green New Deal (GND), her position on Twitter with over 6.7 million followers has given her the power to influence and interact with her constituents, other politicians, supporters, and critics on Twitter and has given her the opportunity to advocate for and uphold key policy issues related to environmental justice within the Green New Deal. She can also shape policy decisions as the Green New Deal moves forward. Ecofeminism, as both a social and philosophical movement, argues that women must be at the forefront of politics in order to improve the lives of others and the environment. Employing Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) to understand digital phenomena, artifacts, and ideology on social networking platforms, this study explores how and why Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a twenty-first century opinion-leader generates support for the Green New Deal, and how she uses ecofeminism as a principle that guides her Green New Deal advocacy on Twitter.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my friends and family for keeping me laughing, and to Dr. Arthur for reminding me about self-care. This thesis is dedicated to all women who accomplished the impossible in the face of adversity.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### **Thesis Overview**

This thesis offers an overview of the study, its theoretical frames, methodology, findings, and discussion. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework of the study by describing the primary literature related to the intersections of ecofeminist, new media, and opinion leader theories. Chapter 3 focuses on CTDA, including cited background of the method and its procedures. Chapter 4 explains the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides insights through discussion and provides suggestions for future research. Finally, Chapter 6 provides conclusions for the study to understand the overall scope of the entire project.

### **Overviews and Rationales**

**Background.** In February 2019, Alexandria-Ocasio Cortez (AOC) and Senator Ed Markey introduced The Green New Deal, a nonbinding resolution for environmental crisis action inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. The goal of this nonbinding resolution is to transform the economy to accommodate for the growing climate crisis. The resolution proposes changes such as upgrading infrastructure, expanding renewable resources, and removing greenhouse gasses from the agricultural sector (H. Res. 109, 2019). Credited as being “an organizing tool, rather than a final destination,” (Coleman, 2019, p.1) the hope for the 14-page resolution is that it will move policy forward in taking actions to achieve net-zero carbon emissions in 10 years. This current version of the Green New Deal is a reprisal of the resolution originally introduced in 2006 by the Green Party, and again in the Obama administration in 2009 and 2010 as an addition to the stimulus plan to spur job growth (Moore, 2019). Ed Markey and

AOC introduced the new version of the Green New Deal in February 2019, appearing on multiple media outlets to discuss its goals for the transformation of the country.

AOC's highly visible online identity and the tactics she uses to communicate with her constituents and numerous audiences play a key role in understanding how a topic such as the GND is perceived online in a time where the climate crisis and global health crisis are pressing issues. A 2019 poll showed that more Americans oppose the Green New Deal (46 percent) than support it due to its massive disruption to the economy (Chait, 2019). Yet, AOC has a personal connection with her audience, infamously showing her relatability on other platforms like Instagram and Twitter. In the past, AOC has done Instagram live streams of herself building IKEA furniture, or drinking wine. In these streams, AOC answers questions from her audience about issues surrounding the GND, or other relevant policies that relate to her environmental platform using social networking sites to educate various publics who may oppose the GND about its strengths and possibilities.

Ecofeminism plays a huge role in AOC's environmental platform and how she communicates about the Green New Deal online. Both a social and philosophical interdisciplinary movement, ecofeminism is the study of how women are globally in subordination to men, which is similar to how people use and destroy the environment. Historically, women are seen as more connected to the environment in which they live, and simultaneously are left out of conversations about policies regarding the environment (Gaard, 2015). When looking at this study through an ecofeminist lens and AOC as the communicator at as the focal point, the injustices and ways in which the ecofeminist movement can move forward can be analyzed. As a prominent opinion leader in the twenty-first century, she influences millions of people online. The ways in which AOC operates as a politician are both public and

personal. Her identity and story reveal how the Green New Deal can be an intersectional example of creating change in the Trump-era. Women and marginalized peoples are often left out of talks about climate policies and solutions. The Green New Deal offers an opportunity for new voices and recognition for solutions to climate issues to be the center of discussion.

The United States is at a critical and contested point in time in terms of adopting climate change policy that can help the future. A split Congress and Trump-era anti-regulation politics have consequences for environmental issues in the future. In 2017, the United States was the only developed country announced to formally leave the Paris Climate Agreement, which deals with greenhouse gas mitigation. This decision was controversial and left many influential leaders wondering what could be done to initiate new environmental policies.

In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reported that a global 1.5 degrees Celsius rise will have dire effects such as sea level rise, drought, extreme temperatures, and flooding (IPCC, 2018). Abundant examples of these fluctuations exist in the U.S., such as the Kinkade and Getty fires in Southern California, Hurricane Harvey in Texas, and region-wide droughts affecting the Midwest in the summer of 2019. The Green New Deal offers a solution to catastrophic circumstances across the country, in a time where denial is still a prominent tactic of members of the White House. AOC's Twitter communications about the GND offer ecofeminist principles (described more fully in the literature review) to various publics that may or may not be informed about current environmental policies and politics. She represents an example of how a woman-identified politician uses social networking platforms to espouse ecofeminism in a largely-divisive twenty-first century political climate.

**Rationale and significance of research.** This research and study will provide contextual information to understanding the basis of how ecofeminism and online technologies intersect

with a politician who is a woman of color. This study is a representative example for understanding how policy promotion and adoption exist in a digital space, and the way that Twitter operates to inform and persuade the public about environmental issues. AOC as an influential opinion leader in the digital age has the capacity to interact with and respond to her audience in a way that was not possible in the twentieth century. She can espouse new ideas online related to environment justice and propose a radical call to transform the U.S. economy. This study provides new insights about how a woman-identified politician communicates and persuades the public about a policy in the online space. Her specific position in U.S. politics, and being a Millennial keen on advancing policy decisions that benefit others will be examined through the lens of ecofeminism. A holistic view of how AOC as an opinion leader functions within Twitter is offered here to determine how ecofeminism is a part of the overall conversation.

**Summary of method.** Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) was the chosen method for this study. Developed by Andre Brock (2018), this method is multimodal, and its goal is to analyze digital phenomena, artifacts, and cultural ideology. CTDA's aim is to understand a digital platform, and how ideologies and related meanings are created on the said platform. Originally used for understanding Black Twitter from a critical race perspective, CTDA is designed to be applied to any critical cultural perspective of a researcher's choosing. Using this approach to analyzing digital phenomena provides an understanding of how users operate in a digital space, and the cultural conclusions that can be made to understand greater phenomena related to technology, social networking sites, and cultural ideology. AOC's Twitter account was scraped with any tweets that mention #GreenNewDeal from January 2019 to January 2020 to further understand the cultural considerations of communication with the public.

that follow her. Using this method brought a multi-layered understanding of how AOC uses the platform to promote cultural information related to a specific policy.

### **Goal and Research Question**

The goal of this study was to understand how support is generated for the Green New Deal on Twitter by a woman-identified politician in a divided political climate. The environmental justice aspects and intersectional principles of ecofeminism were also examined to see how they function in an online environment. By completing this study, a holistic view of how conversations about the Green New Deal and women politicians was understood on Twitter, a specific digital space that provides a wealth of opportunities to examine how digital rhetoric is formed and consumed. The following research question guided the overall framework and progress of this study.

**RQ1:** How does Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez employ ecofeminism in conversations about the Green New Deal on Twitter?

**RQ2:** What primary elements of ecofeminism and environmental justice are featured in tweets featuring the hashtag #GreenNewDeal

**RQ3:** What are the power dynamics of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez functioning as a woman-identified Latina opinion-leader online?

**RQ4:** How do Twitter responses from users affect the trajectory of conversation about the Green New Deal within the platform?

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Past research reveals a multitude of information related to the interdisciplinary field of ecofeminism and how female politicians operate in the digital space. An overall understanding of how Twitter functions and how politicians operate as opinion leaders online are important areas of study. Another area related to this field of research is how the Green New Deal exists as a platform for environmental justice solutions. It is important to have background knowledge about the Green New Deal and its relationship to ecofeminism in order to understand how it is discussed in an online context. A third area of literature relevant to understand within this study is how Two-Step Flow Theory operates on Twitter. Given that this theory was created in the 1950s, current literature provides a new context for studying online phenomena. This literature informs the important research questions investigated throughout the course of this study.

### **The Green New Deal's Goal for Environmental Justice**

As mentioned, Ocasio-Cortez was the face of the Green New Deal nonbinding resolution in February of 2019, appearing on multiple media and social outlets to announce the goals of the resolution. Some critiques of the Green New Deal are that creators of the resolution did not consult with activists when crafting the plan, and that it is unrealistic (Sweeney, 2019). However, other researchers argue that the Green New Deal is the opportunity for a “just transition” for decarbonization, prioritizing the health and well-being of marginalized communities who are affected by climate change (White, 2019). The proposal itself is nonbinding, meaning that nothing in it can technically become law (Friedman, 2019). Overall, the GND focuses on economic, infrastructural, and social solutions to address the climate crisis.

**Acknowledgement of underserved populations.** The resolution itself does mention ways to reach underserved audiences in the face of climate change. The resolution acknowledges economic inequalities that intersect with racial issues. Data featured in the resolution include the fact that white families on average have 20 times more wealth than Black families; the resolution also acknowledges that Indigenous peoples, migrant workers, women, low-income workers, and others are all disproportionately affected by climate change (H. Res. 109, 2019). Climate change issues have always been gendered and racialized in terms of public support and acknowledgement. The Green New Deal provides an economic opportunity that attempts to provide jobs to people in sectors who can transition to renewable energy (Harris, 2019). There are many ways that underserved communities do not get to have a voice in the conversation of climate change and how it affects them.

**Intersectionality and the Green New Deal.** From the moment of its creation, the 2019 version of the Green New Deal provided a pedestal for inclusivity. Hathaway (2019) said that most climate change films in modern media represent the “hero” of the movement as a white man. This characterization makes white men seem like the savior of the environment, when ironically it is the demographic that has exploited the environment the most. AOC as the face of this resolution provides a fresh perspective; she functions as resistance to the silencing of multiple demographics. Kings (2017) notes Kimberlé Crenshaw’s principles of intersectionality can be applied to ecofeminism as both theory and practice. While the original dynamics arose due to the failure to include women as a group that are discriminated against, ecofeminism also sits at the intersection of many lived experiences of those who interact with and are a part of the natural world. This recognition acknowledges that not all oppressions stand alone but reflect the complexity of experiences that different women and groups face with environmental issues.

Thus, the Green New Deal attempts to address multiple types of inequality and injustices for those that may be affected by climate change.

**A key figure in the Green New Deal's creation.** Rhiana Gunn-Wright is a 32-year-old policy director, Rhodes scholar, and Yale graduate for New Consensus, a non-profit that provides support for the passage for the Green New Deal's implementation (Northey, 2019). She crafted the nonbinding resolution and fleshed out details for the plan. Gunn-Wright is an African-American woman who strategically made efforts to include diverse identities into the goals of the plan. In a February 2019 interview with the hosts of the podcast *Pod Save America*, Gunn-Wright noted why this plan is urgent and necessary: "Sixty-six percent of asthma deaths in the country are women. Seventy-seven percent of African-Americans live within 30 miles of a coal fire power plant, and Black children, probably not coincidentally, die from asthma three times more than white children," (*Pod Save America* 6:49, 2019).

