D Í G I T O S

Revista de Comunicación Digital

Visual Communication strategy of populist leaders on Instagram in 2020

Estrategia de comunicación visual de los líderes populistas en Instagram en 2020

Ilya Lavrov
irlavrov@gmail.com
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

Franziska Schranz
franziska.schranz@gmx.at
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

Chiara Miozzo
miozzochiara@gmail.com
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

Marie Palaffre
mpalaffre@yahoo.fr
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

ABSTRACT   In recent years social media platforms, especially Instagram, have become one of the most crucial elements of visual political communication strategies, assisting politicians with creating their vision in the minds of citizens. At the same time, the strengthening of the populist trend in the modern political landscape is noted in many countries worldwide. The present study uses digital methods to examine the virtual visual strategy of 12 populist leaders in democratic states in 2020. This study describes the type of content populists publish on their Instagram profiles. A comparative analysis between populists in different countries is conducted, as well as the engagement and textual analysis focusing on the COVID-19 rhetoric. It was revealed that populist leaders post pictures that communicate personal and national power. While showing their strength and reliability, they also portray themselves as ordinary citizens.

KEYWORDS   Instagram, Populism, digital methods, Vision API, communication strategy

RESUMEN   En los últimos años, las plataformas de redes sociales, especialmente Instagram, se han convertido en uno de los elementos más cruciales de las estrategias de comunicación política visual, ayudando a los políticos a crear su imagen en la mente de los ciudadanos. Al mismo tiempo, se observa el fortalecimiento de la tendencia populista en el panorama político moderno en muchos países del mundo. El presente estudio utiliza métodos digitales para examinar la estrategia visual virtual de 12 líderes populistas en estados democráticos en 2020. Este estudio describe el tipo de contenido que los populistas publican en sus perfiles de Instagram. Se realiza un análisis comparativo entre populistas de diferentes países, así como el análisis de engagement y textual centrado en la retórica COVID-19. Se reveló que los líderes populistas publican fotos que comunican el poder personal y nacional. A la vez que muestran su fuerza y fiabilidad, también se retratan como ciudadanos de a pie.

PALABRAS CLAVE   Instagram, populismo, métodos digitales, Vision API, estrategia de comunicación

Visual Communication strategy of populist leaders on Instagram in 2020

1. Introduction and problem statement

Political communication has changed drastically over the last several decades: politicians still need to use 'traditional' means of expression to win elections; however, they should also have digital media tools at their disposal. Indeed, digital media tools are becoming impactful in influencing the results of an election race (Tambini, 2018). Moreover, with 'the professionalization' of political communication (Maarek, 2014), digital media has unquestionably become a tool that politicians cannot ignore and need to use as effectively as possible. Nowadays, politicians are free to create a different persona of themselves on the Net, and it is unclear which persona is more important to voters. This trend is supported by the 'hyper individualization' and 'personalization' of political communication in the modern political media landscape (Russmann et al., 2019).

Visuals have become even more crucial with the evolution of technology (Farkas & Bene, 2021): "political communication today is built on a visual foundation" (Schill, 2012). The modern World can even be described as the age of "ubiquitous photography" (Hand, 2012), with more than 300 million photos uploaded to Facebook and more than 95 million to Instagram (IG) every day (Stout, 2021). Nowadays, Instagram is one of the leading platforms for sharing visual content; it is becoming a vital tool for shaping a holistic identity (Gordillo-Rodriguez & Bellido-Pérez, 2021) mainly because "impression management" on this platform is possible. Thus, politicians, specifically political leaders, find it extremely helpful for political communication. In an 'image-centric' social network like Instagram, colours, graphic elements, and image style are used as visual marketing tools to draw images of politicians comparable to brand identities (Zailskaitė-Jakštė et al., 2017). Evidence shows that visual communication can create an emotional resonance that conveys as strong a message as a literal one (Lilleker, 2019). Digital tools, in addition to assisting politicians with projecting power, trustworthiness, and prestige, essentially establish a more humanized and relatable version of a politician by displaying certain carefully chosen parts of their private life (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Page & Duffy, 2016).

According to several studies, the populist trend in the contemporary political landscape has been consolidating. However, there is no consensus on determining which regime can be named a 'populist regime' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Three main conceptual approaches are suggested in the Oxford Handbook of Populism: an ideational, a political-strategic, and a sociocultural approach (Miller-Idriss, 2019). Most scholars tend to use *an ideational approach* that revolves around the idea of a strong division between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." This approach also claims that "politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). A less common

variant of conceptualization of populism is represented by *a political-strategic approach*. In particular, K. Weyland defines populism as a political strategy of a personalist leader based on direct non-institutionalized support of followers from different *strata* of society (Weyland, 2020). According to P. Kenny, populism is the mobilization of the masses directed by charisma in order to gain power (Kenny, 2021). Finally, representatives of *a sociocultural approach* consider populism as a "popular style" of politics, manifested in the "wrong" behaviour of a leader who goes beyond the accepted cultural framework to get closer to voters. According to P. Ostiguy, populists "prefer the authentic (pure) lower culture of the people over the inauthentic (corrupt) higher culture of the elite" (Ostiguy, 2009). As B. Moffitt notes, populist leaders are extraordinary personalities who carry out the "presidentialization" and glorification of politics, which allows them to establish such a type of socio-political interaction as performance (Moffitt, 2016).

Regardless of the approach considered, it is evident that many populist leaders widely use social networks to gain power and mobilize people (Dittrich & the Jacques Delors Institut, 2017). It has been happening since 'social media changes the communication structure of the public sphere' (Spiekermann, 2020). Yet, despite populism being widely discussed in the scientific community, their visual communication strategies are not studied extensively, rarely on a small, manually collected sample of images.

This study is intended to reveal the dynamics of visual political communication of populist leaders. Specific objectives are 1) to determine the type of content populists publish on their Instagram profiles; 2) to conduct a comparative analysis between populists in different states; 3) to discover what type of content produces the most engagement on populists' Instagram profiles; 4) to conduct textual analysis of the populists' posts on Instagram.

