

Cross-platform political communication: A comparative analysis of social media campaigning by Italian populist radical right leaders *

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Research shows that social media favors personalized, intimate, and emotional political communication and underlines the elective affinity between social media and populist leaders. However, cross-platform research on political communication is still rare. Existing studies focus on three aspects: how party strategists or politicians assess the relative importance of different social media platforms based on their affordances, the parties' and politicians' different investments in the various platforms and audience engagement, and message-tailoring on specific social media platforms. In this paper, we aim to compare the political communication of two right-wing populist party leaders in Italy—Giorgia Meloni (Fdi) and Matteo Salvini (Lega)—between 2021 and 2022 on three social media platforms: Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The analysis focuses on time, content, and similarity. The results of the cross-platform analysis confirm the evidence of a permanent campaign mode of the two leaders and point to four main results: a cross-platform similarity in communication, a difference in audience engagement, the relevance of depoliticized political communication, and a higher audience engagement when communication focuses on positive rather than aggressive content. These findings significantly impact our understanding of political communication in the digital age.

Keywords: political communication; populism; cross-platform analysis; Italy; social media

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Introduction. Populism and social media

A growing body of literature investigates what has been defined as the “elective affinity” between populism and social media (Gerbaudo, 2018), as well as the affordances that make social media a more favorable environment for populist communication than traditional media. Theory and research have often focused on how social media may give voice and identity to “the people” and allow populists to disintermediate their communication and avoid journalism’s gatekeeping. Hopster (2021) has noticed how social media not only allow the circumvention of journalistic filters but also, due to their architectures and logic, favor sensational claims, simplistic styles, and a real-time expression of the “general will” of the people. The affinity between populism and social media is such that some research suggests the existence of an “endemic” populism in social media, which is present in some elements of the communication of non-populist leaders as well (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Moreover, social media favors personalized, more intimate, and emotional communication that can sometimes spin toward aggressiveness (Berti & Loner, 2023; Cossarini & Vallespin, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). This feature has led scholars to focus on the relationship between populist leadership and social media. Bracciale and Martella (2018), using the case study of Italian populist leaders, identified four different populist communication styles on Twitter. These styles (champion of the people, engaging, man on the street, and intimate) differ in their tone and focus, with two of them centered not much on political issues but somewhat on sharing intimate and emotional moments of a politician’s private life or interacting in a friendly way with the audience. Social media favor the circulation of messages charged with emotionality (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013), which thus becomes a tool in the hands of populists to spread their message, as some research has suggested that emotions may play a relevant role in boosting populist attitudes (Hameleers et al., 2017).

While personalization is a central characteristic of all contemporary politics (McAllister, 2007) and nowadays contributes to shaping voters’ behavior (Garzia, 2011), populists find themselves in a position of advantage, as their narratives are often based on charismatic leadership (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) and direct contact with “the people,” to the point of identification (Urbinati, 2020). Social media affordances facilitate the mingling of public and private spaces, the political and the intimate (Enli & Skogerbo, 2013), thus offering populists an ideal terrain for effective communication.

The results of these strategic advantages can be highly relevant: some recent research, for instance, suggests that not only are politicians perceived as more trustworthy on social media than on talk shows or news interviews but that populist politicians are perceived as more authentic than traditional politicians (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Moreover, the success of populist communication on social media appears to be due mainly to stylistic rather than ideological elements, as “populism’s growing leverage in electoral campaigns has much more to do with the use of individualized, personalized, aggressive, and emotional communication strategies than with its thin ideology” (Bracciale et al., 2021), although the combination of populist style and populist ideology seems to elicit the highest engagement.

Finally, it should be noted that the broad use of social media for political communication has led to a spillover effect in newspapers, possibly due, in part, to the often incendiary and polarizing content of their social media content. As a result, the advantages of populist communication on social media are accompanied by a tendency to move political communication away from political debate and toward more personalized, emotional, and intimate content or aggressive communication, attracting, at the same time, the attention of other, more traditional media.

Despite the relevance of online communication, cross-platform studies that analyze the implications of platforms' differences are still rare. This research aims to investigate the communication of right-wing populist leaders on social media, focusing on Italy and studying the similarities and dissimilarities of the messages published on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook by Giorgia Meloni (Fdi) and Matteo Salvini (Lega). The following sections present the theoretical framework and the research questions, case study, data and methodology, and results and conclude with a discussion on the implications of the study.

Theoretical framework and research questions: Cross-platform analysis and permanent campaign

This work aims to contribute to the debate about political communication by combining two strands of research: cross-platform analysis of political communication and studies on the permanent campaign mode.

Regarding cross-platform communication, social media platforms differ in their digital affordances and their users' profiles; hence, it would be relevant to understand whether, how, and to what extent political communication varies across different platforms. Broadly speaking, platform convergence occurs when political leaders adopt the same content and style of communication from one social network to another, while platform divergence indicates a difference in content and style. This divergence may be related to politicians' attempts to tailor their message, considering platforms' technical differences and users' characteristics. As Bossetta and Schmøkel (2023) have noted, degrees of convergence and divergence have relevant implications for studying political communication. A high degree of convergence means that the results from studies focusing on one social network would be highly generalizable. Conversely, if divergence prevails, analyzing communication on individual social networks separately is useful, as it allows researchers to study the different styles and narratives that emerge.