The nonbinding resolution makes great efforts to represent multiple identities and lived experiences that people face under the effects of climate change. Gunn-Wright stated that her position as a woman-of-color provides her with a way to make marginalized people a part of the conversation regarding climate change. Mann (2011) posits that class and race are intimately related to environmental hazards and that marginalized populations face more environmental injustices. Strategically centering groups that are oppressed so that their problems and injustices can be heard is an important part of the Green New Deal. Economics, infrastructure, jobs and providing justice to those that need to transition from institutional processes that negatively affect them is a major component made apparent that was not before in terms of environmental justice and the Green New Deal.

**Message adversity to climate change and the Green New Deal.** Research shows that misinformation regarding the science of climate change threatens public engagement online. As such, those that are in power and control of a specific issue have the duty to uphold its integrity (Donner, 2017). The entanglement of divisive discourse that occurs online is a feature of this study. Other research shows that accusations against political candidates is the result of media bias and a fragmented media structure that pits one candidate against another (Feldman et al., 2015). This complicated milieu is a feature that is considered throughout the study. AOC, as a woman-of-color politician and the voice leading much of the conversation about the Green New Deal, greatly frames how it is perceived. Additionally, the result of the Green New Deal denial by Congress members greatly affected its perception by individuals who disagree with in the digital space. Sixty Democrats initially endorsed the GND, but in March of 2019 Senate members voted against the GND while Democrats called the vote a sham. There were no outside perspectives or testimony to speak about the resolution (Amadeo, 2019).

Despite the lack of approval in the Senate, several states are moving forward to adopt individual versions of the GND. In January of 2020, 14 California lawmakers announced their plans to echo the goals in Markey and Ocasio-Cortez's GND. Some of the goals of the California resolution include addressing homelessness while also lowering carbon emissions (Romero, 2020). Maine, Illinois, New Mexico, and Oregon also adopted similar goals to help with job training, infrastructure improvements, and more (Sierra Club, 2020). Although partisan conflict affects how the GND might operate at a national level, lawmakers at the state and local level may have more success in convincing constituents of its effectiveness.

In November of 2019, AOC partnered with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders for a new iteration of policy implementation, the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act. This act

promises to “retrofit, rehabilitate, and decarbonize the entire nation’s public housing stock,” (Sanders, 2020, p. 1). The hope for the housing project is to transform energy infrastructure for weatherization and renewable energy. Grant programs will assist in job creation, and to upgrade unsafe structures (Sanders, 2020). This new iteration of the GND will create new conversations on Twitter to be analyzed and explored, but is not a main piece examined for this study. AOC’s acknowledgment of underserved populations is a constant thread present throughout the goals of the GND and the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act. Her platform as an opinion leader and ecofeminist sets the stage for new insights generated online.

A timeline of events presented in Table 1 below provide an understanding for how the GND and events surrounding its proposal have evolved over time. This timeline can guide how actors and events online shape the conversation about the GND, and the trajectory of the proposal as a whole.

**Table 1. Timeline of events related to the Green New Deal and AOC.**

Date	Event
November 6, 2018	AOC becomes the youngest woman elected to the House of Representatives.
November 13, 2018	AOC joins Sunrise Movement activists who organize a sit-in outside of Nancy Pelosi’s office to demand that Pelosi select a climate action committee (Grim & Gray, 2018).
February 7, 2019	AOC and Senator Ed Markey hold a press conference to announce their plan for the Green New Deal (Kurtzleben, 2019).
February 23, 2019	School students from the Sunrise Movement go to California Senator Diane Feinstein’s office to ask for support of the Green New Deal. Feinstein said the GND is “too expensive and won’t receive a vote” (McKibben, 2019).
February 28, 2019	Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi calls the Green New Deal too broad and unfocused (Croucher, 2019).

March 26, 2019	Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell forces a vote for the Green New Deal. 57 senators vote “against” the resolution and 43 democrats and independents vote “present” to avoid going on the record about a bill that would not pass. The vote is called a “political stunt” (Pramuk, 2019).
July 2019	President Donald Trump tells four Congresswomen “Squad” members (AOC, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Talib and Ayanna Pressley) to “go back to the corrupt countries where they came from” on Twitter prompting a discussion about racism and the merit of the women (Yglesias, 2019).
November 2019	AOC and Senator Bernie Sanders announce the “Green New Deal for Public Housing,” a bill that will decarbonize and modernize public housing stock for individuals (H.R. 53, 2019).
January 2020	Fourteen Democratic California lawmakers announce the creation of the California Green New Deal Act, which will address homelessness, drought, wildfires, and public housing (Romero, 2020).
January 2020	Democratic presidential candidates endorse the GND – including moderates Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, and Amy Klobuchar (Lavelle, 2019).

The previous events provide context about how AOC and the GND are situated in the current political climate. Questions remain with how different principles of the GND will be implemented in the future; however the current administration is doing the opposite. President Donald Trump has left a legacy of relaxing many Obama-era environmental regulations. Most recently, the Trump administration said it would weaken auto emissions standards, arguing that the car industry will be able to make cars quicker and safer for Americans (Rott & Ludden, 2020). 2020 presidential hopefuls did voice their concerns about the environment in a February televised debate. Various candidates spent 15 minutes discussing their plans for climate change,

primarily focusing on economic solutions (Aton 2020). Bernie Sanders, a former presidential candidate hopeful AOC endorsed is vocal about the positive impacts the GND could have, and has it as a key issue on his website (Sanders 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is also a cause for concern for the health and safety for many marginalized communities and the environment. The social distancing and lockdown measures implemented for the pandemic have significantly altered total emissions for the US. Many major cities have seen pollution decreases from 30 to 60 percent (Thiessen, 2020). However, poorer communities that do not have as many resources or control of their environment are more subject to diseases like COVID-19. Communities of color are also more likely to have pre-existing conditions like diabetes or heart disease, which can increase the chances of a person catching the COVID-19 virus (Benfer & Wiley, 2020). In Chicago, Black residents are six times as likely to die from the virus than white residents, and 68.6 percent of total COVID-19 deaths in Chicago are Black (Reyes et. al, 2020). While COVID-19 doesn't have direct connections to the GND and how it might be implemented in the future, it does provide proof that environmental, social, and economic justice are all linked when challenging situations such as the COVID-19 global pandemic occurs.

Additionally, the Flint Water Crisis is another example of how social, economic, and racial issues are interlinked with environmental issues. When Flint switched its water supply to the Flint River in 2014 to curb costs, it did not test or treat water properly, prompting an increase in lead levels within the water (Denchak, 2018). Flint is a poor and predominantly Black community and 40 percent of residents live below the poverty line making the impacts of the water crisis much more severe for residents. As of March 2020, it was reported that many residents in Flint still refuse to drink tap water. Additionally, in 2017, "the percentage of third

graders in Flint who passed Michigan’s standardized literacy test dropped from 41% to 10%,” (Alfonsi, 2020, p. 1). This drop was attributed to the impacts of the water crisis on the community. This huge education barrier shows that there is a link to how environmental issues affect people in communities, and those that are underserved suffer more significantly when environmental issues are left untreated. Ecofeminism urges political actors to acknowledge these various injustices, and come up with better solutions to help people. The GND can serve as a document to hold actors accountable.

### **Ecofeminism as a Call to Move Policies Forward**

**Ecofeminism as a transformative movement.** Emerging in the early 1970s, ecofeminism was originally at the intersection of both the environmentalist and feminist movements (Allison, 2010). Ecofeminism acknowledges that the patriarchal nature of the treatment of the planet is in correlation with the oppression of women.

According to Lahar (1996), ecofeminism calls for “the deconstruction of oppressive social, economic, and political systems and the reconstruction of more viable social and political forms” (p. 15). With a combination of political action and creative solutions to address oppression, there is no “one size fits all” solution (Lahar, 1996). Ecofeminism works against the dominant worldview and social structures that oppress women. The hierarchical framework that determines how individuals speak, govern, and conduct science around nature is ignoring other narratives that should be considered (Sandilands, 1999). Another perspective to consider when thinking of oppressive structures is the treatment of animals. Carol Adams is a scholar that claims that animals can be equally “othered” in the ecofeminist equation. The power dynamic of humans eating and using animals as a means is identified as one of Adams’ core praxis of

ecofeminist scholarship. Given the ecological and social impacts of eating animals, Adams said that human cannot put animals in subordination by eating them (Adams, 1991).

Scholars argue that values traditionally associated with women like caring are beneficial for ecofeminism but may pose risks within politics. This position may not be effective enough to achieve effective social change (MacGregor, 2004). Ecofeminism recognizes intersecting systems of oppression and urges that the liberation of women and nature are both necessary (Gaard, 1997). Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" and Lois Gibbs' activism related to the pollution of Love Canal are some examples of women acknowledging the dangers of the destruction of the environment that led to the momentum of the movement (Gaard, 2017). Another turning point of the ecofeminist movement is marked by the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (WEDO) in Rio De Janeiro that drew more than 1500 women from 83 countries. This event was an attempt to build a Women's Action Agenda which was proposed to address issues related to consumption, technology, external debt and population growth. Though the event was successful in some ways, it still did not create meaningful solutions to address women solving climate issues (Gaard, 2015).

Another critique of ecofeminism is that the literature is mainly written by white western women. The voices left out of contemporary discussions regarding ecofeminism may be a reflection of its initial creation with an academic focus. Mainly coming out interdisciplinary literature from the 1990s, ecofeminism has the capacity to resurge as a perspective for how people view climate change in a contemporary setting. Climate change issues have changed significantly since this time, meaning there is might be a need to update its purpose. In the time of #MeToo and increasing pressure to be inclusive of multiple identities, ecofeminism sits at the intersection of these cultural shifts. AOC herself has never used the term to describe herself or

her principles, however the initial concept applies to how she speaks about the GND, and her own identity. This study provides support and confirms if ecofeminism is an appropriate view to look at climate change events occurring contemporarily.

Specific women and activist groups cropped up to support climate change awareness and leadership in 2019 alone. The Sunrise Movement established itself in 2019 as a way to mobilize young people and influence political decisions regarding climate change. The organization's belief is that the Green New Deal is the only viable solution to "address the interwoven climate catastrophe, economic inequality, and racism at the scale that science and justice demand," (Sunrise Movement, 2019, p. 1). Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a firm supporter of the work of the Sunrise Movement, and the organization uses her support as a way to advance goals within the movement. AOC even joined members of the Sunrise Movement at a sit-in outside House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office to demand that House Democrats adopt the Green New Deal (Nwanevu, 2019).

