Populists or Influencers? The Use of Facebook Videos by Populist Leaders

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Populist leaders use social media as a primary tool for cultivating direct relationships with "the people." Their online activity bears similarities with that of social media influencers; however, the extent of this similarity has not been discussed in-depth. In this article, we explore this affinity, performing ethnographic content analysis on a set of Facebook videos published by 3 Southern European populist leaders—Matteo Salvini (Lega, Italy), Luigi Di Maio (Five Star Movement, M5S, Italy), and Pablo Iglesias (Podemos, Spain)—during the general election campaigns of 2016 and 2018 and after assumption of public office. We argue that the communication styles of these populist leaders mimic those of social media influencers according to 4 main dimensions: "hybrid" visibility labor, authenticity, algorithm gaming, and transformation of digital publics into communities characterized by a sense of we-ness.

Keywords: Facebook videos, political communication, populism, social media influencers

Politicians today regularly use social media in their political activities. Not unsurprisingly, among those who do this, the majority of them are populists. A vast body of research has looked at social media use by populist leaders (e.g., Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Gründl, 2020; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018), highlighting the existence of peculiar "populist styles" (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Hameleers, Schmuck, Bos, & Ecklebe, 2020) and assessing their efficacy in terms of political gain (Casero-Ripollés, 2021; Pérez-Curiel & Limon-Naharro, 2019). Some argue that social media facilitates the perception of populist leaders being trustworthy and authentic, as social media amplifies their "realness" and "being themselves" (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). This raises the question of the extent to which an affinity

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can be observed between the online activity of populist leaders and that of social media influencers who are, here, considered paradigmatic figures of online content creation.

Existing research has noted that performing such "populist styles" seems to be more important than the actual content of these politicians' communications when it comes to successfully engaging their audiences (Hameleers et al., 2020). As Gerbaudo (2018) maintains, there seems to be an "elective affinity" between social media and populist communication: "the mass networking capabilities of social media, at the time of a 'mass web' involving billions of people worldwide, provide a suitable channel for the mass politics and the appeals to the people typical of populism" (p. 745). Populist leaders find social media useful in providing them with direct access to "the people," thus circumventing the gatekeeping of traditional media. This, according to Gerbaudo (2018, 2019a), has given rise to a peculiar figure: the "hyperleader," that is, a populist leader who intensively uses social media to appeal to his/her "superbase" and who works to be seen as a direct emanation of the people's spirit. Nonetheless, much remains to be known about what is peculiar to their digital communication practices. Existing works have primarily concentrated on populist leaders' use of social media from a political communication perspective. However, political figures today (especially populist ones) might be seen as peculiar types of online content creators who—irrespective of the content they produce—must attune, like any other, to the rules of the social media attention economy.

Epitomic figures in this context are, as said, social media influencers. This term identifies those social media users in the fields of fashion, entertainment, and consumer economy who have successfully created and managed large audiences and high levels of engagement in the context of lifestyle, fashion, and culture (Abidin, 2016). While initially conceived of as ordinary people who have been capable of developing a bottom-up following (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017), and thus defined as "micro-celebrities" (Senft, 2013), today the notion of social media influencer substantially equates with that of a celebrity (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). The promotional practices employed by social media influencers have effectively become the norm for anyone who wishes to develop a following across online social environments. Pivotal in this regard is the notion of authenticity, which is argued to be a normative dimension by which creators must abide and which represents the main driver of engagement with followers (Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020; Duffy & Hund, 2019). Similar to social media influencers, political leaders in the social media age—especially populist ones—also strive to be perceived as authentic; the efficacy of their political messaging is increasingly measured by metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments), and their message propagation relies equally on the obscure workings of platforms' algorithmic infrastructures (Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020).

To better map the extent of the affinity between populist leaders and social media influencers, this article presents evidence from an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987; Caliandro & Gandini, 2017) performed on 308 Facebook videos published by 3 Southern European populist leaders—Matteo Salvini (Lega, Italy); Luigi Di Maio (Five Star Movement, M5S, Italy); Pablo Iglesias (Podemos, Spain)—on their Facebook pages in correspondence with each country's general election date (June 2016 for Iglesias, March 2018 for Salvini and Di Maio) and after assuming public office following these same elections. We present the most recurrent elements that characterize the promotional practices of these populist leaders at the height of their communication potential and illustrate how they engage in "influencer-like" behavior. Based on this evidence, we argue that the populist leaders observed in our study mimic the promotional strategies

and practices of social media influencers according to four main dimensions. First, drawing from Abidin's (2016) notion of "visibility labor," we show how populist leaders engage in what we define as "hybrid" visibility labor, which are practices designed to acquire "celebrity capital" (Hearn & Schonehoff, 2016) "so as to be noticeable and positively prominent" (Abidin, 2016, p. 1). Interestingly, however, this occurs not only on the platforms in which they operate but also within the "hybrid" media system writ large (Chadwick, 2017)—which attention, despite their "elitist" narration, they continue to crave and nurture. Second, we provide evidence of the extent to which they attune to the normative dimension of authenticity, which is hegemonic in social media cultures. Third, we demonstrate that they sometimes engage in blatantly explicit forms of algorithm gaming, where they produce content that is purposely conceived to exploit the algorithmic logic of social media content circulation. Fourth, we show that, like ordinary influencers, they work to transform their digital publics into communities by converting the ephemeral engagement of their followers—liking content and posting a brief comment—into a sense of we-ness and a communitarian feel.