Cross-platform research on political communication is still rare (Bode & Vraga, 2017). Among the studies comparatively exploring political communication across platforms, some focus on how party strategists or politicians assess the relative importance of different social media platforms based on their affordances and imagined audiences. For example, in a comparative survey of 12 countries, Lilleker et al. (2015) showed the prominence of Facebook among parties' "must-have" (see also Magin et al., 2017; Bossetta, 2018), while Twitter was perceived as mainly addressing well-educated audiences as well as the media

and political élite (see also Jensen & Schwartz, 2020). Of course, platform assessment changes over time, as shown by Kelm et al. (2019), who reported the increased perceived importance of Twitter among German politicians.

Different assessments and imagined audiences can influence variations in the use of social media platforms. This is confirmed by Enli and Skogerbø (2013), who revealed that Norwegian politicians reported using Facebook for marketing purposes and Twitter for dialoguing with the audience. However, Ross and Bürger (2014) found no difference in how New Zealand's politicians used Twitter and Facebook—primarily for disseminating information. The different uses of social media can also be attributed to other factors, such as financial resources, party positioning, and actors' personalities (Quinlan et al., 2018). For example, Larsson and Kalsens (2014) showed that in 2014, in Norway and Sweden, the most active politicians on social media were the “underdogs.” Skogerbø and Larsson (2021) demonstrated that Instagram was significantly more appealing for smaller parties, which used it as an alternative social media, while for mainstream parties, it was complementary to messages spread on other social media. Jacobs et al. (2020) also showed differences in the use of Twitter and Facebook between populist and non-populist MPs in Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Recently, Bossetta (2018) proposed a framework to compare the effects of the digital architecture of four social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat—on political communication. Applying the framework to the case study of the US 2016 elections, Bossetta demonstrated that the network structure, functionality, algorithmic filtering, and datafication influence political strategies “in terms of the audiences they try to reach, the form and content of messages they produce, the diffusion patterns of these messages, and how financial resources are allocated for digital campaigning on social media” (Bossetta, 2018, p. 490).

Studies focusing on the effects of political strategies for communicating through different platforms highlight differences in audience engagement across social media platforms. For example, Larsson (2020) compared Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube during the 2017 Norwegian elections and demonstrated that the themes of popular, viral posts vary across platforms. This suggests the need to adapt political messages to each specific outlet: in fact, the impact of the same message varies depending on the platforms' audience and social media logic. Analyzing the US 2020 elections, Bossetta and Schmøkel (2023) explored the role of emotions by comparing engagement with politicians' images on Facebook and Instagram. Their results show that the message content is the same on both platforms and that “angry” posts are less likely to raise much engagement on Instagram and Facebook. Moreover, on Instagram, the audience rewarded posts showing happiness the most, suggesting generational polarization in social media use.

Focusing on populist communication, Schwartz et al. (2021) compared the activities of populist actors with those of non-populist competitors across three social networks (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland). In addition to confirming that populist actors perform better than non-populist actors on social media, their results show that Facebook is the social media platform most used by populists for audience engagement, granting high engagement, particularly to posts exhibiting anger and an aggressive communication style. Similar results were found for

Twitter, even though the content of the posts was also directed to criticize those perceived as “political and mass media elite”. They also found that Instagram was less popular with populist parties and that when it was used, posts were often shaped to convey a playful and softer side of political leaders. While disagreeing on the role of angry and positive communication, these studies converge in affirming that social media audiences differ and suggest that populist actors may differentiate the type and style of the content they provide on different platforms.

Concerning the theoretical framework of the permanent campaign mode, one idea often associated with the birth and spread of television and social media is that political leaders are continuously campaigning. This term was initially used by Blumenthal (1980) to describe US politics. Contemporary communication strategy demonstrates the continuous effort of politicians—thanks to the help of sophisticated technologies and communication experts—to gain consensus. According to this perspective, there would be no changes between being in an electoral campaign or being in government, and the result is that “the process of campaigning and the process of governing have each lost their distinctiveness” (Ornstein & Mann, 2000).

This perspective has also been applied to study other countries, including Great Britain (Needham, 2005), Greece and Australia (Van Onselen & Errington, 2007), Ecuador (Conaghan & de la Torre, 2008), Italy (Iannelli & Giglietto, 2015), and Norway and Sweden (Larsson, 2016). Furthermore, it has been used indifferently by right-wing and left-wing leaders.

In her analysis of Bill Clinton’s and Tony Blair’s communications, Needham (2005) criticizes the permanent campaign model because “its assumption of continuity between election campaigning and office-holding fails to explain how the strategic terrain changes once a challenger takes office.” Consequently, she proposed a parallel between marketing relationships and electoral campaigns. This model compares voter support to purchasing a product, whereby there is an effort to win voters’ support both before the elections and after to maintain their loyalty. Needham suggested evaluating this relationship using six attributes of successful brands. The first is simplicity, since messages aimed at effectively promoting a product to the public should be clear and straightforward. The second attribute, uniqueness, highlights how the leaders try to differentiate themselves from other leaders and parties, presenting themselves as having unique characteristics (possibly) in line with the nation’s good. The third, reassurance, is the ability of the leaders to communicate to the public that voting for them minimizes risks and is ultimately the right choice, preventing (for example) the opposing party or leader, described as “evil,” from winning the elections. The fourth attribute, aspiration, means creating empathy with voters and convincing them that the leader will make their dreams come true. The fifth is affirmation, which pertains to core values. For example, Bill Clinton focused on opportunity, community, and responsibility during his presidential campaigns. Finally, credibility underscores that leaders should maintain their promises, especially after being elected.