The Sunrise Movement's activism is an attempt to move the Democratic Party even further to the left, and they employ savvy tactics when directly confronting politicians. Astead Herndon is a reporter for the *New York Times* and featured in an August 2019 episode, "Hard Left" from the Hulu series *The Weekly*—which follows timely subject matters in depth. Herndon interviews members of the Sunrise Movement, including Executive Director Varshini Prakash, who is inspired by AOC. In one part of the episode when Sunrise activists stage a sit-in and AOC shows up, Prakash said of AOC, "I've never had an experience where I felt like a politician had my back in a deep way," (Stark & Herndon, 2019). By AOC showing up to these events, she is standing in solidarity with activists and making an effort to change the dynamics of the Democratic Party. The activism of the Sunrise Movement is impressive. At the 2019 Democratic

Convention activists used confrontational tactics like putting politicians on the spot to make the sign the New Fossil Fuel Pledge. There is no doubt that the ways in which AOC backs this movement, and how the movement backs the GND has a huge impact on how climate change is discussed both in the news media and online.

AOC is also a part of “The Squad” a group of women-of-color Congresswomen elected in 2018; the group is subject to attack by both Trump, and Republican right-leaning media. The four women share similar progressive ideas (Sullivan, 2020). Along with AOC, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota’s issues include adopting Medicare For All, getting rid of the “Muslim ban,” and passing the Green New Deal (Omar, 2020); Rashida Tlaib of Michigan advocates for environmental justice and small businesses (Tlaib, 2020); and Ayanna Presley of Massachusetts stands up for trauma justice, energy/environmental issues and Veterans (Presley, 2020). These women are constantly scrutinized for their ideas and status in American politics. Their positions as women in politics who suffer constant scrutiny from people like the President offer a glimpse into sexist actions that still affect women in power. While ecofeminism does call for women to be in positions of power, the cultural ideologies that surround how these women operate define how they act as leaders.

Other powerful woman-identified opinion leaders serve as strong examples for how advocating for change plays a role in society and for the environment. Historically, women have led change such as “Silent Spring” author Rachel Carson, primatologist Jane Goodall, and Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman who led the Green Belt Movement and taught other women how to plant trees. She was also the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (Nobel Prize, 2019). These women are often looked at as strong leaders who represent the ecofeminist movement and use their knowledge to create change as the theory calls for.

Contemporarily, there are various other modern environmental woman-identified activists making their voices heard on the digital space. Autumn Peltier is a 15-year-old Indigenous Water Warrior and member of the Wikwemikong First Nation in Canada. She attends high profile events like addressing the UN General Assembly about water rights and urges leaders to protect water for tribes. She met with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and confronted him about his support for pipeline projects (Kelo, 2019). The activist has an audience of over 116,000 on Instagram (Peltier, 2020) and is a proven powerful opinion leader capable of creating change.

Another young activist that creates change is Greta Thunberg, a 17-year-old Swedish climate change activist, led strikes and marches globally in 2019 to protest the lack of action for climate change issues (Greta Thunberg, 2019). Ocasio-Cortez and Thunberg were featured in a candid conversation in a June 2019 article in *The Guardian*. The article is an articulate representation of how the two women are both leaders and activists in the climate movement. They both share similar sentiments about the urgency to act, how they make change as young leaders, and how climate policy should be an issue at the forefront of discussion (Brockes, 2019). This clear identification of how both AOC and Thunberg communicate about climate issues is a main factor as to why they are both successful in terms of climate activism. With that success, there still comes criticism and doubt. Understanding AOC's power as a united force to fight against climate change will reveal how her opinion leaderships fleshes out online.

Despite these impactful movements that seek change, there is still a stark gender divide in the way that women are treated in relation to the environment. Research shows that women perceive environmental risks as more threatening, are more active in environmental reform projects (Ergas & York, 2012), but are underrepresented in areas of climate change policy

(Albert & Roehr, 2006). In an international context, women in Latin America advocate for “buen vivir,” a recognition for the coexistence of humans and other living things, and a rejection for capitalistic perspectives related to solving climate change (Cochrane, 2014). Although women have a special relationship with the environment and their connections bear a strong significance globally (Gaard, 2017), women are missing from important conversations and leadership positions that impacts the environment.

Historically, women are faced with double standards in society, characterized as “double binds” by Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995). Particularly with woman-identified politicians, someone such as AOC faces the “Womb/Brain” bind. This bind suggests that women have black and white choices, in which they must prioritize one positive decision over another negative one. For example, Jamieson says that women who “chose to exercise their intellects in public life upended the natural order, endangered the family, and called into question whether they were really women,” (p. 17). These characterizations influenced by years of oppressive structures makes it difficult for someone like AOC to voice her opinions and construct policy. This research shows that the public will still hold her to differing standards that are opposite of what men may face. There could be increased criticism online for how AOC might need to correctly communicate information.

Despite these challenges, according to Gaard (2015), women have special knowledge and agency as decision-makers in solving problems related to climate change. Giacomini et al. (2018) argue that ecofeminism is a fight against capitalism and believe a turning point for the rise of the movement was after Trump’s presidential victory in 2016. Key climate scientists also agree that in order to not go above the recommended 2 degrees Celsius planet warming, capitalistic solutions cannot be the only option (Klein, 2019). Ecofeminism embodies the idea

that capitalistic solutions to climate issues may not be the sole solution for change. However, Anderson & Sheeler (2014) argue that women within politics still find it difficult to create a political identity and build political coalitions. Gaard (2015) makes it clear in her literature that women must become more involved in policy decisions and exist at the forefront of climate issues, while simultaneously working to dispel masculine gender influences that permeate how the environment is treated and othered within the global economy. This study explains how AOC exposes various principles related to ecofeminism such as addressing climate effects for vulnerable populations, green economies that benefit people, food justice movements that also support sustainable agriculture, and overall mentions of inclusivity and justness in the Green New Deal's framework.

#### **Four Key Ecofeminist Themes**

Four overall key themes show how environmental discourse can be framed around ecofeminist principles.

##### **Theme 1: Environmental justice**

Environmental justice in regard to increasing the equity of other people, making sure people have fair access to jobs, and acknowledging the power relationships that stem from the complexities of environmental issues is analyzed in this study, providing contextual information related to ecofeminism, and how the acknowledgment of inequity between classes of people operates within this role. Environmental justice for oppressed people is mentioned as both a key principle for ecofeminism, and also is highlighted with the Green New Deal proposal. Much can be understood about how the progression of ecofeminism digitally, specifically with how environmental justice is used. The GND does have very specific goals for environmental justices and marginalized communities. The effects of how this information will be translated and

communicated to publics online will provide new insights into how policy promotion operates in an online setting.

### **Theme 2: Gender scrutiny**

In an online space, individuals can remain relatively anonymous with how and why they communicate information. As said previously in the literature review, AOC is a political figure often associated with division and divisive politics. In scholarship related to how men and women hold roles within politics, women were traditionally seen as emotional, with a lack of ability to reason in making decisions. This historical legacy of alleged differences in power has a significant impact in how women can achieve power within the political structure. Individuals scrutinize or praise AOC's decisions in regard to progressive values and policy propositions. This dichotomy may create an environment online that reinforces particular stereotypes and criticisms that exist in the online space. Comments are read in the study to determine the overall perception of AOC's messages.

### **Theme 3: Female empowerment**

A key principle of ecofeminism is that women must advance in upper-level positions within politics to achieve a more equal society (Gaard, 2015). AOC won a seat in the House of Representatives and has immense power within her position in Congress. Research by Schneider & Bos (2014) showed that people view women politicians as assertive and as having communal qualities in political leadership. Study participants of the study found that they were familiar with many female politicians, perhaps because they were seen as minorities. Although this research is important, this study provides new perspectives on how people like AOC respond on their social media platforms to other women who are in power. This study explores how AOC supports other women who advocate for the Green New Deal. Showing support in the overall conversation

related to the principles of the Green New Deal displays that she is trying to make a difference with the political ecosystem while also advancing a key goal of ecofeminism.

#### **Theme 4: Relationships to constituency**

A fourth important theme explored within this study is how AOC does or does not develop relationships with her constituency on Twitter. This particular theme has many iterations, such how she responds to Twitter users, retweets from fellow politicians, and her relations with Twitter users who leave replies on her tweets. Since women politicians tend to have stronger relationships with their Twitter audiences, the added element of incorporating a political policy into the mix will be understood to see how this strengthens or disrupts bonds. This theme also provides a good indicator of how AOC discusses the Green New Deal with relatable tactics like sharing videos or speaking herself.

**Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as the face of the Green New Deal.** Unlike many of her political counterparts, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's background before entering the political world is unique. Coming from a working-class family, she worked as a waitress in a bar prior to entering the 2018 race in order to help her family financially with the loss of her father (Biography, 2019). Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 win in New York's 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district was a major focus of mainstream media. Her race was particularly discussed because she was the youngest-elected woman to the US Congress, being only 28 at the time. As a Democratic Socialist, she unseated Joe Crowley, who had held the seat since 2004 (Zhou, 2018).

AOC's dominant role as the face of the GND and as an ecofeminist, are assessed to see how the advancement of the ecofeminist movement plays a large part in how she shares information on Twitter. According to Gupta (2019), AOC is using her role as a Democratic Socialist to advance goals of environmental justice. Her intersectional role within politics means

she provides a distinct viewpoint about the GND. She claims her indigenous and Puerto Rican heritage to be a large part of who she is, but nothing at the same time (Gupta, 2019). This means that AOC uses her identity in a way to relate with other individuals. AOC sees herself through this intersectional viewpoint, but still possesses the confidence to break through barriers and lead a powerful effort like the GND. The ways in which she positions herself as the spokesperson of the GND will reveal the role of gender in the discussion. Ocasio-Cortez has 5.7 million Twitter followers (Ocasio-Cortez, 2019) and can push certain policy platforms to an audience that wants to consume the information she provides. Understanding how AOC'S ecofeminism functions in the digital space will show how GND conversations are generated online and how she reaches constituents.

### **Online Technologies and Two-Step Flow Theory in the 21st century on Twitter**

**Two-Step Flow Theory as a guiding point for Twitter usage.** Katz & Lazarsfeld originally created Two-Step Flow Theory in the 1950s to provide an understanding of how opinion leaders receive their information and the flow of media messages in society. Opinion leaders then contextualize information related to tone and sentiment for their own audiences (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). As new technologies converge and are updated to fit into a new media context, this theory can be applied to understand how opinion leaders function in the digital space. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Twitter is a powerful, quicker opportunity for messages to diffuse to followers. In a similar way that the original theory proposes, Twitter opinion leaders pass along information to their followers and make it particularly relevant to their audiences (Winter & Neubaum, 2016). AOC is doing this by passing along information about the Green New Deal to audiences that follow her on Twitter. Vaccari & Valeriani (2015) argue that politicians communicate with their followers both directly and indirectly. Politicians

communicate directly by publishing messages to users that follow them, and indirectly when users retweet messages to their followers. However, the audiences that follow particular politicians may engage with content in different ways. Users actively choose the content that they want to be exposed to, creating an environment that transverses borders of the original Two-Step Flow Theory. This updated version of the original theory allows for faster communication, responses, and divisions in the discourse of the platform.