The Tony Blair Institute methodology has been used (Kyle & Meyer, 2020) to determine a pool of populist political leaders. First of all, all populists have two claims in common: "(1) that a country's 'true people' are locked into a moral conflict with 'outsiders' and (2) that nothing should constrain the will of the 'true people'" (Kyle & Meyer, 2020). The classification of populist leaders studied in this paper was made by the same institute and was based on three aspects of a populist style. "(1) A high degree of anti-elite rhetoric, (2) the evidence of efforts to delegitimize political opposition, and (3) the evidence that the leader cultivated a 'cult of personality or emphasized that they alone could serve as the voice of the people" (Kyle & Meyer, 2020).

For this paper, only free and partly free countries (Freedom House, 2020) and leaders with Instagram accounts were considered, and the study has been limited to the year 2020. As a result, a sample of Instagram profiles of 12 populist political leaders, who were in power in 2020, was conducted.

While several studies analyse the visual communication of specific political leaders (Strand & Schill, 2019; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017) or some groups of politicians in a particular region (Ekman & Widholm, 2017), an investigation of a sample of populists — especially with Vision API tools —, can produce insights on how populists gain and maintain their power on social media.

1.1. Research questions

RQ1: What kind of content do populist leaders publish?
  a. What kind of pictures do they use?
  b. Which colours do they use?
  c. Are their accounts more personal / politician-oriented or institutional?

RQ2: Is there a common communication strategy among populist leaders around the World? Do they refer to common themes?

RQ3: Which content produces the highest and lowest engagement?

RQ4: What vocabulary do populists use to transfer their message, and what topics do they post about, with a special emphasis on the Corona crisis (a topic that affected all of the chosen countries)?

1.2. Research visual protocol

The initial dataset consisted of 3388 Instagram posts (excluding videos, IGTV, and stories) from 12 Instagram accounts of populists from the 1st of January 2020 until the 31st of December 2020. They comprised 3388 image *files* as only the first picture in the carousel was chosen for the analysis using PhantomBuster (https://phantombuster.com). Each of the 3388 images obtained from the Instagram posts was processed through Google Cloud Vision API (Omena, J. J. et al., 2021) and Microsoft Azure Computer Vision API with Memespector (Chao, 2021) to identify: GV_Label_Descriptions, GV_Web_Entity_Descriptions, GV_Web_BestGuessLabels (https://cloud.google.com/vision/docs/detecting-web), MA_Tags, MA_Description_Captions, MA_Objects (https://azure.microsoft.com/en-us/services/cognitive-services/computer-vision/#features) which were used for further analysis.
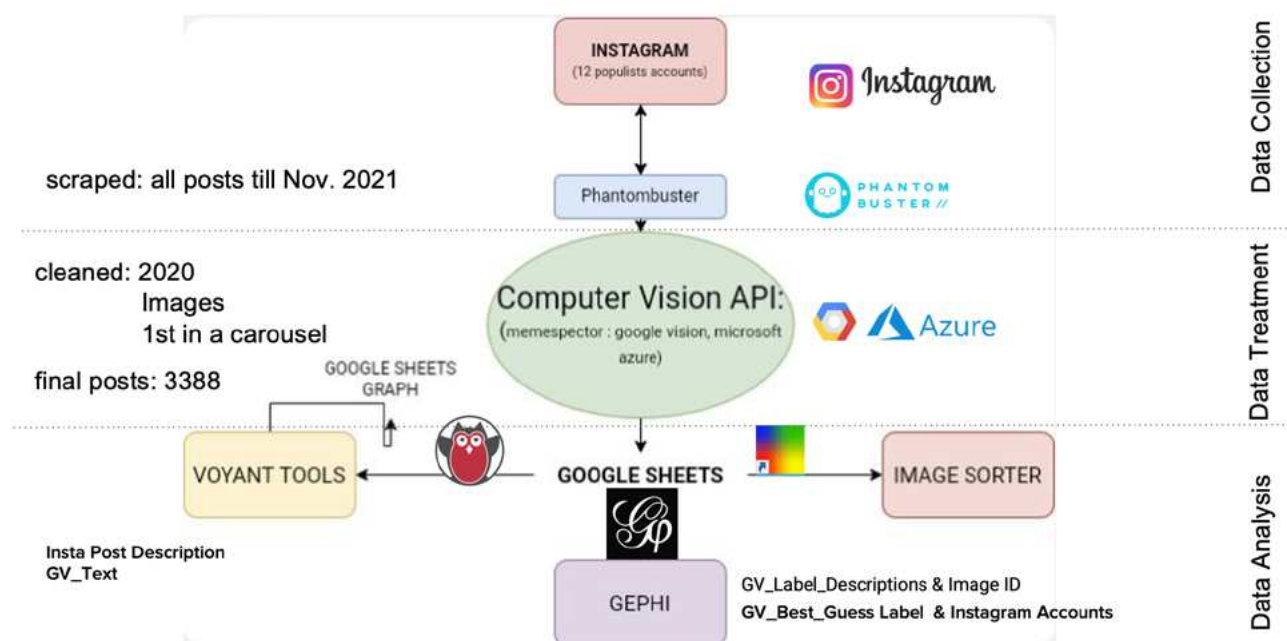

Figure 1. Visual protocol of the project. Source: Own construction

2. Methodology

2.1. Data selection and list of chosen leaders

The 12 populist leaders selected (Kyle & Meyer, 2020) used to govern, in 2020, democratic countries in three parts of the World: America, Asia, and Europe. In America, the leaders are Jair Bolsonaro for Brazil, Andrés Manuel López Obrador for Mexico, and Donald Trump for the USA. The Asian continent is represented by Narendra Modi for India, Benjamin Netanyahu for Israel, and Mahinda Rajapaksa for Sri Lanka. In Europe, the populist leaders are Bojko Borissov for Bulgaria, Giuseppe Conte for Italy Conte, Viktor Orbán for Hungary, Andrzej Sebastian Duda for Poland, Janez Janša for Slovenia, and Aleksandar Vučić for Serbia.