After reviewing 87 studies, Joathan and Lilleker (2023) found two practical methods for identifying a permanent campaign when facing online campaigns. The first is the comparison of messages published during electoral and non-electoral periods, where the number of

messages published during the two types of periods should not differ when in permanent campaign mode. The second was based on the computation of the average number of posts during a legislative session. Politicians whose number of posts is above average are considered to be in a permanent campaign mode. Other measures include interaction with followers, for example, answering questions or sharing content from other users, and the number of followers, likes, comments, or other reactions received. Finally, negative campaigning and a personalized communication focus are considered strong indicators of a permanent campaign mode.

Roemmele and Gibson (2020) discussed the implications of permanent campaigns, noting that the spread of social media platforms has led democracies into a new phase of “data-driven” political campaigning. This phase can result in two variations with significant implications for the future of democracy. The first, termed “scientific,” aims to mobilize and inform voters. In contrast, the second, referred to as “subversive,” focuses on demobilization and the spread of misinformation. Hence, studying permanent campaigns and how they occur is a relevant scientific endeavor.

Three research questions stem from the strand of research on cross-platform analysis:

RQ1) How similar are the communications of the two leaders across the three social media platforms?

RQ2) Is there an effort to tailor communication on social media platforms by adapting the content to the platform’s constraints and the prevailing audience?

RQ3) Are the most popular messages the same across different social media platforms?

This set of questions looks at testing platforms’ convergence or divergence—which would have relevant implications for the study of populist leaders’ political campaigns on social media. In fact, if communication is convergent, the results of the analysis focusing on one social media could be generalized to other social media.

A fourth research question concerns the permanent campaign mode, which, as observed by Roemmele and Gibson (2020), can also have consequences for the health of democracy. *RQ4: Is there a discontinuity in communication between periods of electoral campaigns and non-campaign periods, or are the two leaders always in a permanent campaign mode (Blumenthal, 1980)?*

To address the research questions, this study focuses on the social media communication of two populist leaders, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini.

Why Meloni and Salvini? Why Fdl and Lega?

Scholars agree that the Fdl and the League are populist radical right parties (Rooduijn et al., 2023). The League, which started in the early 1990s, underwent a significant shift after Salvini was appointed party secretary in 2013. Originally focused on regionalism, defending the interests of the northern regions and opposing the central government in Rome, the party strategically embraced nationalist nativism, extending its influence to the southern regions. Its opposition to the EU has replaced its previous stance against the central

government (Albertazzi et al., 2018). This strategic shift has allowed the party to broaden its voter base across the entire country, a key evolution in its political strategy. FdI emerged as the heir of the Italian post-fascist parties. Under Meloni's leadership, it implemented a rebranding policy to differentiate itself from other Italian center-right parties and their post-fascist tradition (Puleo & Piccolino, 2022). This highlights the significant impact of individual leadership in shaping the identity and direction of political parties.

The change in image and ideology promoted by the two leaders was one of the factors that allowed these parties to position themselves and fully integrate into the mainstream at the national and European levels. The other factor was the mainstream's legitimization of these far-right parties: as Zulianello (2022) has pointed out, Berlusconi's entry into politics was a turning point. Thanks to Berlusconi, these far-right populist parties have gradually been integrated into the mainstream. As Rossi et al. (2021) pointed out, Italy has anticipated many recent political trends, making it an interesting case study. In fact, the process of mainstreaming and normalizing the far right also opened up a new phase for the populist party family in Western Europe. The results of all the radical right populist parties in the 2024 European Parliament elections demonstrate this. Furthermore, exploiting communication on social media platforms during campaigns allowed Lega and FdI to appear closer to the people and exponentially increase their support.

Exploring Meloni and Salvini's communication on social media is relevant for, at least, four reasons. First, the two right-wing populist leaders effectively exploited social networks to gain popularity and to attack their opponents (Berti & Loner, 2023). Second, both have vast numbers of followers. For example, although the Italian population does not exceed 59 million, as of July 31, 2023, Salvini had 5 million followers on Facebook, 2.2 on Instagram, and 1.5 on Twitter. Meloni's followers were 2.7, 1.6, and 1.9, respectively. Third, both have been leading their parties for a long time: Salvini since 2013 and Meloni since 2014. In this period, they have become undisputed points of reference within their party (also), thanks to the skillful use of social network communication. Lastly, the two leaders have had different experiences in terms of their role in government. Before being appointed prime minister after the September 25, 2022 elections, Meloni always led an opposition party (except in 2008, when she was a minister in the government led by Silvio Berlusconi). In contrast, Salvini was part of the government between 2018 and 2019, holding the deputy prime minister and interior minister roles, and his party supported the government led by Mario Draghi between 2021 and 2022.

Data and methods

In Italy, research on political communication on social media up to 2020 has primarily focused on Twitter and Facebook, without taking Instagram (or other social media) into account (Rossi et al., 2021). To address the research questions, our analysis compares the messages posted between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2022 by the leaders of Italy's two main right-wing populist parties—Giorgia Meloni (FdI) and Matteo Salvini

(Lega)—on all three platforms, considering multiple levels (time, content, and similarity) and combining quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The time interval was chosen for three reasons. First, 2022 was the year of the national elections in Italy; therefore, we expect the two leaders to have used social media platforms extensively for their campaigns. Comparing their use in 2021 and 2022 would also allow us to address RQ4. Second, in 2020, the dominant theme in the public opinion debate was the COVID-19 pandemic, so we preferred to start the analysis in 2021. Third, in 2023, Twitter was acquired by Elon Musk and changed its name (to X) and its features (particularly in relation to content moderation), and the composition of its users has also changed (many people have left the platform). Therefore, using newer data would have affected comparability.