**Digital opinion leader characteristics.** Katz and Lazarsfeld's original vision for Two Step Flow Theory, proposed many different characteristics that make opinion leaders uniquely able to be of influence within different contexts. Some of these characteristics include having a large social circle, and frequent mass media use (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This is still relevant to current opinion leaders who may use social networking sites to spread information about political policies or other information to their audiences. Opinion leaders on Twitter still must have strong social ties and high involvement in the discussions online. Message diffusion and retweets are also important indicators of the success of an opinion leader online (Bastos, Raimundo & Travitski, 2013). There is also evidence that these opinion leaders have the ability to influence follower attitudes, behaviors, and signal how others should act. Opinion leadership can also be looked at as a way of delegating power or responsibility to followers (Black, 1982). Thus, a politician like AOC could ask her followers to vote in certain ways and urge them to support particular issues. Current literature suggests that politicians, journalists, and bloggers can have the characteristics of an opinion leader (Dubois & Gaffney, 2014). With online communication such as Twitter, politicians can both rapidly diffuse information to the publics they serve, and also engage in self-expression with their audiences (Park & Kaye, 2016).

Women politicians and their presence online is also two-fold. Although women offer a sense of community and belonging online, they are also able to advance goals related to their own specific political work (Demirhan & Demirhan, 2014). Women-identified politicians hold a unique position with how they communicate with their publics on Twitter too (McGregor & Mourao, 2016). Women-identified politicians potentially have a stronger connection with the constituencies they intend to represent (McGregor & Mourao, 2016). Traditional stereotyped gender traits like compassion and caring may mean that the publics online perceive people like AOC in gendered ways. This may foster scrutiny if she acts in ways that do not match those particular gender traits. This has the potential to have an impact on the reception of her communication and goals.

AOC's purpose as a politician on the Twitter space comes with different ways that she chooses to present information about the GND. It can be assumed that as a person in the public eye, AOC has a strategic way of how and when she communicates with her Twitter audience, particularly important policy information she wants the public to understand related to the resolution. Research shows that in digital spaces like YouTube and Instagram, creators try to convince their audiences to purchase certain products or communicate information based on their perceived credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise.

Particularly for vloggers on platforms like YouTube, they are responsible for bringing in new items, materials, and information (Ladhari, Massa, & Skandrani, 2020). While AOC may not be looking to sell the public on a material object, her brand is trying to sell the public about a policy decision. The strategic way in which she spreads this information online can be interpreted as her way of pitching to the public about why the GND is a good idea to adopt. The ways in which a vlogger can effectively promote information on YouTube or another social media

platform is built over time, particularly as viewers gain the capability to recognize and recirculate content (Berryman & Kavka, 2016). With AOC's large platform on social media, constituents can begin to trust and see her a credible force to continue to promote information about the GND.

**Twitter's role in political conversation.** Twitter provides an effective platform for politicians to build connections with their audiences and also a space to promote and share information related to their political policies and ideas related to their platforms. Twitter is considered a "microblogging platform" meaning that users can create and post short status updates (Fiander, 2012). Users also have the ability to create hashtags, respond to, and retweet other Twitter posts. Research shows that sites like Twitter are more inclusive of audiences than static websites that politicians might use and allows citizens to become more engaged with the content presented to them (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Twitter also makes it possible for Twitter followers to be "citizen marketers" in the way that they take it upon themselves to popularize memes, hashtags and slogans for favorite candidates. For example, past election seasons circulated popular euphemisms like #BabesForBernie, or the "Obama is My Homeboy" meme (Penney, 2017). It is also necessary within opinion leadership research to include both primary and secondary audiences when discussing the impacts of politicians and the tweets they produce (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). The primary audience might be more targeted followers with a vested interest in the political candidate, while secondary audiences learn about a candidate from a retweet. The power behind how information is spread online in the political world is undeniably influential.

**Climate policy effects on the Internet.** With digital platforms like Twitter arising to inform, educate, and move people towards political action and participation, the power behind its

ability to influence opinion is great. Political organizations such as MoveOn.org and 350.org emerged because of the increased mobility due to engagement with online audiences (Hestres, 2015). The popular emergence of these organizations on social media platforms reveals support for environmental issues in a popular context. Online platforms offer various publics the ability to engage with environmental topics related to the Green New Deal and engage with other publics also taking part in online conversations about environmental justice.

The public's response in relation to scientific information and Two Step Flow is an part of some interesting digital phenomena. Individuals obtain and spread information about certain topics in unique ways that can impact the trajectory of conversation. Kahan (2017) says that the "science communication problem" is the "failure of scientific evidence to quiet disputes over policy-relevant facts," (p. 36). In online conversation, individuals might find ways to dispute scientific facts about the GND and what it strives for. This conundrum raises the question of whether individuals can be influenced or persuaded by scientific facts represented to them, or if they stick by their deeply held beliefs. Individuals also rely on emotionally laden information presented, and often lack the ability to comprehend science in general (Kahan, 2017). The results of this study will provide further understanding of how scientific policies operate with disapproving publics online.

### **Research Questions**

The literature represented in this study raises many important questions about how ecofeminism functions in the Twitter space with a popular woman-identified politician of color leading the GND movement. There are many nuances that exist between the Twitter platform, interactions between users, and cultural implications of how the Green New Deal is represented online. The following research questions seek to answer these curiosities.

**RQ1:** How does Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez employ ecofeminism in conversations about the Green New Deal on Twitter?

**RQ2:** What primary elements of ecofeminism and environmental justice are featured in tweets featuring the hashtag #GreenNewDeal

**RQ3:** What are the power dynamics of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez functioning as a woman-identified Latina opinion-leader online?

**RQ4:** How do Twitter responses from users affect the trajectory of conversation about the Green New Deal within the platform?

These questions seek to understand how ecofeminism and opinion leadership function within the context of a highly contested political proposition in the Twitter space. This exploration of how the platform intersects these subjects will provide a greater understanding of the dynamics of ecofeminism and how a woman politician advocates for support online.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODS

To explore the interconnections between Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as an ecofeminist opinion-leader, it was necessary to explore the various considerations of Twitter as a platform that has its own cultural and ideological framework. Critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) was the method of choice for this study. CTDA is a multimodal technique, used to explore digital phenomena, artifacts, and cultural ideology. The method is equipped to tackle any topic within a critical cultural framework in a study. Also, CTDA is structured to explore how ideology and cultural meaning are produced through online technologies like Twitter.

### **Explanation of Method**

In Brock's (2018) article describing the three-pronged approach of CTDA, interface (technology) analysis is the first step of the process. Twitter was examined to determine how AOC uses the social networking site to communicate the various ideals of the GND. The parts of the technology that were included in analysis were: the features that enable opinion-leaders and followers to create and upload content onto Twitter; the types of content such as videos, infographics, memes, or other digital artifacts used; and, how AOC and followers might employ retweets and hashtags to convey GND related information. Interface analysis enables examinations of how the various features of Twitter can be used to advance specific ideologies. For example, Twitter users are able to upload images like infographics onto the platform; this interface feature allows users to spread messages embedded with certain ideologies. Interface analysis permits the study of how AOC uses Twitter features to advance ecofeminist principles about the GND.

Secondly, user interactions (technological practice) was examined to see how meaning is created and reinforced within the use of the platform. This includes examination of how opinion-leaders and followers respond to content uploaded to the platform, the context in which followers praise or scrutinize a political candidate, or the meanings behind retweets. Studying technological practice, namely user interactions, facilitates understandings of not only Twitter's interface features, but how audiences use and respond to the messages that the features enable. For example, users may use hashtag functions in response to AOC to defend their own personal beliefs that are opposite of AOC's. Understanding these user elements will reveal how AOC is connected to her audience and how audiences respond to the information she provides about the Green New Deal.

Finally, any cultural considerations (cultural ideology) established within the platform that provide greater ecofeminist meanings related to the Green New Deal were explored. The main purpose of this analytical area was to explore how gender dynamics and ecofeminist ideologies operate in the Twitter-sphere. The way that Twitter is used to build or divide a community in relation to a contested political policy was also of interest. Additionally, how AOC frames herself as an opinion leader online in relation to her audience and the ecofeminist ideas she espouses create a unique environment to analyze.

To accomplish this method, Twitter data from AOC's account were scraped from January 2019 to January 2020. Scraping is the process of collecting a sample of tweets from a certain time or category. Any mentions of #GreenNewDeal were analyzed and coded to understand how this hashtag functions for a woman-identified opinion leader in a technological space. Several themes were examined to glean how the various elements of ecofeminism arise in conjunction with conversations generated on AOC's Twitter account. This data was then analyzed according

to the three prongs of CTDA, which provide a view of the functions and articulations that this platform holds.

**Table 2. CTDA Explanation: The form and function of Twitter facilitates specific ways to analyze how AOC and users communicate.**

Interface/Platform →	Practice/Artifacts →	Culture/Ideology (both interface and practice influence the cultural ideology of the platform) →
Microblogging in 280 characters	Microblogging	Microblogging for political candidates
Post images, memes, videos, GIFS	Comments/replies	Environmental justice principles
Hashtags	Likes	Gender scrutiny
Geotags	Retweets	Female empowerment
Conduct polls	Direct messages	Relationships to constituency
Create threads	Reply/comment	Political divisions
@ people	Editing images	Economic values
Reply/comment	Using specific hashtags	Humor/sarcasm
Like and retweet	Creating memes	Racism

### **Theoretical Framework of the Method**

Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) is a relatively new method used for any type of critical cultural research. Developed by Andre Brock (2018), the first use of this method revealed how Black populations used cultural references and avenues for political action within Twitter. By looking at AOC and the implications of communication about a political policy on Twitter, a greater understanding was developed about what topics are situated within

the discussion. When examining technology, technological practice and cultural considerations in situ, CTDA analyzes how power relations as a backbone to these areas of analysis helps understandings of and the interplay between each.

Qualitative research in the specific contexts of political communication and the study of digital phenomena are appropriate for this particular study for several reasons. The broader category of political communication incorporates a way of understanding how to measure the legitimacy and agency of governing institutions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Historically, this was examined with campaign events and political polls. This research study is a useful way of understanding the approach of political communication in the overall sphere of the online space. Additionally, qualitative research is an effective way of understanding political communication in a rapidly changing online environment.

Another important way to understand the purpose behind the methodology of this study is understanding digital materiality. Digital artifacts help us “think about, organize, and co-create representations in virtual space,” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 285). With qualitative research, it is important to investigate the way a user might understand and use a web interface from their own perspective. When using CTDA, power relations and social systems built into a platform are uncovered. Research that uses CTDA as a method make it apparent that these social differences have an impact on the platform and the users who participate in its functions. Approaching this study with both this mindset and framework will reveal how these concepts can work together seamlessly.

### **Data Collection**

The overall process of gathering data for this study depended on how many types of tweets could be collected with the hashtag #GreenNewDeal from January 2019 to January 2020.