The contribution this article aspires to make is twofold. First, it seeks to establish a stronger link between the study of online political/populist communication and that of social media content creation, aiming to promote a greater dialogue between these two strands of research. Relatedly, and most importantly, it aims to expand the existing understanding of the relationship between public opinion formation and social media cultures, which we consider a key and emergent challenge of democratic societies, emphasizing their increasingly inextricable nature.

In the following pages, we discuss the existing research on populist communication on social media and develop an argument about its affinity with influencer communication practices. Subsequently, following a methodological note, we illustrate the findings of our research and discuss the four main dimensions that, we argue, concretize this affinity, as observed in the social media activity of the leaders considered in our study. We then conclude the article with a set of broader reflections on the relationship between social media and political communication in the years to come.

Populism and Digital Politics

Arguably, the rise of social media constitutes a sea of change in political communication. The global diffusion of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube has produced what Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) describe as a new phase in "pop politics," characterized by an increased personalization of the political message and the amplification of popularity-geared inclinations by political leaders. Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) argue that social media "contribute to dramatizing populist communication because they are platforms suited to producing emotional, controversial, even violent content typical of much populist activism" (p. 3). Within this context, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) continue, "'remix' activity, a creative collage of video clips, sound bites, clickbaits, graffiti, parodies, memes, and many other contents, including insults and fake-news, (…) can prove crucial in boosting the popularity of the leader, of his/her creed, of his/her movement" (p. 3). Existing research highlights how social media communication is particularly in tune with populist messages (e.g., De Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018; Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Hopster, 2021; for a different view, see Postill, 2018). A key contribution to this debate is that of Gerbaudo (2018, 2019a, 2019b), who argued that an "elective affinity" exists between social media and populism. This, Gerbaudo (2018, 2019a) maintains, is because of the disintermediation

power that characterizes the public perception of social media and its symbolic juxtaposition to traditional or "mainstream" media, which are perceived as byproducts of the cultural and financial elites. Social media has thus taken the role of "a platform for the voice of the people" against mainstream news media, who are "accused of being in cahoots with the financial and political establishment" (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 749). In turn, populist leaders explicitly tap into this perception, presenting themselves as alternatives to mainstream media elites and genuine representatives of "the people." Social media affords them unmediated and ungated access to the public, circumventing traditional information gatekeepers (Gerbaudo, 2019a).

Over the last decade, this "elective affinity" between social media and populist rhetoric has contributed to the affirmation of previously fringe political figures into the mainstream political arena as a result of their capacity to build a following away from the editorial bottlenecks of traditional media. An obvious but no less epitomic example is the ascent of Donald Trump to the United States presidency in 2016. Various research has studied Trump's peculiar use of Twitter noting, among other things, the effectiveness of the simple and repetitious format of his tweets (e.g., "SAD!") and the capacity to create an emotional flow of contagion among followers (Ott, 2017). Throughout his presidency, Trump's Twitter account represented a peculiar diplomatic tool he utilized to engage in public negotiations with foreign political leaders in original ways (Šimunjak & Caliandro, 2019). Beyond Trump, many populist politicians in recent years have based their political ascent on a strong social media presence. Existing research has highlighted the existence of peculiar "populist styles" based on emotionality and first-person references, which are argued to be more important than the actual content of their communication and are instrumental in triggering the engagement of followers (Hameleers et al., 2020). It has also been noted that social media facilitates the perception of populist leaders as more trustworthy, as they amplify their "realness" and their capacity for "being themselves" (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018).

Comprehensively, this body of research has shown how populist politicians on social media employ promotional strategies and practices that explicitly attune to the social media attention economy. This raises the question of the extent to which political figures—and populist leaders, in particular—might be seen as a peculiar type of online content creators who seek to elicit the attention and emotional engagement of their followers. Similar to content creators in fashion, entertainment, and the consumer economy, to be successful on social media, political leaders today must optimize their messaging to fit the platforms' algorithmic systems that organize content circulation. Their reputation is increasingly measured by social media metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments, cfr. Arriagada & Ibanez, 2020), which in turn might attract journalistic attention and propel traditional media exposure (Ernst, Esser, Blassnig, & Engesser, 2019a). Populist leaders seem to make considerable efforts to develop authentic online personas, as their "realness" and "being themselves" are keys to being seen as direct emanations of the people (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). It seems interesting, then, to question the extent to which the promotional practices of these populist leaders on social media mimic those of content creators in other fields—in particular, those employed by the archetypal figures of this ecosystem: social media influencers.