According to DataReportal (2023), social networks are widespread in Italy. In 2023, there were 43.9 million active users on social media, about 74.5% of the entire population. The number of users is 27.9 million on Facebook, 26.2 million on Instagram, and 5.5 million on Twitter. The same source does not show significant gender differences, except for Twitter, where two out of three users are male. Another report confirms these results: Facebook is the second most popular social network platform in Italy (the first is WhatsApp), reaching 77.5% of online users (We Are Social & DataReportal, 2023). Instagram use is rising (72.9%), especially among young people, while Twitter is less popular (26.4%). Given their diffusion, social networks offer valuable and appropriate data for studying the communication of political leaders in Italy.

A total of 25,335 posts were collected through CrowdTangle (2023) within the timeframe considered. Both leaders are highly active on social networks. However, Salvini published more than Meloni on all three platforms: on average, 21.0 daily posts, in contrast to Meloni's 13.8 (Table 1).

	2021	2022	Post by day	Sum
Meloni				
Facebook	2022	1524	4,9	3546
Instagram	1741	1305	4,2	3046
Twitter	1934	1513	4,7	3447
<i>Total</i>	<i>5697</i>	<i>4342</i>	<i>13,8</i>	<i>10039</i>
Salvini				
Facebook	3206	2326	7,6	5532
Instagram	2350	1715	5,6	4065
Twitter	3354	2345	7,8	5699
<i>Total</i>	<i>8910</i>	<i>6386</i>	<i>21,0</i>	<i>15296</i>
	14607	10728		25335

Table 1. Posts by leader (Meloni: $n = 10039$; Salvini: $n = 15296$). Data downloaded from CrowdTangle (2023)

We used the open-source software R to analyze the data (R Core Team, 2023) and the Quanteda and RNewsFlow packages to manage the texts and compute cross-platform similarity (Benoit, Watanabe et al., 2018; Welbers et al., 2023). Data pre-processing

included the removal of the Italian stop words and stemming to reduce the words to the same root.

The research compared communication at multiple levels. The first level focused on a temporal scan through each leader's post timeline. This section aimed to observe whether there was a similar pattern in the timing of postings for the three social networks.

The second level was related to the overall comparison of the communication content. To this end, we quantitatively analyzed the posts of each leader and social network to observe whether the words used most often were the same across the three platforms.

The third level measures the similarity between posts published on different platforms using two indexes. The first index is cosine similarity, which estimates the degree of similarity in the two texts. Its score ranges from 1 if the texts are identical to 0 if there is no similarity (Gunawan et al., 2018). An advantage of this measure is that it can be computed for documents of different lengths. We also computed a second index, the overlap pct, namely, the percentage of overlapping terms between the documents. We computed these measures by day, considering all the posts published daily. Therefore, the single unit of analysis is all the posts published by the leader on the same day and platform. The similarity was calculated on the original and the cleaned—i.e., pre-processed—texts. Furthermore, we found no difference between the results of the cleaned text and the original one. We also computed the overall similarity for the two years to check whether the messages were tailored or homogeneous across the platforms.

The fourth level of comparison qualitatively analyzed each leader's most successful posts on the three social networks. This analysis aimed to determine whether followers' responses to likes (for Facebook and Instagram) or retweets (for Twitter) varied across social media.

Since the characteristics of the platforms analyzed in this work are different, finding an approval measure common to all three platforms is problematic. Therefore, we decided to use the simplest solution. In the case of Twitter, the characteristics of this platform do not include the number of likes, and we therefore preferred to use retweets as a proxy for success, even if we were aware that this difference could generate some distortion in the results.

Results

Time analysis

The first analysis focuses on the temporal pattern of communication. The goal is to understand whether the posting frequency is the same for the three social media platforms. The timeline confirms the high similarity between the patterns (Fig. 1). Furthermore, for both leaders, the similarity between Facebook and Instagram was higher than the comparison with Twitter. This depends on the shortest length of the messages on Twitter and its use as a tool for institutional, rather than personal or political, communications. Over the two years, peaks emerged in the number of messages published during specific events. Examples are

the national elections of September 2022, the regional elections of October 2021, and the first months of the government led by Mario Draghi (since February 2021).