The work began with exploring how these populist leaders appropriate their Instagram profiles. Along with an account overview, politicians were grouped, for the study purpose, according to the number of their followers. Since there is no academic agreement about this group division, the Influencer Marketing Hub (2021) differentiation was used as an authority. This Hub divides the categories of IG influencers being

Micro-influencer:	less than 15,000 followers
Regular-influencer:	between 15,000 and 50,000 followers
Rising-influencer:	between 50,000 and 100,000 followers
Mid-influencer:	between 100,000 and 500,000 followers
Macro-influencer:	between 500,000 and 1,000,000 followers
Mega-influencer:	more than 1,000,000 followers

Thus, in this study, the largest category is the "Mega-Influencers," including half of the profiles. It shows a massive gap between the smallest accounts (@lopezobrador from Mexico and @b.netanyahu from Israel) and the biggest one, namely the Indian president. Indeed with his 63,5 million followers, Narendra Modi's account (39,8M followers) exceeds the account of the second biggest one: Donald Trump.

Table 1. Populists in power in democratic countries and their Instagram accounts in 2020. Source: Own elaboration

Name	Username (@)	Country	Followers	Number of posts in 2020	Influencer classification
Narendra Damodardas Modi	narendramodi	India	63,5 m	39	Mega-influencer
Donald J. Trump	realdonaldtrump	USA	23,7 m	459	Mega-influencer

Table 1. (cont.)

Name	Username (@)	Country	Followers	Number of posts in 2020	Influencer classification
Jair M. Bolsonaro	jairmessiasbolsonaro	Brazil	19 m	556	Mega-influencer
Giuseppe Conte	g i u s e p p e c o n t e _ ufficiale	Italy	1.8 m	225	Mega-influencer
Andrés Manuel López Obrador	lopezobrador	Mexico	1 m	35	Mega-influencer
Benjamin Netanyahu	b.netanyahu	Israel	1 m	625	Mega-influencer
Gotabaya Rajapaksa	gotabayar	Sri Lanka	248 k	111	Mid-influencer
Aleksandar Vučić	buducnostsrbijeav	Serbia	156 k	721	Mid-influencer
Andrzej Duda	prezydent_pl	Poland	147 k	381	Mid-influencer
Viktor Orbán	orbanviktor	Hungary	124 k	134	Mid-influencer
Boyko Borissov	boyko.borissov	Bulgaria	38.2 k	61	Regular-Influencer
Ivan Janša	jjansasds	Slovenia	14.9 k	41	Micro-Influencer

2.2. Visual communication

A bipartite graph has been designed to get an overview of the image corpus and connect pictures with their accounts. The analysis focused on the Images described by labels given by Google Vision API. Using an image-label network allows the study of the visual image content through a literal description. It should be noted that this method results in a network according to the image classification by Google Vision through a pre-trained machine learning algorithm. Still, the resulting network facilitates a qualitative analysis of the image content and interpretation of the strategic image use of populists (Omena et al., 2021). The approach of computer vision-based analysis was chosen due to the sample size, as it has already proved helpful in previous work to examine patterns at a "macro-level" (Pearce & Gaetano, 2021). The network was rendered by Gephi displaying images and their assigned labels as nodes and the edges as relations between both node types. ForceAtlas2, as proposed by Omena et al. (2021) and Venturini et al. (2018) was used to detect clusters among the labels and contiguous images. This particular layout is a force-driven algorithm that spatially arranges nodes by repulsion and attraction, with edges acting as attractive forces and nodes acting as repulsive forces between nodes, drawing nodes with the same or similar labels closer together (Venturini et al., 2018). Since no unique clusters could be mapped through spatialisation, the *Modularity*

Class was then applied to identify the most densely connected communities (Blondel et al., 2008). In Figure 2, the resulting graph, coloured according to the detected Modularity Classes, is shown.

Figure 2. Visual communication strategy: labels - images.
Source: Own elaboration

Six main clusters were detected. To analyse clusters, labels were filtered by Partition (Modularity Class) to see the used labels per cluster and their occurrence. Table 2 shows all six clusters and their top labels ranked by occurrence count.

Table 2. Visual communication strategy: clusters and detected labels. Source: Own elaboration

purple	blue	rose	green	red	orange
Suit (1477)	Event (915)	Motor vehicle (185)	Sky (526)	Font (832)	Smile (629)
Gesture (1343)	Table (459)	Vehicle (185)	Plant (327)	Screenshot (304)	Sleeve (387)
Tie (1317)	Chair (366)	Automotive design (115)	Tree (271)	Number (236)	Happy (310)
Coat (1072)	Outerwear (277)	Tire (88)	Building (240)	Circle (233)	Forehead (244)
Blazer (752)	Furniture (187)	Wheel (88)	Cloud (240)	Product (228)	Human (213)

In addition to the quantitative analysis of the label occurrence per cluster, their visual content was qualitatively interpreted. Therefore, the ImageID nodes were printed as pictures and viewed. Subsequently, the clusters were renamed and given the following descriptions: "Graphic elements", "National pride", "Ordinary people", "Personal Power", "Everyday life" and "Transportation". The qualitative and quantitative investigation of the clusters combined with the cluster size and the label-node size, which indicates the occurrence of each label, allowed the detection of a visual communication strategy of populist leaders.