Existing research underlines that social media influencer communication is peculiarly characterized by working "to generate a form of 'celebrity capital' by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic 'personal brand' via social networks" (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016, p. 194). According to leading influencer scholar Crystal Abidin (2016), the essential element of social media

influencers' communication practices is the engagement in what she calls "visibility labor," that is, online activity aimed primarily at garnering attention and subsequently capitalizing the deriving symbolic and reputational capital into a return (e.g., forms of revenue) in the larger economy. Visibility labor, Abidin argues, chiefly revolves around the capacity to create a sense of closeness and intimacy with one's followers. The key to the success of social media influencers is, in fact, "the curation of a persona that feels authentic" (Abidin, 2016, p. 3) and the capacity to create a perception of likeability, relatability, and ordinariness with which their followers can easily identify. Authenticity, in this sense, has been described as the cultural logic that dominates social media cultures as a whole (see also Banet-Weiser, 2012). Today, the promotional strategies and practices employed by social media influencers represent a script for user engagement across the entire social media ecosystem. Political figures, especially populist ones, are not exempt from this logic. Existing research on populist social media presence has so far focused primarily on the phenomenological study of populist rhetoric (De Vreese et al., 2018; Engesser et al., 2017) and the impact of this kind of communication, its success, and comprehensive outreach (e.g., Bene et al., 2022; Blassnig et al., 2020; Ceccobelli, Quaranta, & Valeriani, 2020). However, an investigation of populist communication from the perspective of online content creation research is still lacking. A stronger link between the study of political/populist communication and that of social media cultures, we argue, could be beneficial to better account for how these two dimensions today osmotically relate and are inextricably intertwined, reciprocally influencing one another. Furthermore, a better grasp of their relationship might improve our existing understanding of the changing contours of public opinion formation in the social media age, and its evolution considering the broader process of "celebritization" of politics (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Street, 2011). This article aims to fill this gap.

Methodological Note

This article presents evidence from an ethnographic content analysis conducted on a set of 308 Facebook videos published by three Southern European populist leaders: Matteo Salvini (Lega, Italy); Luigi Di Maio (M5S, Italy); and Pablo Iglesias (Podemos, Spain) (June 2016 for Iglesias, March 2018 for Salvini and Di Maio) on their public Facebook pages in the month preceding the national elections and a month after they assumed office. Data were collected using a custom-built ad hoc script and then manually checked for content relevancy and data cleaning. For Salvini, our collection includes 181 videos; of these, 122 were posted in the month leading to and including election day (March 4, 2018), while 59 were posted in the month after he was appointed Interior Minister. For M5S (now former) leader Luigi Di Maio, our data set features 89 videos, 58 of which were published in the month before and on election day, and 31 in the month following his nomination as work and innovation minister. Regarding Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, we collected 38 videos, 15 of which were published in the month before and on election day (June 26, 2016) and 23 in the month after his party entered a governmental alliance following the election. Data include the following metadata: each video's URL; the number of views, likes, comments, and shares of each video generated at the time of collection; video duration, title, and description; and publication date. All the videos included in our analysis are publicly available materials.

The choice to focus on videos produced at the peak of electoral campaigns and public office negotiations or nominations finds reason in the amplified promotional potential produced by these events, which allows for the possibility of observing the communicational practices of these leaders at their most

intense timing. The decision to consider specifically these leaders in this study is motivated by: (a) data availability: all leaders are regular Facebook users (although, as we will see, their volume of posting is significantly different); (b) comparable political contexts: all three leaders come from Southern European countries that experienced a remarkable digital populist wave in the 2010s and held eventful elections between 2016 and 2018, which did not swiftly produce a clear winner; (c) variety of the political spectrum: Salvini is considered a representative of right-wing populism, Iglesias is observed as a representative of left-wing populism, while Di Maio, the (now former) leader of the Italian M5S, is considered representative of a third party, "anti-political" with a strong root in the digital arena (see also Gerbaudo, 2018, 2019a; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). We deemed this selection would allow us to build a cohesive data set suitable for in-depth qualitative analysis, leading to the isolation and illustration of common communication practices.