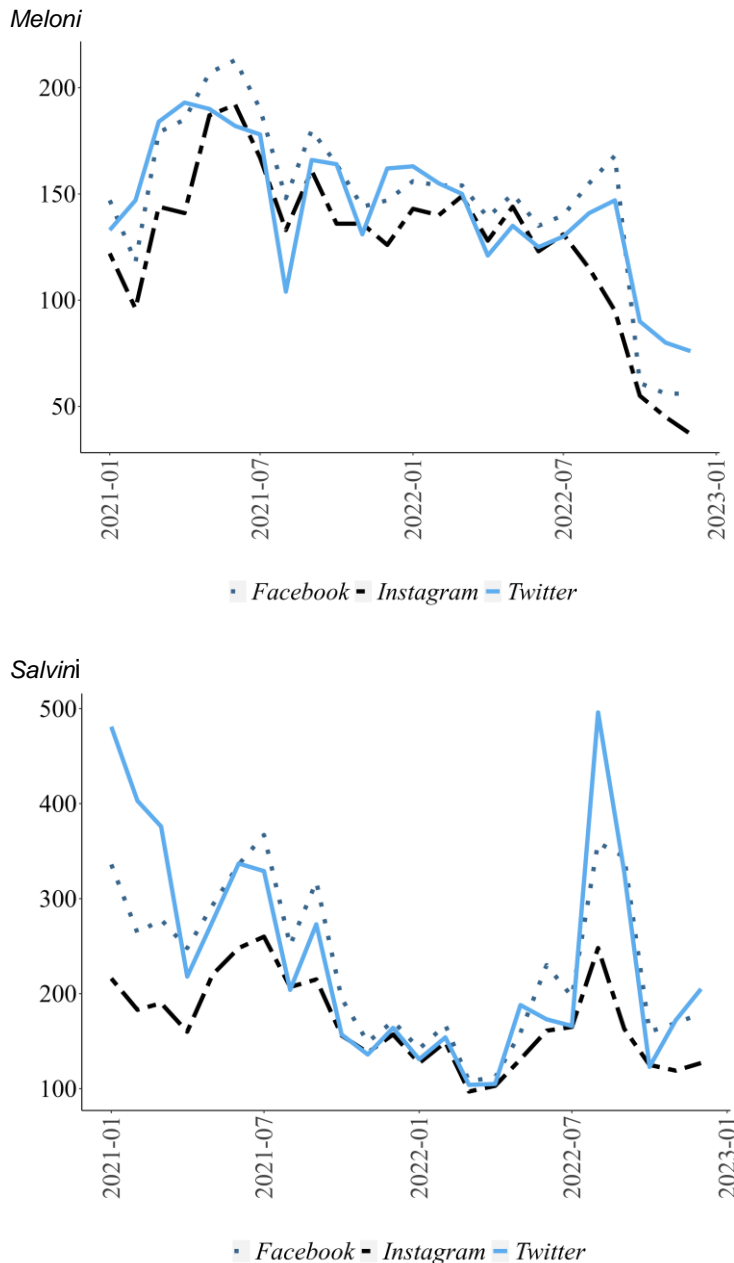



Figure 1. Meloni and Salvini posts timeline (2021–2022)


Meloni used Facebook more frequently than the other platforms (Fig. 1, Meloni). This result is not surprising, given its widespread popularity in Italy. Her focus on this platform responds to the need to reach as many people as possible. The result is similar for Salvini. However, in the second half of 2022, Salvini's tweets peaked, showing the intensification of his electoral campaign for national elections (Fig. 1, Salvini). In this sense, the results point to different patterns of posting in electoral and non-electoral periods.

Quantitative content analysis

The second analysis focuses on the words used most frequently during political communication. Here, we will observe the frequency of the bigrams, i.e., the sequence of two words that occur one after the other. Bigrams capture a longer fragment of the discourse than single words; therefore, they can provide a first idea of the slogans and topics used. The results highlight similarities but also some differences.

As far as Meloni is concerned, the “green pass,” namely, the document certifying vaccination against COVID-19, is the topic she addressed more frequently on all three social media platforms (Fig. 2). During the pandemic, Meloni often contested the government’s approach to COVID-19. For example, in a tweet dated March 6, 2022, she wrote: “The Green Pass is a useless measure that has not limited the contagion in any way while seriously damaging the economic system. No more hesitations and waste of time: this provision must be abolished immediately.”

The same criticisms also recurred in messages posted on Facebook and Instagram. In the first place, even if not precisely in the same order for the three social networks, there is also the issue of immigration, represented by the bigrams “immigr* clandestin*” (“illegal immigration”), “blo* naval*” (“naval blockade”), and “difend* confin*” (“defend the border”). Here, immigration is stigmatized, and the request to close the ports to prevent landings is functional to the social construction of the populist identity of her followers (Loner, 2022). Other recurring words refer to families and businesses (“famigl* impres*”), namely, the voters Meloni wants to reach. Another frequent bigram is “reddit* cittadinanz*” (“citizenship income”), an employment subsidy approved by the government in 2019, which Meloni’s party has always opposed. Also recurrent is the request for security—“mett* sicurezz*” (“to secure”) and “forz* ordin*” (“law enforcement”). These themes are typical of right-wing populism. Likewise, in the case of Salvini, the most common issue is the same in the three social networks. His narrative revolves around the bigram “donn* uomin*” (“women and men”), Figure 2. In his rhetoric, the leader of the Lega often links gender questions to the police (“forz* ordin*,” “law enforcement”), thus connecting them to security issues and national pride. For example, in a post published on November 16, 2022, both on Twitter and Instagram, Salvini praises women and men within a frame of national pride: “This afternoon, I visited the Port Authority of Monfalcone to personally thank the women and men of the @guardiacostiera [coast guard] for their extraordinary daily commitment. Italy is proud of you .

This post also relates to another recurring theme among the top bigrams: “test* alta” (head up), which expresses pride in upholding a firm and unwelcoming attitude toward migration. Salvini uses the same bigram when commenting on being put on trial for having prevented the landing of a ship of migrants: he presents himself as a hero who is not afraid of the consequences of his actions. A post published on Instagram and Twitter on June 17, 2022, captures Salvini’s narrative: “I go head-up proud of having risked everything, personally, for what millions of Italians asked me. I do not give up! .