Several important steps were employed to accurately collect and interpret the data with Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Pretest.** The initial pretest for this study was conducted using Ilhan Omar's Twitter account. Omar was chosen because she endorsed the Green New Deal as a policy on her platform and she has similar progressive beliefs as AOC. Ten Omar tweets featuring the hashtag #GreenNewDeal from the span of January 2019 to January 2020 were used for this pretest to understand the tweet content, replies, and themes explored. The four key ecofeminist themes were used as a guiding point to interpret the material found within Omar's tweets. Additionally, any emerging themes that came across, such as economic justice and racist remarks were tracked in a separate sheet spreadsheet. Using this information from these tweets, an initial codebook resulting from analyzing Omar's tweets comprised several categories for the actual study with AOC.

**Data and codebook creation.** The next step of data collection was scraping any tweet that mentioned the GND from January 2019 to January 2020 on AOC's Twitter account using qualitative software NVivo's NCapture tool. The reasoning for this particular timeframe is that AOC was elected in November of 2018, and the official launch of the Green New Deal nonbinding resolutions occurred in February of 2019. In total, 48 tweets with the hashtag #GreenNewDeal were selected out of a pool of 111 tweets from January 2019 to January 2020. The first three replies of each tweet were included to gain an understanding of user replies to each individual conversation in the study. The first three responses were considered because they offer insight from the outside public about reactions towards the policy changes AOC is trying to implement. This provides an understanding of what led up to the announcement of the Green

New Deal, and how public perceptions may or may not have affected conversation about many of its goals. The total tweets scraped and analyzed for this study came out to be 148 (n = 148).

The coding process took approximately four weeks.

**Codes.** The codes used in this study guided what could be related to ecofeminism, opinion leadership, and other emerging themes such as racist remarks, economic justice, and skepticism/denial/deflection that to represent the culture and interactions within the content presented on Twitter. An Excel spreadsheet was created to organize data and findings (see Appendix A.) Four initial categories tracked tweet date, number of likes, number of comments, and number of retweets. A tweet content category tracked AOC's tweet, the meaning behind it, and what kinds of images she used. In CTDA, this category corresponds with technology. The tweet artifacts category tracked what kinds of hashtags, emojis, tags, and links AOC used. This category falls within technology practice according to CTDA. A comment content category tracked what the Twitter user said in their reply, in context of the original tweet by AOC, corresponding to technology. Finally, comment interface artifacts were a category and written as a category to look for hashtags, memes, emojis, symbols and more.

According to the four themes related to ecofeminism, categories were created to track aspects of Environmental Justice, Gender Scrutiny, Female Empowerment, and any Constituency Relationships. Other themes that emerged through coding were also tracked in separate categories. These tracked emergent themes included: the Science of Climate Change, Skepticism/Denial/Deflection of Tweets, Racism Related to Candidate, Humor/Sarcasm, Green New Deal in Relation to Community Support, Mentions of the Climate Crisis/Apocalyptic/Strong Language, Conversations About Economic Justice, Mentions of

Socialism, and Us vs. Them Political Divisions. The number of times the theme appears in each category is listed in the tables below.

**Table 3. Ecofeminist themes and frequencies**

<b>Ecofeminist Theme</b>	<b>Frequency (n=)</b>
<b>Environmental Justice</b> (any tweet that mentions environmental justice for people/others, and marginalized groups).	6
<b>Gender Scrutiny</b> (A tweet reply that criticizes the candidate on the basis of gender).	Explicit gender bias = 8 Implicit gender bias = 21
<b>Female Empowerment</b> (A tweet or reply drawing attention to or showing solidarity with a female candidate).	10
<b>Constituency Relationships</b> (A tweet or reply where AOC directly calls out her constituents).	12

**Table 4. Emergent themes**

<b>Emergent Theme</b>	<b>Frequency (n=)</b>
<b>Science of Climate Change</b>	13
<b>Skepticism/Denial/Deflection</b>	29
<b>Racist Remarks</b>	1
<b>Humor/Sarcasm</b>	3

<b>Green New Deal and Community Support</b>	7
<b>Climate Crisis/Apocalyptic/Strong Language</b>	8
<b>Economic Justice</b>	8
<b>Mentions of Socialism</b>	10
<b>Us vs. Them Political Divisions</b>	3

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

### **A Display of Ideas – Interface and Artifacts Analysis**

Developing an understanding of how the overall interface platform operates, as well as the artifacts available in accordance to how Twitter users can maneuver them is a foundational aspect of CTDA. Brock (2018) notes that within CTDA, the researcher should look at data as if they are texts in relation to how the user partakes with them. Many of the artifacts used circle back towards asserting particular cultural beliefs that relate to ecofeminism later in analysis. A critical understanding of how both the interface and artifacts are represented can influence how practice and cultural ideologies are analyzed.

**AOC's tweet content.** Twitter as a platform enables AOC to communicate in a variety of ways with her audience. Using a public dynamic platform, AOC chose to push the narrative of the GND in many ways within her tweets. In the 48 tweets examined for this study, 38 were retweets from other Twitter users, politicians, or policy experts. To establish credibility and as a response to conversation happening about the GND in the mainstream media, she often retweeted articles from news sites like The Huffington Post, The Guardian, or Vox. AOC also aligned herself as a progressive by publishing retweets from a group called Justice Democrats and by promoting her appearance on the MSNBC talk show “All In with Chris Hayes.” AOC also used emojis in 31 of her tweets and tagged people using the “@” symbol 11 times. She used emojis as a way to highlight or emphasize the topic. For example, she frequently used the Earth emoji, recycling emoji, or arrow pointing down emoji to emphasize the points she made related to the environmental issues of the GND. She often used the arrow pointing down emoji to point to an article she retweeted and almost as a “signal” to direct the reader to read it. She never posted videos or streams of her talking

to her audience, which may or may not be a functional limitation of Twitter, included with the fact that she may instead use this feature on Instagram instead. Other tweets showed AOC at events like a St. Patrick’s Day Parade promoting the GND.

**Comment content.** The audiences who chose to reply to AOC’s tweets used artifacts in highly specific ways. Emojis, memes, and GIFS were often used to elicit an emotional response. For example, a user might use a meme or a GIF of a person making a disgusted face, which was chosen as a response to the ideas in AOC’s tweet. Emojis were used similarly to show emotions, such as a sad, laughing, or disgusted face in response to what AOC is promoting in relation to the GND in her tweet. Other types of artifacts used included graphs and charts that illustrated differing viewpoints related to science or specific facts about climate change. Oftentimes, people who replied claimed that they “fixed” what AOC was trying to promote (Figure 1, 2019). For example, AOC revealed a set of posters specifically designed for the Green New Deal, inspired by posters



*Figure 1: A Twitter user manipulates an image of a GND poster to assert that AOC is a socialist.*

used to promote specific programs for FDR’s original New Deal. A person who replied to the tweet doctored the images in a red hue to associate her ideas with Communism and posters that were developed during that particular era. This subtle yet symbolic manipulation of AOC’s

original tweet showcases this Twitter user's thoughts and feelings about what AOC is implying. The user is asserting their own opinion and denial of the message AOC is trying to convey.

When individuals supported what AOC had to say in a specific tweet, they often echoed her thoughts regarding a policy or idea by using the hashtag #GreenNewDeal to align their ideas and support. Some users also provided a link to their own political campaign website or picture of their campaign posters as a reply to one of AOC's tweets. These Twitter users are subsequently building stronger constituent relations with AOC, which has the ability to strengthen ecofeminism as a movement. This cross-promotion shows that individuals are both agreeing with AOC's views related to the GND and also taking the opportunity to capitalize on any individuals who might be able to support them.

Graphs and charts were also used by Twitter users as a "fix" for what AOC communicated about the GND. When referring to science or economic issues related to the GND, users that did not agree with what AOC presented often had unique ways of representing their own viewpoints and science about the GND. On August 30, one user replied to a tweet and said that AOC is unable to achieve renewable energy goals outlined in the GND based on data from France and Germany attached as a chart in the tweet (Tweet 2, 2019). In this way, the user is using their own version of "science" to disagree with what AOC is saying. The reply to AOC's tweet was also unrelated to her own tweet, which was about the inspiration for the Green New Deal posters,

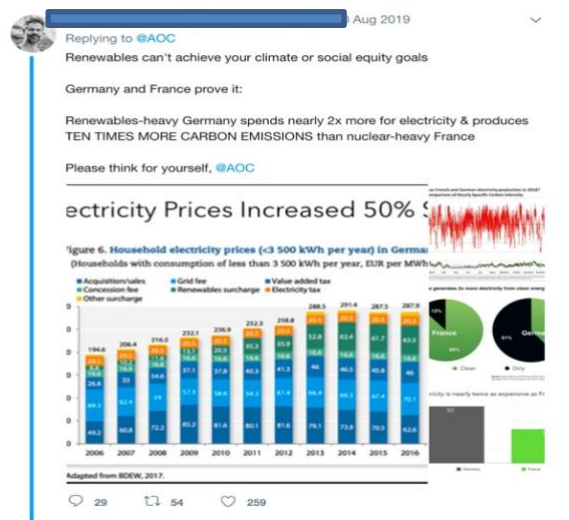


Figure 2: A Twitter user disagrees by presenting AOC with a chart about renewable energy.

originally inspired by the New Deal. Anderson & Sheeler (2014) said that the “polysemous, multivocal messaging made possible via social media demonstrates the hyperreality of postmodern political culture,” (p. 228). When individuals on Twitter provide a countering opinion that shapes the discourse around the topic, it evokes an instantaneous climate of what those individuals think about a certain politician and their ideas. In an unprecedented way, conversation and course of action can be developed by both opinion leader and follow.

### Who’s Agenda Is It? -- Interactions Analysis

CTDA’s second facet of analysis is interactions. Brock (2018) notes that meaning is created by how users interpret and use the artifacts in their own personal ways. Throughout the course of interactions analysis for this study, meaning was created as a larger representation of how an interface like Twitter can be operated to suit an individuals own personal agenda as seen through the weaponization and manipulation of artifacts like memes and GIFS. While not every Twitter reply featured specific artifacts that pointed to a specific agenda, there was significant polarization of beliefs and ideas on either side.

**Ecofeminism's role in interactions.** AOC consistently used the principles of ecofeminism to interact with her audience and other people who might have an opinion about the GND. AOC frequently refers to wildfires in Australia, droughts, and floods in her tweets to raise concern for the dangers of climate change (8). She is choosing to be an advocate for the environment at time when many destructive events are occurring. By raising awareness about these events, AOC can be an activist while also promoting the GND. Her role as an environmental leader is a huge part of why ecofeminism can be successful, and how she is using its tenets in her interactions.