To this end, ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987), tailored to the principles of qualitative digital methods (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017), has been employed. Ethnographic content analysis focuses on the description and understanding of the meanings and cultural narratives naturally emerging from the text. Its execution is similar to quantitative content analysis; however, besides pure numerical counting, it is principled on the iterative and reversible construction of qualitative labels and categories. It "does not avoid quantification but encourages content analysis account to emerge from reading the texts" (Krippendorff, 2012, p. 23). Informed by digital methods, ethnographic content analysis allows the use of digital data and metadata as methodological sources that inform the analysis of the text observed (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). In practice, this comprises the qualitative coding of video content following an inductive, ethnographic-driven approach. Categories include (a) the type of video posted, (b) the main subject portrayed, (c) the video's main topic, and (d) the main function of each video, which may be inferred by its content and composition. Each video was coded for each category; then, in an iterative process, labels were consolidated and aggregated for coherence and consistency. In those cases where more than one label was used (e.g., videos covering more than one topic), a qualitative decision was made based on the most prevalent aspect observed, to determine one label per each video in each category.

Using ethnographic content analysis for this kind of research has several advantages and certain limitations. On the one hand, it is conducive to a comparatively deeper account of the content observed vis-a-vis quantitative content analysis, which primarily focuses on the numerical coding of (larger amounts of) content (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015). Ethnographic content analysis allows us to focus on smaller sets of data and thus ensures that issues of contextuality and discourse play a more central role in the analysis. In addition, it is particularly well suited to the qualitative investigation of digital content, as it allows the exploration of its multimodal nature and takes into adequate consideration the combination of different languages into one cultural unit (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017). On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that this approach does not permit the generalization of findings beyond the cases observed. For this reason, the study maintains an exploratory nature and aims to elicit insights that may be useful to further research. In addition, the decision to focus on relatively similar political contexts bears the limitation of not focusing on other contexts where promotional practices by populist leaders might vary significantly or blend with the local media and political system. Furthermore, ethnographic content analysis is potentially at greater risk of subjective bias by the researcher(s); to counter this issue, we worked to develop "intercoder reliability" (Burla et al., 2008), involving all authors in the coding process. After familiarizing ourselves with the collected data and coding the main emerging themes, we iteratively reviewed and discussed these in several

meetings. We see our approach as complementary to existing research on populist communication styles, which mainly adopts a quantitative rationale (e.g., Gründl, 2020; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers et al., 2020).

Another important goal of our study is to expand the current knowledge about the use of Facebook videos in political communication. Despite the video upload feature being present on Facebook since 2007 (Cashmore, 2007), it was in 2015 that the Facebook video feature gained traction globally when Facebook made it possible for verified users to livestream audiovisual content—a move believed to be a response to emergent competitive video streaming platforms, in particular Periscope (Newton, 2015). Owed to its success, Facebook Video became available to all Facebook users in January 2016 and was renamed Facebook Watch in 2017 (Danker, 2017). Populist leaders are among the most prolific creators of Facebook videos. Nonetheless, the role of Facebook videos in the overall promotional strategies of populist leaders has been sporadically analyzed, as opposed to their in-platform communication ecologies (Rein & Venturini, 2018) or information circulation within the media system at large (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018).

Findings

Overview

In this section, we provide a descriptive overview of the data analyzed. We start by looking at the engagement metrics of the videos included in our data set for each leader (Table 1). On average, we see that Salvini's videos are much more visualized than those of his counterparts in this study. Interestingly, the average number of likes, shares, and comments generated by Salvini's videos appear to be slightly inferior to Di Maio's videos, despite garnering more views. On the other hand, Di Maio's videos are considerably longer on average than both Salvini's and Iglesias' videos: This reflects the practice of producing long livestreamings by the former M5S leader. Overall, Iglesias' engagement figures were proportionally lower than those of the other leaders considered. This indicates comparatively inferior levels of online activity.

Table 1. Metrics Overview.

Average	**Salvini**	**Di Maio**	**Iglesias**
Views	1,406,383	447,441	171,855
Likes	25,546	26,824	7,694
Shares	12,010	13,375	2,261
Comments	4,933	6,485	121
Duration	3 minutes 8 seconds	15 minutes 0 second	1 minute 44 seconds
No. of followers at data collection	3,858,946	2,402,843	757,796

Table 2 (below) presents a breakdown of the videos posted by each leader. Salvini's videos are predominantly TV excerpts of his interviews or appearances on popular talk shows. This type of content

appears to be central to his social media strategy, as we will see more comprehensively in the next steps of the analysis. This is interesting because populist leaders typically express antagonistic positions against mainstream media, commonly portrayed as elites' instruments (Gerbaudo, 2018). Right-wing politicians, in particular, claim that traditional media are biased against them. They blame journalists and distance themselves from mainstream media (Jacobs, Sandberg, & Spierings, 2020; Soontjens, Van Remoortere, & Walgrave, 2020). Nonetheless, Salvini recurrently posted mainstream media and television appearances on his Facebook page during the 2018 Italian election cycle. Original content (in the form of ad-like promotional videos) and livestreaming also feature regularly in Salvini's feed. Conversely, Di Maio built his Facebook video presence mainly through livestreamings; these streamings display the leader during his public appearances or show him in everyday settings. Among Di Maio's posts, TV excerpts feature less often than they do in Salvini's posts; this may be explained by the fact that M5S voters are predominantly younger and less likely to be regular television consumers (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2015). It should be noted that, until 2013, M5S members were banned from participating in TV programs by the founder of the Movement, Beppe Grillo (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). Original promotional videos are also central to Di Maio's postings. For Iglesias, we see a prominence of original promotional content created by the leader's communication. Interestingly, excerpts from his interviews on television programmes are an integral aspect of his promotional practices. Livestreamings, on the other hand, are less frequent.