The League leader adds emojis or images to his messages to reinforce the symbolic content of his

communication. In this post, for example, he added the Italian flag and a photo of himself wearing a necklace with a cross, a Catholic symbol, to appeal to the Catholic Christian electorate, particularly relevant in Lega’s constituency (Giorgi, 2021). Finally, another recurring question concerns taxes, as it results from the bigrams “flat tax” (the proposal to apply a single rate) and “tax bills” (“cartell* esattorial*”).

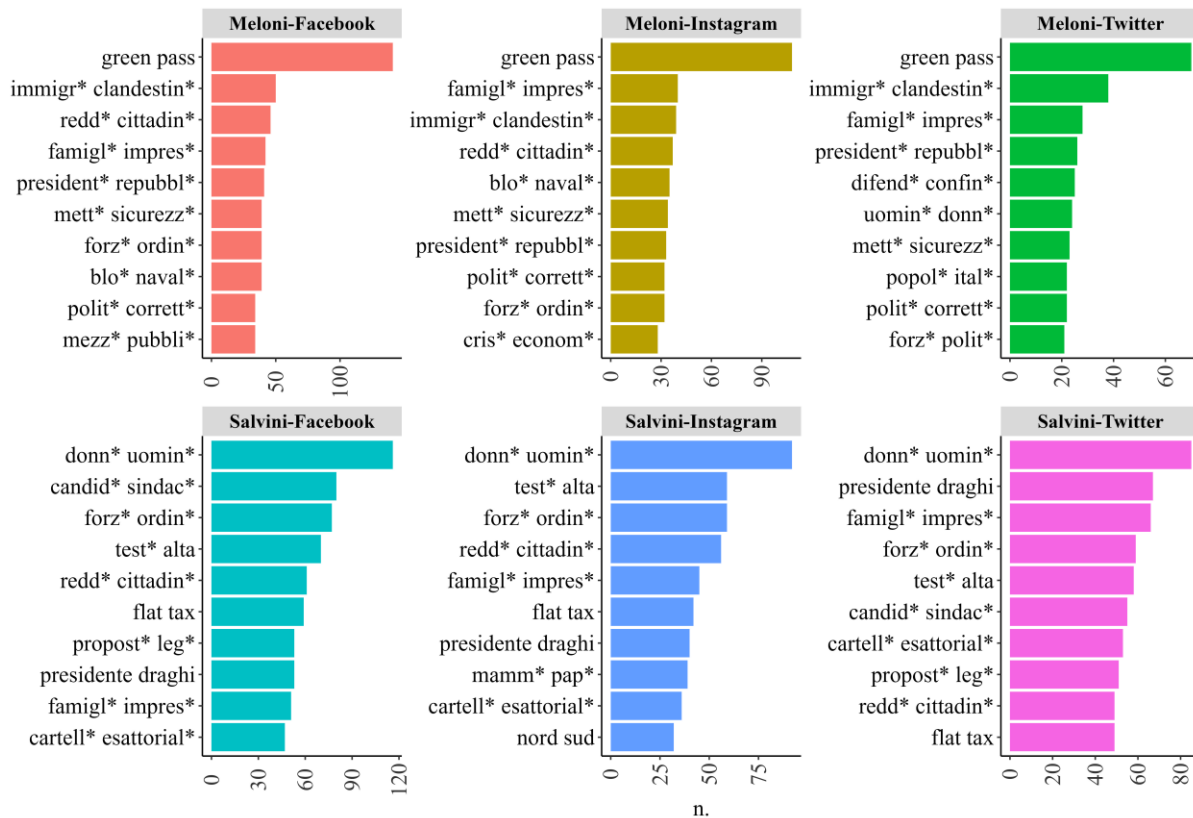


Figure 2. Most used bigrams. Asterisks (*) indicate truncated words.

In conclusion, the topics are very similar across social networks, confirming some of the findings reported in the literature (Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2023). There are also similarities between Meloni and Salvini, which is unsurprising, given that both produce a narrative in line with that of radical right populist parties.

Similarity analysis

This section aims to quantitatively measure the similarity among posts published on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The first analysis reports the monthly similarity, while the second concerns the overall trend over the two years. The monthly comparison highlights that communication on Facebook and Instagram is more similar than on Twitter and Facebook or Twitter and Instagram (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