**Rejection or support.** There was a stark contrast in how individuals on the platform chose to show their rejection or support of AOC. For rejecting AOC, users often went to extreme lengths to show their dismay or disgust with either AOC's policy proclamations or ideas. In one specific tweet written by AOC, she discussed an event where various stakeholders could meet to rally for the GND. The tweet reply features a person who criticized her for flying on an airplane to said event, saying that the rally will "literally accomplish nothing" (Tweet 11, 2019). Not only is this user disagreeing with AOC's tactics for promoting the GND as a viable policy option, he is also rejecting AOC's own personal decisions when it comes to travelling. It appears that there will always be consequences for a politician choosing to be vocal about decisions related to a policy, and users will always choose to be critical of choices made. This is also a form of gender scrutiny in that the person is directly relating AOC's actions to her failures as a politician. An eyeroll emoji, facepalm emoji, or GIF of a person making a grimacing face are all signals that individuals use to communicate their disagreement with a tweet about the GND that AOC is attempting to communicate. The subtle use of these artifacts in these interactions tell a bigger story about gender scrutiny and disgust towards AOC as an opinion leader.



Figure 3: A meme is used humorously to react to those who disagree with AOC.

Oppositely, Twitter users also choose to vocalize support for AOC in different ways. Some users even chose to acknowledge some of the negative comments directed at AOC by using creative memes to counteract the negativity. For example, one Twitter follower created a meme using characters from the cartoon comedy *South Park* to vocalize their support for AOC. The meme itself says “show us on the doll where the scary Ocasio-Cortez lady touched your fragile manhood” (Figure 3, 2019). By the user posting this tweet as a reply to AOC, they are humorously poking fun at other users who may get offended or act out of combativeness towards a tweet that AOC posts. Other ways that users show positivity and support to AOC are by using a thumbs up, smile, or flexing emoji to show agreeance and support for AOC’s push for the GND as a viable resolution. When using these specific emojis, they are empowering AOC as an ecofeminist to keep spreading her GND message. The emojis tell a more powerful story about how to encourage and support women online. Southwell (2014) notes that network size,

heterogeneity of users, and ideological stance all have the ability to affect the trajectory of conversation and response within Two Step Flow Theory online. The conversations that occur within the reply section of a tweet, are indicators of how the topic and subject are affecting the audience who views it. This public perception thermometer is an interesting gauge of the ideas and stances of the users who choose to reply to a tweet, whether they are supporting or rejecting her message.

**Weaponization of memes and GIFS.** Many of the Twitter users who did choose to respond to AOC tweets used the power of memes and GIFS in a specific way to align with their own viewpoints and agendas. Users would often use Photoshop and doctor up tweets that painted AOC and her ideas in a certain light if they did not agree with what she had to say. For example,



Figure 4: A manipulated image of AOC, Jill Stein, and Bernie Sanders.

one user reply claims that the Green New Deal is a “Trojan horse for socialism,” and photoshops images of AOC, Jill Stein, and Bernie Sanders onto the meme (Figure 4, 2019). The impact of this doctored meme has many layers of meaning that communicate this Twitter user’s point of view and agenda. The meme itself is quite detailed with what it is trying to espouse. Jill Stein, a 2016 presidential candidate, introduced her version of the GND as a major platform related to

her party that would focus on renewable energy (Stein, 2016). Through the Twitter reply, the user is implying that Stein is gifting AOC a socialist “pill” that will only focus on income redistribution. Bernie Sanders is featured in a glass of water, given the socialist pill.

The notion that three major figures dedicated to improving environmental policy are used by the Twitter user shows the very specific narrative being presented. The user is denying the viewpoint of the original tweet published by AOC on May 13, 2019. This tweet mentioned Republicans “publicly abandoning their climate science denial” (Tweet 12, 2019). Secondly, using the platform’s artifacts, the Twitter user is seeking further support with their point of view, or potentially facing further backlash. Whether or not the Twitter user tries to engage with the discourse either positively or negatively is a direct reflection of how they try to expel their beliefs to the public online.

**Acknowledgment of political actors.** An important finding throughout the course of AOC’s communication online is how she selectively engages with allies or members of the opposing party when discussing the various facets of the GND. While Twitter user replies are marked by division in discourse, AOC’s approach to political division is as equally apparent. When a Republican member of Congress expands upon the negative attributes of the GND, AOC makes a point to call them out and offer a rebuttal as to why the GND is an effective policy decision for people. She will often directly call out a member by name, by tagging them in a tweet. One example of how this tactic is used is when AOC calls out two GOP members for spreading false information featured in the GND. AOC’s tweet features a retweet from a person who says “look at these morons trying to gorilla channel @aoc’s green new deal” (Figure 5, 2019). The tweet image features an original screenshot of a section of the GND, and an edited section that says “1) Males should urinate into an empty milk jug instead of a toilet. 2) Let the open milk jug sit in the

sunlight for at least six hours for sanitation. 3. Use this recycled urine in place of water when brewing coffee or preparing frozen juice, as the leftover “pee” taste will be covered up by other natural flavors” (Figure 5, 2019).

By AOC directly calling out the GOP members who chose to spread around false information related to the GND, she is essentially performing “damage control” for both herself and the GND as a policy. AOC is consciously making the decision to address the inaccurate claims that these two individuals in power are making for a wide audience. AOC is upholding the principles of environmental justice in ecofeminism that she continuously fights for online.

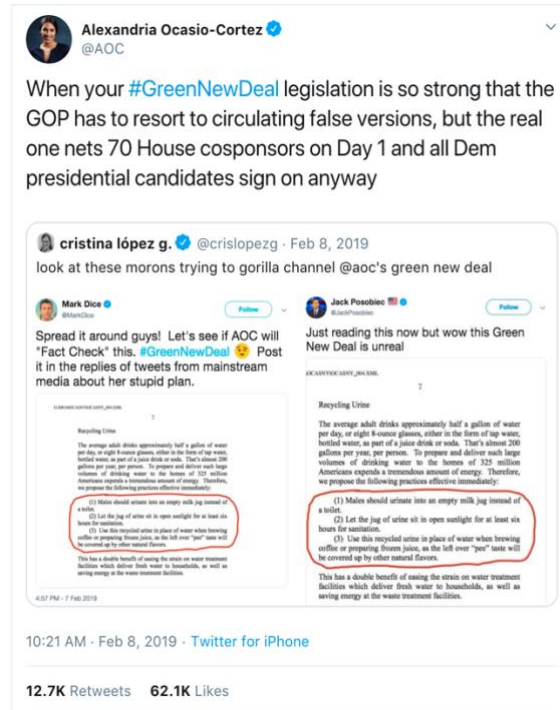


Figure 5: AOC calls out the altered text in a section of the GND being spread by members of the GOP.

She does not allow her relationships with the opposing political party tarnish her work for the GND. According to Pew Research Center, 50 percent of Americans see fake news as a “very big problem in the country today,” with only the gap between the rich and poor, the U.S. political system, affordability of healthcare, and drug addiction being more prominent (Mitchell et al., 2019). The integrity of the GND as a viable policy option is at risk when leaders choose to make

a joke of it. It was critical for AOC to address false information surrounding a policy attached directly to her and her stance as a politician in the public light. She also has much at stake when advocating for the justices of people and the environment too.

Oppositely, AOC makes a point to align with her allies and support them in a tweet when they endorse the GND or have another agenda in their campaign related to environmental goals. This is directly related to a tenent of ecofeminism, which says that political candidates should have and maintain strong relationships with other women. In a January 14, 2019 post AOC is



*Figure 6: A tweet with Chellie Pingree and AOC shows that they are in agreement with the ideas of the GND.*

pictured in an image with Chellie Pingree, a House Representative for Maine. The image shows the two walking together and laughing with the tweet caption stating “AOC (NY) + @chelliepingree (ME) = #GreenNewDeal (green heart emoji) (Figure 6, 2019). While the text in this tweet is short, it reveals a partnership between AOC and Pingree that they are both committed to the policy and ideas that come from the GND as women. Particularly as two women joining forces, it is a powerful sentiment that eludes how two women can connect over a nonbinding resolution that has the capability to help a wide variety of people. AOC is incorporating ecofeminism by lifting up another woman who wants to achieve similar goals for the environment.

In the online space and as an ecofeminist, AOC has much at stake when it comes to how individuals perceive the GND. The opportunity for opinions about the policy to be revealed through online discourse is a reflection of both how AOC and Twitter replies frame the issue. There is a certain amount of accountability that is reflected in how AOC writes about the GND, where she must protect the integrity of the resolution and her vision behind it. It is a unique position of an opinion leader in the twenty-first century to have a simultaneous “call and response” to resolve and protect vicious attacks to her and her policy’s name.

### **“Cut her some slack, she’s not very bright,” -- Cultural Ideology Analysis**

Brock (2018) identifies that cultural technologies emerge during CTDA analysis must be rooted in the communities that they serve and be representative of how the artifacts influence the larger meaning. For this part of analysis, the four key ecofeminist themes were of interest including Environmental Justice, Gender Scrutiny, Female Empowerment and Constituency Relationships. In this case, AOC was looked at as a woman-identified ecofeminist politician who is operating within the vast network of Twitter as the interface. There are many dominant narratives of historical gendered language that come across through the themes encountered in this study. AOC arrives at the center of discussion as a Latina woman and the head of a major policy resolution which frames her in many ways, according to the people who follow her conversation.

**Ecofeminism’s role in cultural ideology.** Ecofeminism as a movement and philosophy grates against many cultural barriers that still exist in modern American politics. While AOC as a politician successfully defends the GND with ecofeminist principles, those that comment still deem it appropriate to question her authority as an opinion leader. While AOC does make efforts in exposing many tenets of ecofeminism, including mentions of environmental justice (6), there

are still 29 mentions of gender bias featured in the comments attempting to drown out the purpose and power of AOC's plan for the GND. Ecofeminism's goals are not being taken seriously by the majority of people that reply to AOC's tweets even though nationally other publics may think differently.

**A defense of ideas.** AOC's overall goal did seem to revolve around working in unique ways to promote her vision of the GND and ecofeminism, while defending her ideas. She specifically aligned herself with politicians and spokespeople who were on board with the adoption of the GND, and if they weren't then she found ways to articulate how their viewpoints should be redeveloped. For example, in a tweet from April 18, AOC is congratulating New York and Los Angeles for passing its own versions of the GND specific to their regions and economy (Tweet 12, 2019). This is a signal to the progress of the GND and the success that her promotion of the



Figure 7: AOC defends Chris Hayes from remarks by Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

resolution has accomplished. In a different tweet, she is defending MSNBC host Chris Hayes in an attack from Fox host Tucker Carlson who demeans Hayes's actions as a man. She uses the hashtag #GreenNewDeal as she defends Hayes and his view, both as a way for her to show support and to align Hayes with the goals of the GND (Figure 7, 2019). In this example, she's using the reply as an opportunity and it is twofold. First, it provides an opportunity to defend Chris Hayes, someone who is on a left-leaning television network and has given her the opportunity to defend the GND on air. Secondly, it is a chance for her to broadcast her views against a television network

that consistently paints her in a bad light. She is also identifying that men like Chris Hayes can face the impacts of gender scrutiny, which she fights against herself and other people. AOC uses her platform to address unjust assumptions about gender that other parties make, and dismantle oppressive systems that plague leaders.