Table 2. Type of Content.

Types of Content	Salvini	Di Maio	Iglesias
TV excerpts	67	12	10
Original content	48	20	21
Livestreaming	35	54	4
Social media reposts	15	1	1
Political ads	7	-	-
Parliament footages	6	-	1
Others	3	2	1
Total	**181**	**89**	**38**

If we look at the protagonists portrayed in these videos (Table 3), we can see that, somewhat predictably, each leader is the most featured character in his story—for all the politicians here observed. Salvini's videos commonly present him as a guest in a television program. Interestingly, his political rivals also feature frequently in his videos, as content designed to elicit negative emotions against his rivals. Salvini also frequently shares generic news media excerpts, for instance, about crimes committed by migrants, with the goal of eliciting anger and indignation (more on this later). In contrast, Di Maio's videos commonly portray him in everyday social settings, including random encounters with his followers, casual moments—such as a livestreaming from the leader's car—and "behind the scenes" footage at official meetings. The latter appears to be a frequent type of content in Di Maio's feed; this is designed to project the image of the leader as an ordinary citizen who has been entrusted with political responsibility and who reveals the inner workings of the political machine. This practice aligns with the M5S historical motto "uno vale uno" (trans: "everyone counts as one") and reflects the calls for transparency in political negotiations

that animated the early M5S spirit. Official statements and public speeches are also more constant in Di Maio's posts than in Salvini's posts. Concerning Iglesias, the leader himself features in the vast majority of his videos. His style appears to be a combination of Salvini's and Di Maio's, as it features TV appearances and videos of the leader on everyday occasions. Iglesias showcases an interestingly original category: His supporters' videos. This represents an attempt to convey a more positive message when compared with that of the other candidates (in particular, Salvini).

Table 3. Main Protagonists

Subjects	Salvini	Di Maio	Iglesias
Leader (interviews)	27	23	10
Political rivals	23	-	3
News media (various subjects)	21	-	-
Leader (various settings)	19	37	9
Leader (public speeches)	19	13	3
Leader (official statements)	19	11	3
Leader debating other politicians	14	-	3
Amateur videos (various subjects)	13	-	-
Political allies	9		2
Leader selfies with fans	3	-	-
Supporters' endorsements	-	-	3
Others	14	5	2
Total	**181**	**89**	**38**

Concerning the topics most frequently covered by the leaders in their videos (Table 4), Salvini unsurprisingly puts significant emphasis on immigration, which represents the main topic in almost half of his videos. Among Salvini's postings, there is also a remarkable number of "miscellaneous" content (here classified as "Other"); these commonly comprise videos of the leader weighing in on various subjects—from social and political issues to music, and even the death of a popular Italian TV show host. Traditional left-wing issues, such as pensions and work, also find space in Salvini's messages; this is motivated primarily by the fact that the abolition of the pension reform adopted by the technocratic Monti government was a key pledge in Salvini's 2018 campaign. For Di Maio, work and welfare issues feature prominently. This is because of the M5S campaign pledge for the institution of a national basic income (in Italian, *reddito di cittadinanza*), which led to Di Maio's nomination as Work and Innovation Minister in the Conte I (2018) coalition government. Also present are, respectively, a typically populist and M5S stance—railing against political elites and their privilege—and the composition of the M5S government team. This reflects how Di Maio, as M5S leader, introduced the names of prospective ministers of a future M5S government to the public via Facebook videos as part of his electoral strategy. In contrast, immigration does not feature in Di Maio's postings as strongly as it does in Salvini's postings. Iglesias' videos display a clear majority of typically leftist topics (categorized here as "social justice"), particularly

concerning human and women's rights. Interestingly, immigration features more prominently in his videos than in Di Maio's videos; calls against the corruption of the political elites also feature frequently. A peculiar topic in Iglesias' videos is political alliances, which reflect the negotiations held by Podemos before the formation of the 2016 Spanish coalition government.

Table 4. Topic Analysis.