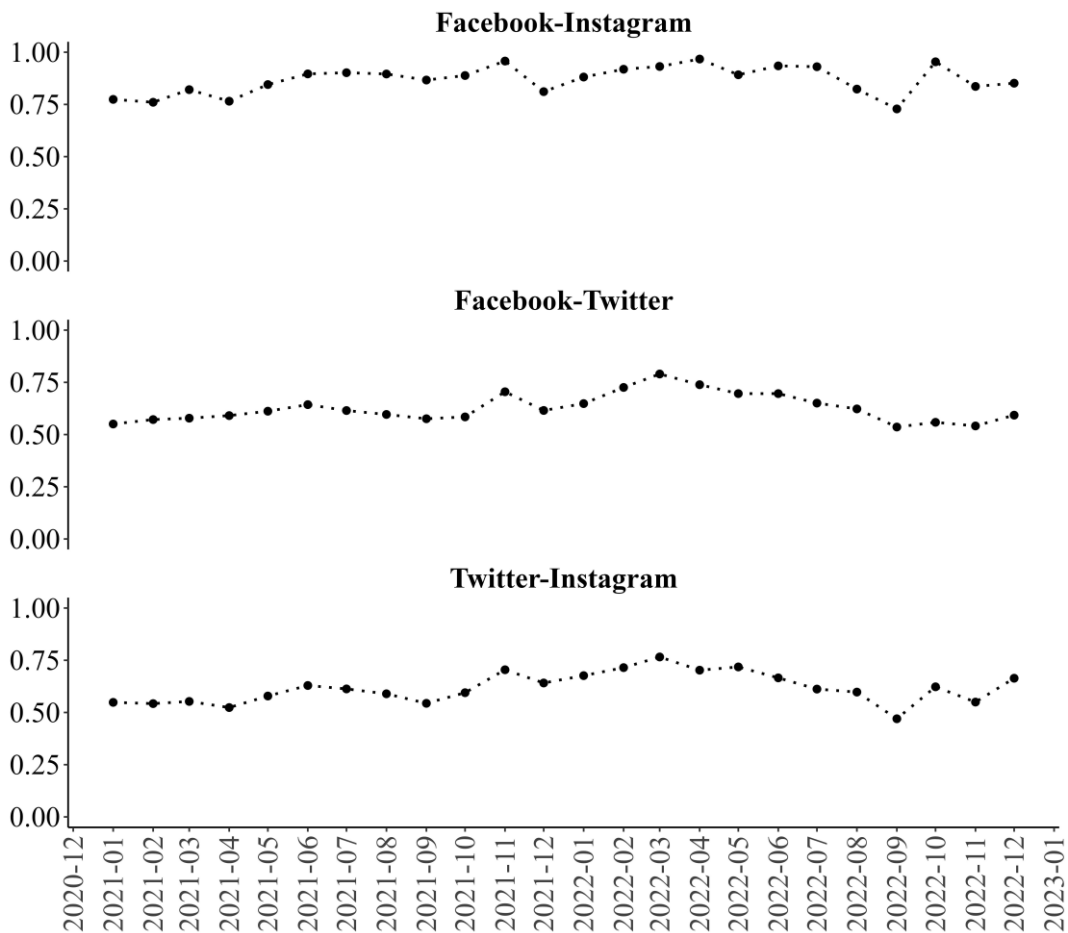


Figure 3. Meloni. Cosine similarity (Original text)

Cross-platform similarity indexes are higher for the posts published by Meloni. For example, the cosine index of her Facebook and Instagram posts is almost always greater than 0.80 (Fig. 3). This confirms that she frequently uses the same content across the two platforms. Regarding Facebook–Twitter and Twitter–Instagram, the similarity decreases to values between 0.60 and 0.70. The difference depends on Twitter’s structure, making using the same message more difficult due to the word limit.

Considering Salvini, the cosine index is lower but still similar to Meloni’s pattern. Comparing Facebook and Instagram, the measure is always slightly higher or lower than 0.75, while between Twitter and the other two social networks, it ranges between 0.50 and 0.60. Interestingly, the similarity decreases after the elections. For example, in August and September 2022, just before the national polls, the measure’s value dropped significantly, rising again in the following months. For Salvini, this pattern is more evident, particularly if we consider the Facebook–Instagram comparison (Fig. 4). This finding denotes his (although limited) effort to differentiate and tailor communication—and thus not just copy messages from one platform to another—when the need is to maximize the mobilization of the electorate.