To investigate if the detected primary strategy is shared across all leaders, a second bipartite graph was rendered by Gephi. In this graph, the GV_Best_Guess Label and the Instagram Accounts of all 12 leaders were used as nodes, and the Instagram Account node was plotted as an image: the corresponding Instagram Profile Picture. While the GV_Label_Descriptions used in the graph above describe the image by several labels with different confidence values, the best guess, as the name suggests, provides the most probable estimate of the image theme (Google Cloud, 2022). This particular feature of Google Vision was used to compare the most dominant visual themes of all populists and to investigate whether and in which visual themes their strategies overlap or diverge. However, since the best guess is based on theme-like images from the internet, the result had to be critically scrutinised in the analysis.

Figure 3. Common & distinct visual communication: best guess labels - profiles. Source: Own elaboration

Figure 3 shows the spatialisation of the two used nodes connected by their edges as images. Like in the graph above, ForceAtlas2 was applied, spatialising the nodes with the most shared connections in the centre and the nodes with the least connections in the periphery and allowing further analysis of those zones (Omena & Amaral, 2019). In addition, the best guess label nodes were sized and coloured by In-Degree to highlight the most occurred image descriptions by Google Vision. In Figure 3, all nodes with only one degree were filtered out for better visualisation.

In a second step, the filter was removed, and the Ego Network filter on Gephi was applied

with Depth 1 to colour the two politicians in the periphery and their connected best guess labels. Due to this procedure, the common visual communication elements could be detected, and the specialties of the politicians in the periphery were investigated. The results can be found in the findings section.

Regarding colour analysis, the tool ImageSorter was used for the image dataset of every politician to detect noticeable patterns in their communication, which can be compared among other politicians.

With the use of such Vision APIs as Google Vision API and Microsoft Azure (GV_Web_ Entity_Description and MA_Description_Captions respectively), we were able to determine whether the politician is depicted in a picture or some other people can be found there. That information was then used to identify the type of Instagram accounts.

According to Lilleker, in political communication, an "image must convey an idea that is consistent with the audience's learned values" (Lilleker, 2019). As this study aimed to investigate the communication style of politicians from 12 different countries, taking into account the cultural background of each would have been beyond the scope of this study. For this reason, the study focused on describing the visible features of their communication strategy. However, for a deeper investigation, further work is suggested to focus on understanding their strategy in the light of cultural and social background.

2.3. Content engagement

A sequence of steps was made in order to depict the most and least engaged-with images on each of the populists' Instagram pages. Engagement is calculated by adding the number of likes to the number of comments on each post extracted using PhantomBuster. Then, tables on Google Spreadsheets allowed for ranging and numbering.

2.4. Written communication

To understand populist leaders' communication strategies, every word they used in 2020 on Instagram was analysed with the Voyant Tool (https://voyant-tools.org/) and the Google Vision API. The latter identified the words written in the pictures. The collected text corpus was then translated into English for adequate results. Both the description of the posts and the posts with text were qualitatively analysed as some of the leaders post on Instagram screenshots of their own tweets such as Jair Bolsonaro.

3. Findings

3.1. Visual communication

The two most significant detected label clusters were "Personal power" and "National pride." "Personal power" is conveyed by pictures that show the politicians in an official setting, usually in the centre, wearing suits and ties, holding a speech, pictured alone or with other political leaders. The "National pride" cluster contains pictures that show national monuments like the White House of the USA or the Triglav Mountain in

Slovenia and pictures with the military or the president in military clothes. This indicates that populist leaders use the strategy of posting pictures that show them as a strong central personality who is very connected with the country and its traditions. However, almost as a counterpole to this unattainable figure, the two clusters, "Everyday life" and "ordinary people", who together account for nearly 30% of the total network, convey a sense of the politician being accessible and a man just like everyone else. Some dominant pictures show their daily life at work, eating with their families, or at social events. Also, close-ups, where the political leader is still in the middle, are found in this cluster but with a positive and friendly facial expression and often in leisure clothing. Figure 4 provides a stereotypical picture of every cluster.

Figure 4. Visual communication strategy: Cluster Descriptions. Source: Own elaboration

Since the cluster graphic elements account for 15% of the network and contain mainly screenshots showing pure text and small amounts of pictures with slogans, this cluster was closely investigated in point 3, "Written content".

The detected visual strategy is also mirrored in the analysis of the Best Guess Label - Instagram Account Network. Nodes with the highest in-degree (Figure 5) shown by size and colour in the centre of the network can also be found in the above described dominant clusters:

- Personal power: public speaking, suit, official, business

- National pride: tree, sky, photograph, crowd

- Everyday life: social group, furniture

Figure 5. Common & distinct visual communication - centre.
Source: Own elaboration

When looking at the centre, we can see that all politicians except two are very close to the centre, which indicates that their visual content posted contains similar topics. The best-guessed terms associated only with one Instagram account usually have names or descriptions of the specific politicians and their countries, which is why this analysis focused only on the more general words. By closely investigating the connected labels to Narendra Modi and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in the periphery, one can see that

the labelling algorithm of Google Vision influenced their spatial position. In the case of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Google Vision extracted the labels in Spanish. It often used his initials "amlo", but he is using similar topics as detected in the centre: e.g. official clothing. Another influence on his spatialisation is the low amount of pictures that were extracted from his Instagram account; therefore, fewer connections could be made which is also true for Narendra Modi. However, in the case of the Indian leader specific general descriptions were labelled differently by Google Vision due to the country's specifics: Orange, Festival, Writing. The pictures corresponding to those descriptions could have also been labelled as Orange = official, business, Festival = crowd, and Writing = document, which would draw Narendra Modi's node closer to the centre. Therefore, it can be argued that similar visual content is used by all of the 12 investigated populist leaders. They convey power through posting pictures where they are shown in official settings, alone in the centre or with other political leaders and showing solidarity with one's own country by posting monuments, traditional celebrations but also pictures from their everyday lives.

3.2. Colour analysis

Having performed the colour analysis, we can divide politicians into three main groups:

      a) with a specific pattern of action;

      b) with the will to transmit a mood;

      c) without a detectable style.