According to April 2019 research from Media Matters for America, the Fox News network mentioned AOC for 42 consecutive days totaling 3,181 mentions in just six weeks, painting her as radical leftist (Hagle, 2019). This is another example of how dominant culture continually fights against ecofeminism, gender bias, and the goals that AOC has as a politician. Another tweet from March 26, 2019 features a counterattack from AOC of Senator Mike Lee's spectacle of the GND in the Congress chamber where Lee is shown using crude images to dismantle why the GND is a bad idea (Tweet 13, 2019). This is another opportunity for AOC to stand her ground about her ideas related to the GND and to uphold the credibility of the GND and to "respect the chamber." AOC takes every opportunity and words in line with ecofeminism to fight against gender scrutiny.

Alternatively, AOC takes the opportunity to show support and respect for those that want the GND to be as equally successful as she does in her relationships. For example, she announces her endorsement of Ed Markey for Senate, her co-author of the GND resolution. AOC coins Markey as a "climate champion" (Tweet 16, 2019) and uses the #GreenNewDeal hashtag as a way to show that Markey is aligned with the vision and cause of the GND. By providing this endorsement on the digital space on Twitter as an opinion leader, she is attempting to build up support as a coalition for the GND. According to Winter & Neubaum (2016), "the goals of disseminating information, persuading others, and presenting oneself in a positive light are crucial goals spurring opinion leadership and opinion expression" (p. 9). As seen in how AOC uses Twitter to further ideas and support for the GND, it is a constant balancing act to make sure that all of these aspects of opinion

leadership are addressed. When AOC uses the ecofeminist tenet of building relationships with those who show support, the GND can become a more viable option for constituents.

**Economic benefits of the GND.** An interesting finding that emerged through the course of this study is the number of tweets focusing on the economic benefits (8) that the GND would provide to individuals on Twitter. Often touted as a solution for environmental justice both within the actual resolution and on other social media platforms, the majority of AOC's tweets discussed how the GND would help the economy. For example, AOC mentions in several of her tweets that the GND would be beneficial for transitioning coal workers towards learning new skills and working in a new economy. Mentioning this shows that AOC is looking out for individuals who would need to transition to a new economy. This upholds the tenet of environmental justice in ecofeminism, by helping people that are underserved. She also bolsters the expertise of economists to discuss the beneficial impacts that the GND will have for both individuals and the economy in the long term. This provides credibility and a voice of authority when discusses how the GND might appeal to a broader audience who might be interested in how the GND could benefit them and their concerns with economic security. While AOC does not mention environmental justice as frequently in her tweets (6), this may be a result of AOC's team not wanting to prioritize this subject specifically for Twitter. She makes the case that the economy will still be benefitted from the GND in the form of providing new opportunities for workers. While this is framed as an economic benefit, she is still aligning with a theme of ecofeminism which is to help individuals who are marginalized.

**Deflection and denial of.** A large percentage of post replies related to AOC and the GND featured a common thread of the deflection and denial at the core of what AOC is communicating. A commanding skepticism and doubt related to issues like climate change, her

intelligence, or representing AOC as a “socialist” where the main themes that emerged. These dominant critical assessments sought to delegitimize AOC’s GND discussions.



Figure 8: A Twitter user discredits AOC by presenting their own data and calling out the GND as socialist.

First, discussions centering the “science” of climate change included interpretations of the true “science” of the GND. Both AOC and her audience members on Twitter discussed the science of climate change in 13 of the tweets examined in the study. She often discussed how the GND is an effective solution to counteracting the various consequences of climate change. In response, a common thread among Twitter users replying to AOC’s tweets was outrightly denying what AOC said in terms of the GND and providing their own proof in a form of a chart, graph, or other article. For example, on October 11, 2019 a Twitter user responded to a tweet by AOC that said that the GND is for all different people, for peace, prosperity and the planet (Figure 10, 2019). AOC is using ecofeminism to address how the GND would be a solution for all people. In response, the user showed a map of mismanaged plastic waste across the world. The user also said, “The Green New Deal is a Trojan horse for socialism. It will do absolutely nothing to relieve anthropogenic climate change” (Figure 8, 2019). While this map comes from *The Wall Street Journal* and may be a credible source of information to contribute, the combative

sentiment and tactic of the user providing their own version of science is meant to be argumentative, and fight against the initial point AOC tried to address.

Secondly, individuals on Twitter frequently question her capabilities as both a leader and about her intelligence in general. This is also related to ecofeminism’s tenet of gender scrutiny and how users question her every action as a leader. Users will often deflect from or detract from the issue that AOC is speaking about, and instead take the opportunity to comment on the various ways that AOC is incapable as a leader, also a form of gender scrutiny impacted by



Figure 9: Twitter users discredit AOC's intelligence and the GND.

online conversation. Additionally, individuals will also consistently bring up the unsuccessful GND “vote” in the Senate that resulted in criticism and skepticism from both sides of the political aisle. This combination of doubt surrounding the issues of the GND delegitimizes the resolution and AOC as a politician. One example that conveys how users conceptualize AOC and the GND in this particular moment come from May 13, 2019. Two different users commented about how a bridge might be smarter than AOC, and how the GND was definitely a “winning policy” (Figure 9, 2019). The consistent criticism and doubt cast upon AOC about her GND advocacy are a reflection of a significant barrier in culture related to women in politics that will be explained in more detail within the discussion.

**Implicit vs. explicit gender bias.** A wide spectrum of gender bias is involved with how people react to AOC and her promotion of the GND. Hathaway (2019) said that gender affects

responses to climate change because of the hegemonic power associated with industrialization and the political right. In the 48 tweets analyzed for this study, 18 of the individuals who replied could possibly be identified as white males. The patterns displayed in replies

Men are particularly responsible for and drive narratives related to how resources are used from nature. These gender biases play out in a unique way with more subtle bias (implicit),

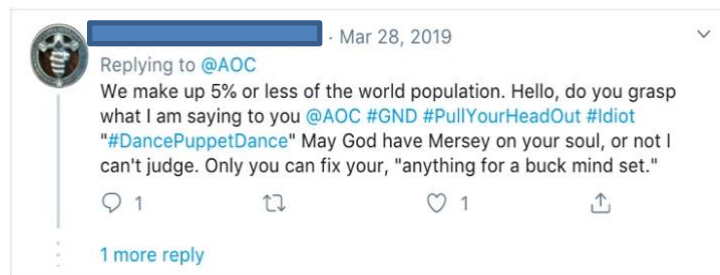


Figure 10: Users use implicit gender bias to confront AOC's ideas about the GND.

or a more expressive explicit bias. The differences between these two types of biases lies in subtleties. An example of implicit gender bias is a tweet using the hashtags #Idiot and #DancePuppetDance. By referring to AOC as puppet for her ideas, they are implying that AOC is incapable of formulating or acting upon her own ideas related to implementing the GND. The hashtag #Idiot is also an obvious strong indicator related to how the Twitter user perceives AOC's intelligence.

Explicit gender bias is interpreted as a specific way to attack AOC's character and intentions as a woman. One very clear example of explicit gender bias is in a tweet from January 5, 2020. The original tweet by AOC is about how there needs to be large-scale mobilization in order to achieve the outcomes of the GND. A user, in response to someone says to "cut her some slack, she's not very bright. (Tweet 14, 2020) Again, this is an undermining of AOC's intelligence both as a leader and as a powerful force to implement change through the GND. The assumption that AOC does not have the intelligence to be a leader is subjected to opinions by

many of these Twitter users. The various ways in which implicit and explicit biases work together undermine AOC and work against ecofeminism.

**Female empowerment.** Twitter users who share similar platform ideas as AOC took an opportunity to boost their campaigns on very specific posts by AOC. For example, a woman named Salma Yaqoob announced she is running for West Midlands mayor in the United Kingdom on a post where AOC is congratulating the UK Labour Party for adopting its own version of the GND. Yaqoob posts a link to a video that she modelled after one of AOC's videos, uses the hashtags #GreenNewDeal and #ForTheMany, and also tags the UK Labour Party in the post (Tweet 15, 2019). Yaqoob took advantage of the power of these artifacts offered on Twitter, and AOC's opinion leadership in order to gain support for her policies as a candidate running for mayor. It is convenient for women like Yaqoob to have a direct connection with an opinion leader while spreading the message of their own campaign. This shows unity between AOC and the publics that respect her as a politician. Yaqoob is displaying a relationship with AOC, while also empowering her message. This corresponds with two tenets of ecofeminism which say that woman must show support and build relationships together. This is a strong indicator of the effect that AOC has to inspire and encourage other women.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

**The status of ecofeminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.** This study attempts to address whether or not there is a place and purpose for ecofeminism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly as it related to online discourse. Scholars like Gaard and Warren espoused an idealistic vision for ecofeminism's place in conversations about how environmental issues should progress. While AOC never refers to herself as an ecofeminist, she certainly advocates and upholds important ecofeminist principles such as environmental justice and relationships with her constituency. While there is recent literature written about ecofeminism and its place within contemporary and climate change, it hasn't fully transcended academic borders. AOC's lack of acknowledgment of ecofeminism as a term may or may not be a result of the fact that with words comes loaded meanings and assumptions. The public and political sphere that AOC is a part of have a difficult time accepting feminism itself as a relevant movement. However, the results of this study indicate that AOC may be guided by some of the tenets of ecofeminism. AOC is creating significant change through her unique position as an ecofeminist and leader.

AOC and her "squad" colleagues are already breaking boundaries in terms of advocating for progressive ideals in the contemporary political space. AOC herself as a public-facing figure behind the implementation of the GND and is advocating for a future in the GND where individuals from marginalized communities are accepted and helped in the transition to a new economy that limits harm. The GND argues that stagnating wages, racial wealth divides, and inequalities to poor, rural, and disadvantaged Americans are all overlapping elements that ecofeminism addresses. The GND is meant to empower Americans to live in a world where they can work with nature and not against it.

Realistically, the “passing” of the GND was a political failure for AOC but nonetheless it remains a topic of conversations a year after its introduction. The GND is inspiring other places in the US to take climate change issues more seriously. AOC is still determined to discuss why the GND is necessary and to introduce new bills like the “Green New Deal for Public Housing.” The online publics who follow AOC like to frequently remind her of the failure of the GND, and will take any opportunity to input their reasoning for why their political ideas, science, or stances are superior to the ideas of the GND. This may be the result of multiple factors working together, like the persistent influence of divided politics and gender biases. It could also be a result of Twitter being a more combative platform, one where users frequently defend their positions on the ideological spectrum about what is right or wrong related to environmental issues on the agenda. While some Americans do support the Green New Deal, there are more outrageous comments that can overpower conversations related to the core of what the Green New Deal is idealistically trying to accomplish.