Topic	Salvini	Di Maio	Iglesias
Immigration	88	2	3
Economy	9	5	
Electoral promotion	15	6	3
Pensions, work, and welfare	13	23	3
Social justice (e.g., women's rights)	1	-	8
Crowd size	5	3	2
Crime and corruption	11	7	4
Government team	-	13	
Political elites/political adversaries	12	13	-
Political alliances/political vision	-	3	6
Media	1	3	-
Freedom of speech	1	-	-
Birth rate	1	-	-
Environment	-	2	-
Youth	-	1	4
Catalan independence	-	-	2
Others	24	8	3
Total	**181**	**89**	**38**

Finally, if we turn our attention to the main function of these Facebook videos in the communication strategies of these leaders (Table 5), we will see that many of Salvini's videos are primarily aimed at triggering emotional reactions from his fans or eliciting their anger on a topic or against a political rival, others are aimed at enhancing the policy credibility of his party through clips that explain and simplify key policy proposals, and the remaining are directed at delivering a perception of authenticity and include the leader shooting selfies with fans in the street, talking informally with attendees at his political rallies or after his speeches, or attending local festivals. The videos showcase a strong dimension of leader characterization, aimed at presenting the leader with an institutional aura through TV interviews or videos of the leader in parliamentary rooms. Interestingly, many of the same categories also appear in Di Maio's posts; however, the elicitation of negative sentiments against political rivals does not regularly feature in his communication strategy. When present, it is mostly with a generically populist, anti-elitist tone that is a subtext to many of his postings. Most of Di Maio's content is, instead, designed to project

policy competence and trust. Authenticity also features, quite prominently, by means of videos showing the leader at public or institutional events or the already-mentioned "behind the scenes" footage. Unlike Salvini, leader characterization for Di Maio seems to be less relevant overall. This is again in line with the M5S traditional claim of "uno vale uno." For Iglesias, although his levels of activity differ from those of his counterparts in this study, the building of a shared sentiment seems to be a core aspect of his communication strategy. Notwithstanding, many of Iglesias's videos are also aimed at antagonizing his supporters against his political rivals. Leader characterization is also present, with a strive for authenticity expressed through videos that portray the leader in ordinary settings or among fans. The projection of policy competence and trust seems to be less central.

Table 5. Function Analysis

Function	Salvini	Di Maio	Iglesias
Trigger fans/enemy building	63	13	7
Policy competence and trust	32	30	3
Authenticity	25	17	6
Leader characterization	22	5	6
Build shared sentiment	17	20	16
Promotional	13	4	-
Click bait	8	-	-
Other	1	-	-
Total	**181**	**89**	**38**

Overall, this overview signals a clear tendency by these populist leaders to engage in influencer-like behavior. The frequent portrayal of leaders in everyday settings and the ample use of livestreamings suggest a striving toward informality that is akin to influencer practice, where it is deemed to be conducive to an imaginary of authenticity (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021). This insight is further corroborated by the analysis of video functions, whereby authenticity stands out as the only element that remains constant in relative terms among these leaders. A more extensive discussion of the similarities between these populist leaders and influencer communication practices is offered in the next section.

Populist Leaders or Influencers?

Comprehensively, the evidence analyzed here confirms the existence of what Hameleers et al. (2020) describe as a peculiar "populist style" of communication that these leaders arguably represent. Although individual differences exist, we can see how the populist leaders observed in our inquiry engage in promotional strategies and practices that are, by and large, similar to one another. While differently articulated, all leaders combine forms of personal characterization and share an "us and them" rhetoric; at the same time, they strive to build authenticity and a kind of shared sentiment with their followers. This can have a negative tone, as in the case of Salvini, who is more aggressive against his opponents, or a positive one, as in the case of Di Maio and Iglesias. The negative characterization of political rivals also features in

Iglesias's posts, albeit less frequently than in Salvini's posts. It may be argued that, mutatis mutandis, the promotional strategies and practices of these leaders mimic, to a considerable extent, those employed by social media influencers. This can be seen across the 4 main dimensions detailed as follows:

1. *"Hybrid" visibility labor:* As argued by Hearn and Schonehoff (2016), social media influencers produce content aiming to capture attention and, in so doing, work strategically to craft an authentic personal brand. Their end goal, it seems, is to acquire a form of "celebrity" or "reputational" capital, which they can use as an asset to pursue economic returns by means of sponsorships and other collaborations (Bainotti, 2021). The populist leaders observed in our study similarly seek to garner the attention needed to acquire celebrity capital, engaging in what Abidin (2016) defined as "visibility labor." Interestingly, however, their "return" is largely aimed back at mainstream media, as they explicitly produce content to be visible within the hybrid media system writ large (Chadwick, 2017). While projecting their alterity to mainstream media elites, our data suggest that populist leaders use mainstream media appearances to boost their political status and enhance their credibility. Many of Salvini's videos are exemplary of this practice. Take, for instance, the video (Figure 1) posted on his wall on February 28, 2018, a few days before election day, with the caption: "In 1 minute on TG1, I explained why to choose the CLARITY and COMMON SENSE of the Lega. Would you send this video to your undecided friends?" (Salvini, 2018a). Note also the pseudo-clickbait use of capslock text in the caption, and the call to action embedded in the post (more on this below).