The first category (Figure 6) contains politicians whose pictures overall transmit a mood with homogeneous colour palettes despite defined clusters. Orbán's pictures, for instance, are dark and shady, with colours just related to flags and his figure, which are highlighted. Rajapaksa's images have a prevalence of the orange colour, which is highly associated with religious ceremonies. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Borissov has a majority of blue, with images representing huge infrastructures. Finally, Modi's dataset has a prevalence of the orange colour as leader but images related to military power are also noticeable. The predominance of orange in the images of Rajapaksa and Modi is linked to cultural meanings that are also associated with the religion of Buddhism and Hinduism (Kudrya-Marais & Olalere, 2022).

The second category can group politicians that use specific patterns (Figure 7). For instance, Bolsonaro, Netanyahu, and Conte usually share Twitter screenshots. The Brazilian president shows two main clusters: the national flag and close-up photos with a blue background. Moreover, he shared the same photo many times, resizing it. Netanyahu's profile shares many titles of articles related to the Covid vaccine and images with the Israelian flag. Conte's dataset presents a group of close-up photos with a specific graphic containing his quotes, pictures taken while signing documents, and the country's flag. Images of Trump's profile present many graphics as well, related in particular to his election campaign. Moreover, he has many photos with crowds, mainly associated with the 2020 elections.

Orbán

Rajapaksa

Borissov

Modi

Figure 6. Distribution of photos by colour. Source: Own elaboration

Even though the group includes politicians with a similar communication pattern, an oversight of the profiles shows Bolsonaro as an outsider due to his lower image quality and a "less refined" style. The remaining three politicians seem to have well-defined communication, with recurring graphic elements used for their posts. While this latter group seems to be guided by professional communication decisions made by social media managers, the "less refined" style of Bolsonaro's profile may also result from a professional, intentional choice.

The overview through Image Sorter of the remaining politicians does not present noticeable outlines.

Bolsonaro

Netanyahu

Conte

Trump

Figure 7. Distribution of photos by colour. Source: Own elaboration

3.4. Personal / politician-oriented vs. institutional accounts

The accounts of Mega-influencers can be grouped either into:

1) *personal or politician-oriented* if more than 60% of posts include politicians themselves;

2) *mixed accounts* with circa an equal distribution of pictures with the politician and other content;

3) *institutional accounts* with more than 50% of posts portraying other people, events, text content, or/and architecture.

The accounts of Narendra Damodardas Modi (@narendramodi) and Jair M. Bolsonaro (@jairmessiasbolsonaro) were identified as *personal accounts*. Indeed, they use Instagram as a diary, posting pictures with their portraits in different environments. The accounts of Donald J. Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Giuseppe Conte (@giuseppeconte_ufficiale), and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (@lopezobrador) are *balanced in terms of content*. These politicians publish pictures of them and other people and events. Finally, the Instagram account of Benjamin Netanyahu (@b.netanyahu) is the only account that can be characterized as an *institutional one* because the majority of posts include content that does not have photos of Benjamin Netanyahu himself.
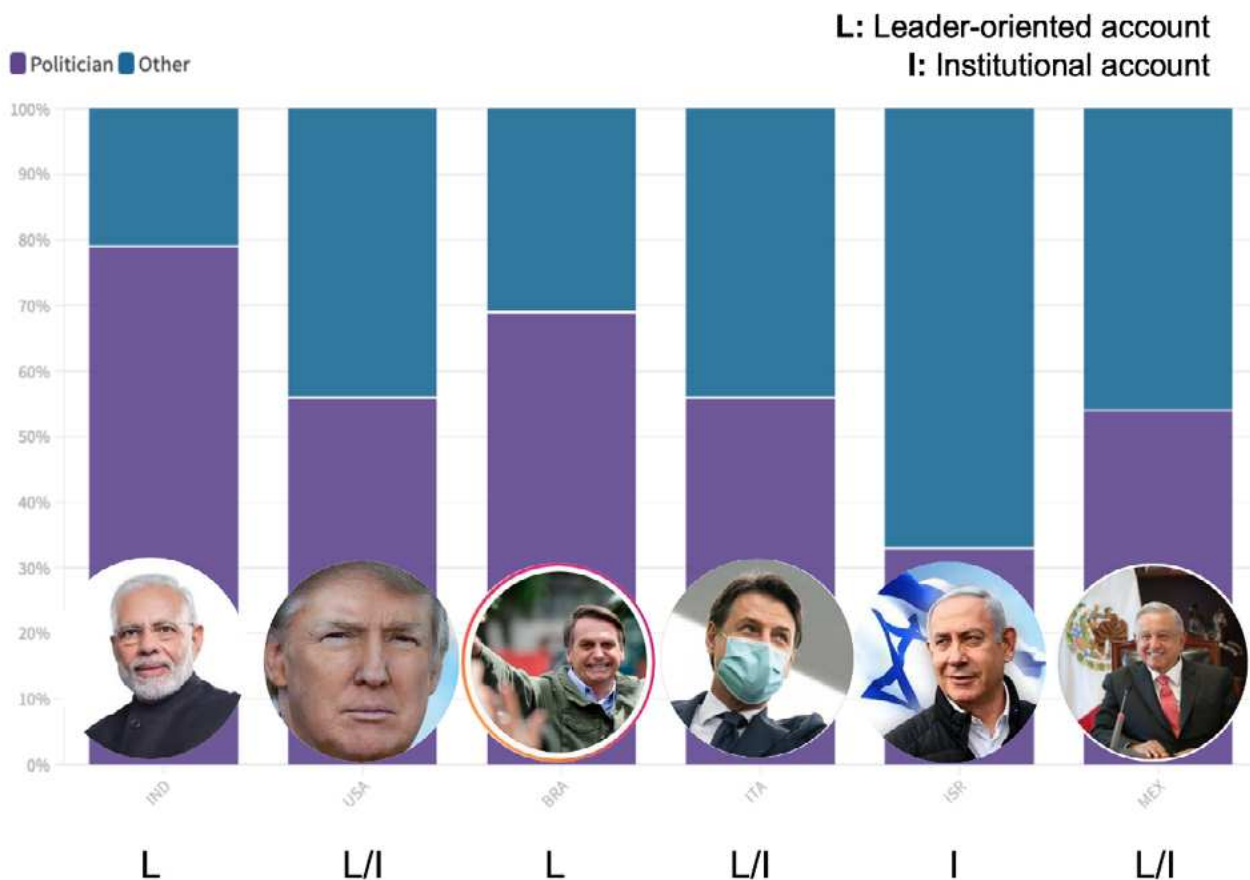
Figure 8. Shares of photos with Mega-influencers, present on them.
Source: Own elaboration

3.5. Content engagement

Analysing the engagement level of Instagram posts, several insights were found. First, in accordance with common patterns, Instagram accounts were grouped into three tables.