**Environmental economics vs. environmental justice.** A broader finding that was a surprising addition to the narrative of online discourse was the fact that AOC discussed the economic benefits of the GND much more frequently than the impacts made to environmental justice. Though the actual GND resolution does spell out what it strives for in terms of improving the lives of other through a just economic transition, AOC does not specifically mention the details of how the bill would achieve this. Rather, she spends more time focusing on how workers in places like coal country would be treated fairly and transition into the new economy. Economic justice can be interpreted as a form of environmental justice and ecofeminism for workers – allowing them to have a better life and contribute to a greener future. However, this is a more subtle approach, perhaps for her Twitter audience. The breadth of how

AOC discusses the GND on Twitter may be a function of her own personal strategies when discussing the resolution online along with the form and functionality of Twitter itself. AOC's presence online is seen as a balancing act in many respects. She educates the public about the resolution, promotes its benefits, and appeals to a specific audience that may follow her on Twitter. It may be certain that those who follow her have specific interests such as how the GND will personally affect them and the economic communities to which they belong. It may be possible that AOC has a much different approach strategically to communicating aspects of the GND on Twitter in comparison to sites like Instagram, Facebook, or even her own personal website. These separate interfaces allow for different framing of issues for the audiences that follow them. She does discuss other issues related to the progress of ecofeminism such as female empowerment and environmental justice similarly to Twitter, but the interfaces themselves might allow for a different set of cultural guidelines that allow for a different type of discourse.

**AOC as a 21<sup>st</sup> century opinion leader.** AOC as a 21<sup>st</sup> century opinion leader offers important insights into the dynamics of a platform like Twitter. Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) note that opinion leadership is defined by opinion leaders exerting both pressure and support to their followers. AOC is seen as the expert behind the GND and is the primary person associated with its attempts for actual adoption. Dubois & Gaffney (2014) argue that, in the past, it was hard to define, trace, and understand exactly how the influence of an opinion leader can be tracked. By using CTDA in this study, a more holistic understanding of the attempts at influence, and the two-way communication between followers are seen. AOC commands the respect and ownership of the GND regardless of how members of the public perceive the policy. The terms are up to AOC and her vision for a greener future in the USA.

**AOC as politician or activist.** A question that arose from the course of this study: Is it more appropriate to refer to AOC as a politician or an activist? Because AOC is a progressive candidate who beat out a 10-term politician in a historical race, the expectations were high with what AOC promised as a House member. As seen through this study, the GND is a policy issue that states how important it is to be inclusive and radical with how to move forward in a new climate era. AOC is upholding her policy, but also being an advocate for those that are disadvantaged. She rallies for those in her district and continually calls out those who do not act on the moral basis for others, as prescribed in the ecofeminist theme of relationship to constituencies. This study begs the question of whether, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century divided political climate, if it is appropriate to define someone as an “activist” or “politician,” and if those lines can be more defined or blurred. AOC blends those two concepts as a leader who can effectively be both, while upholding the principles that make ecofeminism possible to move forward.

**Gender bias dominates racial bias.** Prior to this study being conducted, a pretest of Ilhan Omar’s Twitter account was created to understand preliminary themes that might also apply to themes found on AOC’s Twitter account. A frequent theme within the comments of tweets from Omar was racially prejudiced claims made from various users. Due to AOC being a highly prominent woman-of-color who discusses similar concepts as Omar’s, it was thought that racial prejudice might be a similar theme to appear in many tweet replies from users. Surprisingly, gender bias was a more dominant theme found in the replies to AOC. Ecofeminism mentions that gender scrutiny is a large part of why the movement cannot progress. These tweets characterized by people online show this dichotomy of progress vs. limitations. Tweets that question AOC’s leadership and deflect/detract from the issues presented are a larger sign that woman-identified politicians still struggle to be taken seriously and authentically. While a series

of tweets cannot determine the outcome of a political decision, it is a good representation of a thermometer for initial public reception. Attacks made against AOC both by GOP senators and members of the public in response show that it is not a question of whether the policy decision is sound, but rather a question of why AOC is not fit to be a leader due to her gender.

Both the implicit and explicit gender bias captured in tweet replies reveal that ongoing themes of trust and credibility related to AOC and her ideas are consistent issues in the realm of female political opinion leaders. Anderson (2017) said that the more credible a woman politician is, the more of a threat she is in the hegemonic structure of American politics. AOC consistently needing to prove herself and her GND ideas are a side effect of the sociocultural constructs built that don't take women seriously in US politics. While ecofeminism does argue that women need to be in leadership positions, time will only tell how much longer it will require women to be taken seriously with the policy resolutions they stand by.

**The 2020 political climate and woman-identified politicians.** The year 2020 is a massively influential time when discussing how woman-identified politicians are treated in reference to the political sphere. Women like Elizabeth Warren were projected to be top candidates in the 2020 presidential race but were still subject to misogyny and criticism in a diverse race. The fact that a woman cannot be elected in the highest office in the U.S. has consequences for how women are portrayed in all aspects of political life. Elizabeth Warren was a proponent of the Green New Deal, and even advocated for her own version The Blue New Deal alongside it. In this policy effort, Warren proposed expanding offshore renewable energy and restoring marine ecosystems among other efforts (Warren, 2020). Though Warren had solid policy ideas, she was still not taken seriously as a candidate. An article from The Guardian written by Moira Donegan (2020) said, "She had to be competent but not condescending, cheery

but not pandering, maternal but not frumpy, smart but not haughty. As she rose in the polls last summer and fall, she came under the kind of scrutiny that male frontrunners are not subjected to, and faced skepticism about her claims and character that male candidates do not face,” (p. 1).

Women are still held to impossible standards that men simply don't have to face in all areas of political races. These standards reflect how men, particularly white men, perceive the virtues and accomplishments of women online. This discourse only reinforces the narratives that are so persistent in our current political climate. Consequentially, gender biases pushed by the president and his condemnation of “The Squad” reflect as poorly for women. These women are in positions of power but are still subject to patriarchal standards that persist in society. This study provides a may provide both a verification and cultural look into why women in power may not be taken as seriously, when they bring policy issues into focus on an online platform.

**Limitations.** There were a few limitations to this study that need to be addressed and understood. First of all, only 148 tweets were looked at over the course of a one-year period. AOC published 48 of these tweets, and three replies were analyzed per tweet. This sample of tweets was not representative of every single tweet for the full scope of the GND, only those that had the hashtag #GreenNewDeal. Consequentially, some information and themes within the scope of the GND may not have come across as strongly if the entire sample with every single mention of the GND was accounted for.

Another limitation of the study was that not every reply within a single tweet was analyzed, only the top three comments were analyzed in depth. Due to time constraints, it would have been more challenging to look at every single reply using CTDA while still maintaining an efficient and thorough analysis method. Understanding the full scope of tweets for each time AOC wrote about the GND would have provided a full gauge of the digital discourse. However,

looking at the first three replies still provided rich information about the online discourse that comprised the three prongs of CTDA, technology, technology practice, and cultural ideology.

A third limitation of the study involved the difficulty ascertaining AOC's specific intentions and strategy with how she chose to communicate information about the GND on Twitter. It can be assumed that she has a communications team that determines what types of messages she sends on social media platforms. Due to limitations on Twitter itself and the obvious fact that the public does not know these specific strategies, it makes it hard to assume how and why AOC might refer to the GND from a specific angle on her platform.

A final limitation of this study is due to the ever-changing news surrounding the GND in current news media. Capturing the interactions and cultural ideologies that develop from a resolution such as the GND prompted a deep analysis of how to configure information and replies in a concise and well-informed way. A constant awareness of opinions related to how the GND functions from multiple audiences was taken into consideration for analysis.

Understanding how and why the GND changed and evolved as a policy was very important to understand both AOC's and the public's reactions to the resolution.

**Future research.** As for future research, there are many options to consider in order to move forward with this study, particularly as the GND continues to evolve as a resolution and concept. A quantitative content analysis would be a nice compliment to this study, in order to understand further codes that could quantify this information based on the findings of this qualitative study. This type of study would also provide further evidence and information as to how ecofeminist opinion leaders operate in an online setting.

Future research could also look at how other woman-identified politicians, youth climate change activists, or people from other ideological stances frame the GND or other environmental

policies on Twitter. Comparing how AOC chooses to communicate information about the GND on other platforms such as Instagram using CTDA as a method could also provide a unique comparison into how the interactions and cultural ideologies may be similar or different.

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how an ecofeminist opinion leader communicates about a policy decision online and how interactions and cultural ideologies influence the overall discourse of this topic. The chosen method for the study, Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis provided a holistic overarching account of how these various factors work for and against each other. Through the various facets that ecofeminism espouses for women to be strong leaders committed to making the environment a fair and balanced place, AOC achieves these principles both for her actions as a politician and her promotion of the GND as effective policy. However, the ways in which interactions and culture shape and influence how opinion leaders craft their online narratives shapes how the policy is received.

This study indicates that gender bias is still a huge issue that predicates and plagues how women can act as politicians. There is no shortage of judgment, scorn, and mockery of how women act online, despite the well-researched, inclusive policy decisions that they represent. Political divisiveness combined with the trope that women are not taken as seriously in positions of power tarnishes the credibility and accomplishments of someone like AOC. It appears that there needs to be a redefining of what ecofeminism is, and the value that it holds for woman-identified opinion leaders in the future. As climate change becomes more and more of a battle that activists and politicians alike tackle in the future, the conversations around environmental justice and the influence of ecofeminism on digital platforms should be a subject placed on a higher pedestal.

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## APPENDIX A. PORTION OF CODEBOOK USED IN STUDY

Post/Comment Date	Likes (Number)	Comments (Number)	Retweets (Number)	TWEET Content (Topic Images used and their context within the post) (Technology)	TWEET Interface Artifacts Used (Hashtags, @ symbol, geotag, retweet, emojis, symbols, memes, etc.) (Technology Practice)	COMMENT Content (Brief Summary of what comment what was about/using platform to do.) (Technology/Practice)	COMMENT Interface Artifacts Used (Hashtags, @ symbol, geotag, retweet, emojis, symbols, memes, etc. More description of practice) (Technology Practice)	Environmental Justice (Any tweet or reply that highlights aspects of environmental justice/injustice of marginalized groups of people (Ecofeminism))
1/14/19	5200	246	449	Original tweet by AOC. AOC is pictured with Chellie Pingree, a representative from Maine.	#GreenNewDeal hashtag, @chellepingree, green heart emoji.	1. Telling Chellie her daughter can defeat Susan Collins. 2. Telling AOC she could be the next president. 3. "Tweets more than Trump." (man)	1. NA 2. Smile emoji. 3. NA	Comment: Shows affinity by asking to run for president.
1/15/19	2700	1900	5600	Retweet of Huffington Post article describing the climate crisis. AOC says "tweaks and shortcuts" are not the answer.	Retweet. #GreenNewDeal hashtag.	1. "Turning national parks into football fields." Claims that getting rid of trees gets rid of climate change. (man) 2. "Let's vote for the party that believes in scientific facts." (woman) 3. "Unless that science includes genders."	1. NA 2. Wave emoji. 3. NA	NA
				Retweet from Waleed Shahid	Retweet #GreenNewDeal	1. Rebecca Parson promoting campaign. 2. <a href="#">Link to science to</a>		Shows support by retweeting

*Appendix A: This is a portion of the codebook used to determine ecofeminist and emergent themes for the study. Likes, comments, and retweets were tracked along with artifacts and themes.*