Figure 1. Salvini at TG1 (Salvini, 2018a, 00:00–00:01).

2. *Authenticity*: A key component in visibility labor practices by social media influencers is "the curation of a persona that feels authentic" (Abidin, 2016, p. 3) and the necessity to create a perception of likeability, relatability, and ordinariness. Ordinary and informal settings are regularly

featured in the communication practices of these leaders, which suggests that it is imperative for them to achieve a similar goal. Populist leaders claim an ontological difference between them and the elites, so they commonly portray themselves in the middle of crowds, discussing with ordinary citizens, or engaging in social settings marked by informality. This extends Enli and Rosenberg's (2018) insight on the cyclical relationship between authenticity, trust, media, and populist leadership, as it shows that the promotional practices of populist leaders strive not only for authenticity to be seen as trustworthy but actually replicate the dogmatic conception of authenticity as the cultural logic of social media influencer communication (Abidin, 2016). Take, for instance, the video (Figure 2) published by Luigi Di Maio in the last week of the election campaign with the caption: "Help us in the last week of the campaign!" (Di Maio, 2018). Posted as a livestream from the back of his car while travelling from one rally to another, it was designed to present the leader as an ordinary man who sought help from his "peers" to be elected.

Figure 2. Di Maio in his car (Di Maio, 2018, 00:00-00:01).

3. *Algorithm gaming:* The need to garner attention and acquire reputational capital also requires populist leaders to play by the rules of the social media attention economy, which incentivizes the practices of algorithmic optimization (Bishop, 2018). This translates into content that is explicitly— and sometimes blatantly—produced to "game the algorithm" of the Facebook news feed. Calls to action, pseudo-clickbait titles, "hooks" to activate users, and engagement in discussions of ordinary nonpolitical topics that appear in contingent news, such as music festivals (which also fit with the necessity to be perceived as authentic), are all pointed at optimizing the circulation of these leaders' posts across the platform—like any other social media influencer would do. Salvini, in particular, seems to make ample use of these techniques; many of his videos begin with the expression *"avete un minuto?"* (trans: "Have you got a minute?"), while others are titled in capslock, incite users to share content, or use clickbait expressions. A glamorous example of this can be found in what is possibly the most striking video by this leader in our collection. This consists of a TV quiz-like contest called *"Vinci Salvini"* (literal translation: "Win Salvini"), in which the leader plays the host of a game show and asks questions of his followers, who have to reply in the comments section

(Salvini, 2018b). A lottery among those who answer correctly will award one of his followers the prize of receiving a phone call from the leader (Figure 3).

Figure 3. "Vinci Salvini" (Salvini, 2018b, 00:14–00:15).

4. *Transforming publics into communities:* Another element that is common with the communication styles of these leaders, albeit with different nuances, is the necessity of building a shared imaginary that binds the "hyperleader" and the "superbase" (Gerbaudo, 2019a, 2019b). This emphasis on building a shared sentiment is a key feature in the communication practices of influencers, who strive to transform their ephemeral and discontinuous *publics* (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) into actual *communities* of users bound by a sense of belonging (Bainotti, 2021). Among the leaders observed in this study, this occurs in two main ways. On the one hand, we have an oppositional community formation, displayed in particular by Salvini, consisting of videos that trigger the anger of followers against political rivals or on the occasion of specific news, typically concerning migrants and crime. As we move toward the left end of the political spectrum, however, we find communication styles that become more openly pointed at the construction of a positive sense of we-ness and the building of a communitarian feel. This is particularly true for Iglesias. For instance, the video (Figure 4), published around a week before the 2016 Spanish election, with the caption "Hay abrazos que, sin hablar, lo dicen todo" (trans: "There are hugs that, without saying a word, say it all"), where he hugs followers behind the scenes of a political rally (Iglesias, 2016).
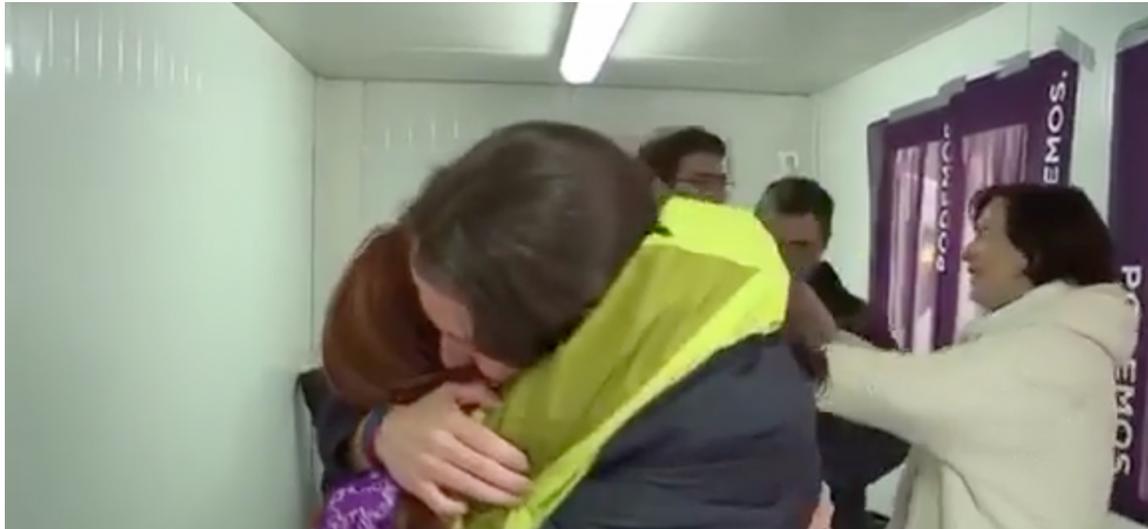
Figure 4. Iglesias hugs supporters (Iglesias, 2016, 00:03–00:04).