> *Insight 1:* Close-up portraits and images depicting 'ordinary life' increase engagement, while formal settings and posters decrease the number of likes and comments (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Insight 1 illustration. Own elaboration.

Aleksandar Vučić (@buducnostsrbijeav) is recognized in the five pictures from the list of the most engaged-with publications as they are his portraits. At the same time, it is pretty challenging to find him on images from the list of least engaged with. As for Andrés Manuel López Obrador (@lopezobrador), the President of Mexico is usually easily recognized in the pictures on his Instagram page; however, it is evident that his portraits taken outside are more engaged-with than the photos taken in his office. Posts with portraits of Giuseppe Conte (@giuseppeconte_ufficiale) also produce more likes and comments. Donald J. Trump's Instagram (@realdonaldtrump) shows that events sometimes are more important than the pictures chosen to depict them; however, it is clear that pictures with the face of Trump are pretty popular and that 'professionally designed' posts are not as engaging.

> *Insight 2:* Posts with family members and children are very popular, while official meetings do not produce so many likes and comments (Figure 10).

For example, Ivan Janša (@jjansasds) publishes pictures with his wife and children in informal settings, and these pictures are more engaged-with than the so-called 'official publications.' Posts by Boyko Borissov (@boyko.borissov) and Orbán Viktor (@orbanviktor) with children produce significantly more likes and comments than pictures depicting their working environment. The President of Poland, Andrzej Duda (@prezydent_pl), quite often publishes pictures with his wife, Agata Kornhauser-Duda, the current first lady of Poland, and these pictures produce much more engagement than other posts.

Figure 10. Insight 2 illustration. Source: Own elaboration

Insight 3: Posts with a lot of text on pictures are significantly less popular than others (Figure 11).

Instagram accounts of Gotabaya Rajapaksa (@gotabayar), Benjamin Netanyahu (@b. netanyahu), Jair M. Bolsonaro (@jairmessiasbolsonaro), and Narendra Damodardas Modi (@narendramodi) prove that Instagram is not a platform for posting text content if it is not a screenshot of a tweet. Posts with politicians themselves in them are substantially more engaging than posts with their quotes, screenshots of articles, and posters.

Figure 11. Insight 3 illustration. Source: Own elaboration

3.6. Written communication

Some of the most used words detected by the text analysis are: "Day", "People", "President", "Health", "Citizens", "Government", "National", "State", "Forces" or "Measures".

> *"In honor of Serbian heroes who lost their lives in Kosovo and Metohija. 38 The 38 were killed in the battle of baskets. Serbia remembers!" - The President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, laid a wreath on the monument to the father-in-laws 1998-1999. Years."*

Aleksandar Vučić

Populist leaders are very devoted to promoting their national culture to gather the people around the nation. Pictures present many national buildings, flags, and traditional events, a national communication reflected in the language. All the leaders use words that refer to their country and allow them to promote their patriotic sentiment. They also use terms that evoke power and strength, talking about decisions they make for the country and demonstrating the power of the government they rule. The effect is the emphasis on their power and strength, a strategy reflected in the pictures, where the leaders show themselves in situations where they demonstrate control and influence.

> *"I'm not fighting for me, I'm fighting for the 74.000.000 million people (not including the Trump ballots that were "tossed"), a record for a sitting President who voted for me !"*

Donald Trump

The analysis shows that they also use trivial language, which evokes routine and everyday life. For example, they write about their family, and some, like Modi, use religious and spiritual lexicon. People can relate to this vocabulary, making them think that populist leaders come from the people, live like them, and use a simple language that everybody can understand and relate to.

Populist leaders are cautious about the type of language and vocabulary they use on Instagram. They use words about power and the nation to promote their political leadership and trivial vocabulary to get close to the people and gain popularity.
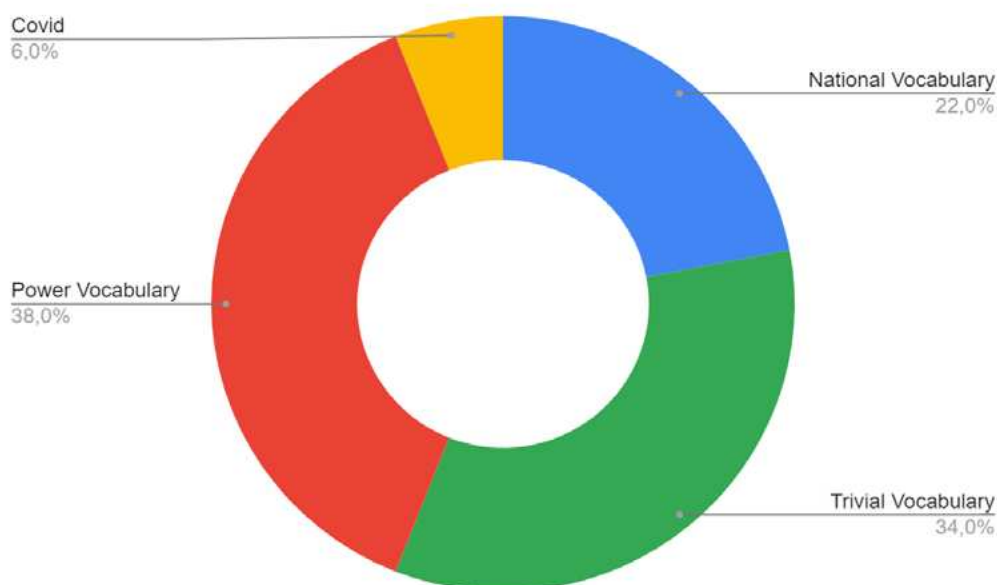

Figure 12. Distribution of different types of vocabulary across politician's posts. Source: Own elaboration

Coronavirus represents only 6 % of the words used by all the populists. The frequency of mention of COVID-19 (and relatable words) was also analysed. It was calculated country by country (e.g., 25% in Rajapaksa's post of posts in 2020, while 2% in Duda's communication), but since the frequency is based on a %, it varies a lot due to considerable differences in the total quantity of posts between the leaders. But there is a difference between text and images about COVID-19. It was noticed that Benyamin Netanyahu posted a lot of pictures with vaccines because he wanted to promote the scientific progress and economy of his country. Still, in the text analysis, we only found 2% of posts mentioning covid-19. In the end, the populist leaders did not mention covid a lot in their written communication and preferred to underline the messages of the pictures by using an impactful vocabulary. Nevertheless, it could be seen that political leaders of countries critical of the existence of Corona or downplaying its impact rarely addressed the issue in written or visual form.

> *"The Chinese vaccine of João Dória.*
>
> *For my government, any vaccine, before being made available to the population, should be scientifically proven by the Ministry of Health and Certified by ANVISA.*
>
> *The Brazilian people will not be a guinea pig.*
>
> *No billionaire is justified for a financial contribution in a medicine that has even surpassed its testing phase.*
>
> *In view of the foregoing, my decision is not to acquire the said vaccine."*
>
> Jair Bolsonaro

4. Conclusion and future studies

Connecting our findings with the theoretical framework described in the introduction, we observe that the main clusters detected during the network analysis may represent different characteristics of populism. The cluster "Personal power" relates to populist leaders always being portrayed as extraordinary personalities, a characteristic described in Moffitt (2016). Besides, one of the strategies such politicians apply is to address those "pure" people they supposedly represent and show that they all have one mission (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). This explains why there is a cluster of "Ordinary people". Populists also strive to get closer to the "pure" lower culture of the people rather than the higher culture of the elite (Ostiguy, 2009). Hence, the cluster of images "Everyday life" emerges. Furthermore, as a result of the engagement analysis, we discovered that images of "ordinary life", unlike images in official settings, and photos with family members and children produce the most likes and comments.

There are two strategies of populists on social media that stand out: 1) either a politician heavily relies on their charisma and, thus, the account is more politician-oriented and, thus, may even seem like a personal account (for instance, Narendra D. Modi's and Jair M. Bolsonaro's accounts); 2) or a politician posts images where he is not depicted, so he is not the central figure of the publication, and such an account may be characterized

as an institutional one (for example, Benjamin Netanyahu). However, it is true that in order to detect the distinctive features of populists, there is a need to compare the content of these populists with the content of other politicians who are not considered to be such, and that may become the basis for future studies.

While the use of digital methods and the computer vision API has allowed us to look at the issue of communication strategy from different angles, there are still some limitations that need to be kept in mind. As far as the labels attributed by Google Vision are concerned, they follow a certain hierarchy in interpreting the data that must not be disregarded. In this paper, a recording, like already suggested by D'Andréa & Mintz (2021), was done by the authors based on the clusters displayed through Google Vision labels and Gephi, as described in the Methodology section. Another interesting finding concerning the labelling algorithms was the output of specific images not in English but in the national language of the country where the image was taken. While no conclusion can be drawn as to when this is the case, it is something we should consider for future studies

Regardless of the limitations, the use of digital methods, computer vision APIs, and the representation of networks made it possible to answer all research questions to a certain extent. The findings indicated that populist leaders post images that convey personal and national power. They convey the message that they are the embodiment of national power, strong leaders on whom the people can rely, but also show that they are close to the people, that they follow traditions and that they can be referred to and relied upon. Through Instagram, the image conveys that they are at the same time ordinary citizens and strong men who are loyal to their country and act only in the best interests of it, as the textual *issuefication* of the global topic, COVID-19, has shown.

As for future studies, this study can be enriched by emotion analysis (using APIs) and sentiment analysis (using Python) of the text in the images and the post descriptions. Thus, an overview can be given of the range of emotions that populist leaders use for their communication, which seems most attractive to their audience/voters. To get a holistic picture of their communication strategies, we suggest that in further research, to also examine posts of these politicians on other well-known platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and extend the time frame of the analysed data. This would provide insights into the dynamics of their visual communication and show how and if it has changed over time.

Finally, to better understand the differences and similarities between the Instagram communication of populist and non-populist leaders, a comparative analysis of the visual communication strategies of both camps would be an interesting topic for future research.

Author contributions

Ilya Lavrov (IL), Chiara Miozzo (CM), Marie Palaffre (MP), Franziska Schranz (FS)

Project pitch, the initial research and design: *IL*

Project introduction and contextualization: *IL*

Research design: *IL, FS, CM, MP*

Dataset building and research visual protocol: *IL, FS, CM, MP*

Data analysis (and respective visualisations): *image-label network analysis (FS), engagement analysis (IL), determining the type of accounts (IL), textual analysis (MP), image grouping/colour analysis (CM), Instagram-Profile appropriation (CM, FS, IL, MP)*

References

Blondel, V.D., Guillaume, J.-L., Lambiotte, R. & Lefebvre, E. (2008). Fast unfolding of communities in large networks, J. Stat. Mech., P10008.