These findings corroborate the evidence presented in Bracciale, Andretta, and Martella (2021)—who also analyze Salvini and Di Maio's social media communication during the 2018 Italian election—in showing that, while each populist leader adopts their original version of the "populist styles" as described by Hameleers et al. (2020), populist styles take primacy over ideology in their display. Similarly, our study could be seen as complementary to that of Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, and Esser (2019b), which, as opposed to our research, concerns a nonelection phase but achieves comparable results. Our data largely confirm the three populist "key messages" identified by Ernst et al. (2019b): anti-elitism, people-centrism, and restoration of sovereignty, albeit the latter seems to be articulated differently among them. For instance, Salvini takes a more nationalist stance, while Di Maio remains primarily centered on people's sovereignty. These categories are not fixed, but they blend with one another, as they are adapted by these leaders to individual political families across the right/left spectrum and to tailor their specific political propositions. Yet, it is precisely their combination and actualization in a multimodal way that fits perfectly with the logic of the social media attention economy, which demonstrates how political communication languages are remarkably attuned to social media languages more broadly.

Overall, while we concur with Bracciale et al. (2021), that "the popularity and success of populism on social media is clearly the result of multiple factors, including political positioning (challenger vs. incumbent), platform characteristics (demographics and uses), and communication strategies (adopted to 'perform' populist ideology)" (p. 1489). Our research shows that populist communication styles in the social media sphere cannot be assessed in light of the language and style that are hegemonic but in the context in which these are performed. Seen from the perspective of online content creation, populist styles are less peculiar and original than they appear to be in political communication research, as they largely replicate the most effective communicative practices of the social media sphere. This suggests the utmost necessity of taking into adequate consideration the extent to which political communication has effectively subdued the economic logic of social media platforms and their functioning (Ceron, 2017).

Conclusion

Through a qualitative study of the communication styles of three Southern Mediterranean populist leaders, this article has argued that populist communication styles and the promotional strategies and practices that distinguish social media influencers bear remarkable similarities. Like influencers, populist leaders engage in peculiar forms of visibility labor and strive to build authenticity. Furthermore, they sometimes try to "game" the algorithms of the platform they are operating in and work to turn their publics into communities. Their practices, irrespective of specific differences, are close to what other social media influencers regularly do in the context of fashion, lifestyle, and culture.

These findings are rooted in the broader discussion on the changing contours of public opinion formation in the social media age (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Street, 2011). Social media are significantly reshaping political communication and its established conventions and styles. Party leaders remain crucial actors in this process, yet many of them are furthering the "celebritization" of politics (Street, 2011) in new directions, attuning to the cultural logic of social media. This trend and the political effects of nonpolitical social media influencers must be monitored and assessed in the coming years, as the two spheres continue to reciprocally contaminate each other.

Contextually, our study further confirms the urgency of expanding the accountability of the role social media platforms play as mediators of public opinion formation—which we consider a key challenge for 21st-century democratic societies. This not only invests in the necessity of maintaining a high-quality public debate in terms of information circulation and content accuracy. It also concerns understanding the role of social media affordances as key devices of political messaging and metrics of cultural conceptions of status and worth in the eyes of prospective voters (Bene et al., 2022), whose significance extends well beyond the digital arena.

Finally, our research provides fresh evidence of the relevance of the video format in present-day political communication. As multimodal digital objects, videos allow users to simultaneously perform several strategies discussed here and require less cognitive engagement by users, as opposed to written text. We can reasonably expect that the use of videos in political communication will further increase in the years to come, alongside the rise of new platforms such as TikTok, catering to different demographics, and we call for the monitoring of its evolution.

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