Chao, J. (2021). "Memespector GUI: Graphical User Interface Client for Computer Vision APIs [Computer Software] (Version 0.1)" [C#] (Original work published 2021). https://github.com/jason-chao/memespector-gui

Google Cloud.(2022). Features List | Cloud Vision API. Google Cloud. https://cloud.google.com/vision/docs/features-list

D'Andréa, C. and Mintz, A. (2021). "Investigating cross-platform visual issuefication." #SMARTDataSprint. https://smart.inovamedialab.org/past-editions/2021-platformisation/project-reports/investigating-cross-platform/

Dittrich, P. J. and the Jacques Delors Institut. (2017). "Social networks and populism in the EU. Four things you should know." https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/socialnetworksandpopulism-dittrich-jdib-april17-2.pdf

Ekman, M. and Widholm, A. (2017). "Political Communication in an age of visual connectivity: Exploring Instagram practices among Swedish politicians." *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, *15*(1), 15–32.https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.15.1.15_1

Farkas, X. and Bene, M. (2021). "Images, Politicians, and Social Media: Patterns and Effects of Politicians' Image-Based Political Communication Strategies on Social Media." *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(1), 119–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220959553

Freedom House. (2020): "Freedom in the World 2020 A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy". Available on the Internet: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf

Gordillo-Rodríguez M.T. and Bellido-Pérez, E. (2021). "Politicians self-representation on Instagram: the professional and the humanized candidate during 2019 Spanish elections." *Observatorio*, 15(1), 109-136.

Hand, M. (2012). "Ubiquitous photography." UK: Polity Press.

Influencer Marketing Hub. (2021). Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report https://influencermarketinghub.com/ebooks/influencer_marketing_benchmark_report_2021.pdf

Kenny, P. D. (2021). "The strategic approach to populism". In D. B. Subedi, T. Lynch, A. Scott, & H. Brasted (Eds.), *Handbook on populism in the Asia Pacific*. Routledge.

Kyle, J. and Meyer, B. (2020). "High Tide? Populism in Power, 1990–2020". Institute for Global Change. https://institute.global/policy/high-tide-populism-power-1990-2020

Kudrya-Marais, E. & Olalere, F. (2022). The Spiritual Language of Colour: A Case Study of Colour Symbolism in Hindu Community in South Africa. Pharos Journal of Theology. 103. 10.46222/pharosjot.10321.

Lalancette, M. and Raynauld, V. (2017). "The power of political image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram, and celebrity politics." *American Behavioral Scientist*, *63*(7), 888–924. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217744838

Lilleker, D. (2019). The Power of Visual Political Communication: Pictorial Politics Through the Lens of Communication Psychology. 10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3_3.

Maarek, P. J. (2014). "Politics 2.0: New Forms of Digital Political Marketing and Political Communication." *Tripodos*, 1(34), 13-22. http://www.tripodos.com/index.php/Facultat_Comunicacio_Blanquerna/article/view/163

Miller-Idriss, C. (2019). "The Oxford Handbook of Populism", edited by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy. *Populism*, *2*(2), 247–251. https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-02021036

Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2018). "Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda." *Comparative Political Studies,* 51(13), 1667–1693. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018789490

Omena, J. J. and Amaral, I. (2019). "Sistema de leitura de redes digitais multiplataforma." In Janna Joceli Omena (Ed.), Métodos Digitais: Teoria-Prática-Crítica (pp. 121–140). Lisbon: ICNOVA.

Omena, J. J., Elena, P., Gobbo, B., & Jason, C. (2021). "The Potentials of Google Vision API-based Networks to Study Natively Digital Images". *Revista Diseña*, *19*. https://doi.org/10.7764/disena.19.article.1

Ostiguy, P. (2009). "The high and the low in politics: a two-dimensional political space for comparative analysis and electoral studies". Kellogg Institute, https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old_files/ documents/360_0.pdf

Page, J. T. and Duffy, M. E. (2016). "What does credibility look like? tweets and walls in U.S. presidential candidates' visual storytelling." *Journal of Political Marketing*, *17*(1), 3–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2016.1171819

Pearce, W., & De Gaetano, C. (2021). Google Images, Climate Change, and the Disappearance of Humans. Diseña, (19), Article.3. https://doi.org/10.7764/disena.19.Article.3

Russmann, U., Svensson, J., & Larsson, A. O. (2019). "Political parties and their pictures: Visual Communication on Instagram in Swedish and Norwegian election campaigns." *Visual Political Communication*, 119–144. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3_7

Schill, D. (2012). "The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication." *Review of Communication*, *12*(2), 118–142.https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504

Spiekermann, Kai (2020). "Why Populists Do Well on Social Networks." *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* 12 (2):50-71.

Stout, D. W. (2021). "Social Media Statistics 2022: Top Networks By the Numbers. Dustin Stout." https://dustinstout.com/social-media-statistics/

Strand, R. T. and Schill, D. (2019). "The Visual Presidency of Donald Trump's First Hundred Days: Political Image-Making and Digital Media." In A. Veneti, D. Jackson, & D. G. Lilleker (Eds.), *Visual Political Communication* (1st ed. 2019 ed., pp. 167–187). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-18729-3

Tambini, Damian (2018) Social media power and election legitimacy. In: Tambini, Damian and Moore, Martin, (eds.) Digital dominance: the power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple. Oxford University Press, New York, NY, pp. 265-293. ISBN 9780190845117

Venturini, T., Jacomy, M., & Jensen, P. (2019). "What Do We See When We Look at Networks. An Introduction to Visual Network Analysis and Force-Directed Layouts." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3378438

Zailskaitė-Jakštė, L., Ostreika, A., Jakštas, A., Staneviciene, E. & Damasevicius, R. (2017). Brand communication in social media: The use of image colours in popular posts. 1373-1378. 10.23919/MIPRO.2017.7973636.

Weyland, K. (2020). "Populism's Threat to Democracy: Comparative Lessons for the United States." *Perspectives on Politics*, *18*(2), 389–406. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592719003955