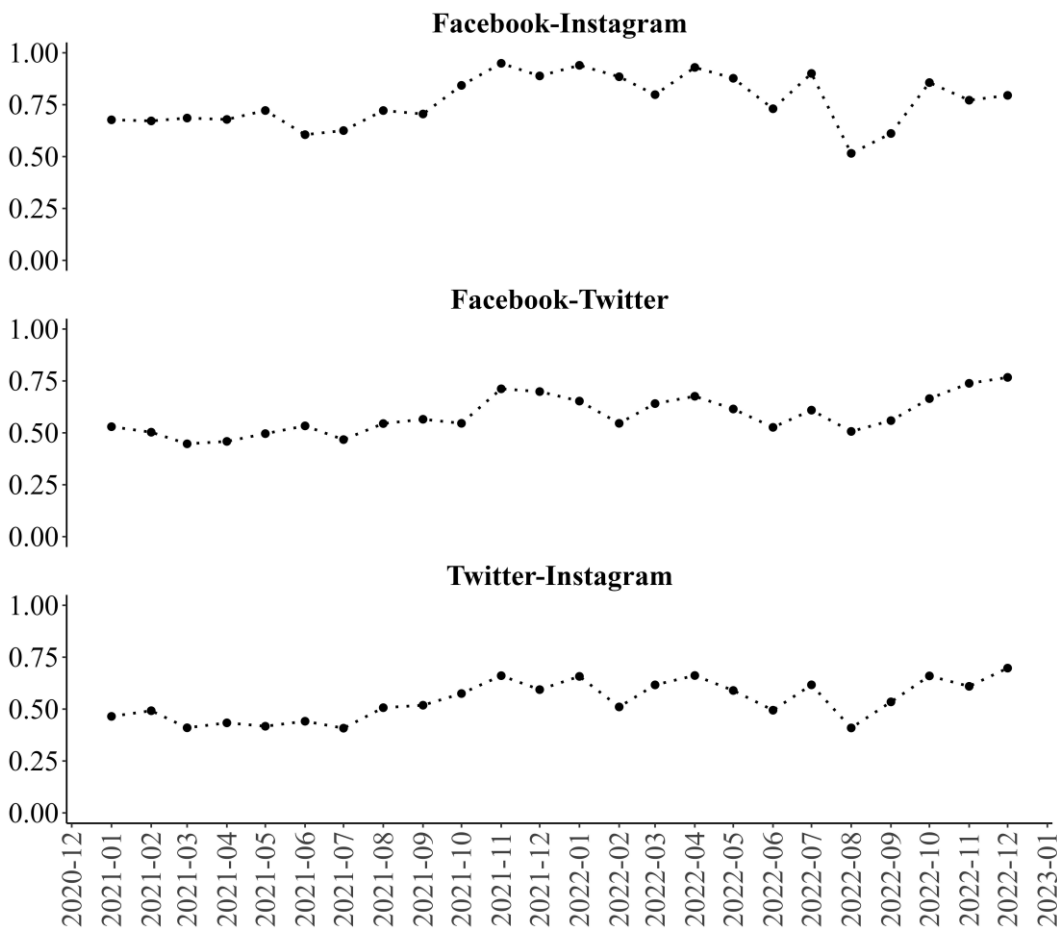


Figure 4. Salvini. Cosine similarity (Original text)

In Table 2, communication is compared over the entire two-year period. The analysis includes the cosine similarity index and the overlap percentage. The results show little or no difference in measures when using the cleaned or original text (Tab. 2, column “Mean”). The maximum values recorded (1.0, column “Max” of Table 2) indicate complete equality and confirm that, in some cases, the leaders used the same message on the three platforms. Also, the median values for Instagram and Facebook—which are 1.0 using the overlap percentage and slightly lower considering the cosine index—confirm the similarity across platforms in Meloni’s communication.

Considering Salvini, the median is slightly lower, while the standard deviation is higher than Meloni’s values. These results confirm a moderate attempt to differentiate communication across platforms. However, the limited variation confirms, especially for Facebook and Instagram, that the messages are often almost identical. Therefore, the transition from one platform to another does not appear to give much consideration to the platform’s specificities, resulting in an almost homogeneous diffusion of the messages of the two leaders and confirming the results of the quantitative content analysis and some of the findings in the literature (Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2023).

Meloni	Text	Measure	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	SE
Twitter – Instagram (n. = 715)	Cleaned	Cosine	0.60	0.22	0.63	0.10	1.00	0.008
	Original	Cosine	0.62	0.21	0.64	0.10	1.00	0.008
	Cleaned	Overlap Pct	0.67	0.29	0.73	0.10	1.00	0.011
	Original	Overlap Pct	0.64	0.30	0.71	0.10	1.00	0.011
Twitter – Facebook (n. = 719)	Cleaned	Cosine	0.62	0.22	0.65	0.10	1.00	0.008
	Original	Cosine	0.63	0.21	0.66	0.10	1.00	0.008
	Cleaned	Overlap Pct	0.73	0.29	0.85	0.10	1.00	0.011
	Original	Overlap Pct	0.70	0.31	0.84	0.10	1.00	0.012
Instagram – Facebook (n. = 720)	Cleaned	Cosine	0.85	0.23	0.95	0.10	1.00	0.009
	Original	Cosine	0.87	0.21	0.96	0.10	1.00	0.008
	Cleaned	Overlap Pct	0.89	0.27	1.00	0.10	1.00	0.010
	Original	Overlap Pct	0.84	0.32	1.00	0.10	1.00	0.012
Salvini	Dataset	Measure	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	SE
Twitter – Instagram (n. = 720)	Cleaned	Cosine	0.54	0.25	0.56	0.10	1.00	0.009
	Original	Cosine	0.54	0.25	0.54	0.10	1.00	0.010
	Cleaned	Overlap Pct	0.57	0.30	0.57	0.1-0	1.00	0.011
	Original	Overlap Pct	0.56	0.30	0.56	0.10	1.00	0.011
Twitter – Facebook (n. = 721)	Cleaned	Cosine	0.57	0.26	0.61	0.10	1.00	0.010
	Original	Cosine	0.58	0.26	0.62	0.10	1.00	0.010
	Cleaned	Overlap Pct	0.64	0.32	0.73	0.10	1.00	0.012
	Original	Overlap Pct	0.62	0.33	0.71	0.10	1.00	0.012
Instagram – Facebook (n. = 728)	Cleaned	Cosine	0.74	0.27	0.83	0.10	1.00	0.010
	Original	Cosine	0.77	0.25	0.84	0.10	1.00	0.009
	Cleaned	Overlap Pct	0.75	0.34	0.95	0.10	1.00	0.013
	Original	Overlap Pct	0.73	0.35	0.95	0.10	1.00	0.013

Tab. 2. Similarity indexes 2021–2022 by leader and social network using original and preprocessed (cleaned) texts. The fragments analyzed represent the sum of the posts for each day.

Qualitative analysis of posts

In this section, we qualitatively inspect the messages that received more likes (for Facebook and Instagram) or retweets (for Twitter). The purpose is to compare the content of the communication, starting from the most successful messages, and to evaluate the reactions of the users of the three social networks. To do this, we analyzed the posts in the top positions by popularity (i.e., those that received more likes on Facebook and Instagram and more retweets on Twitter) for each leader and platform.

Meloni's most successful message is the same for all three social networks and was published on September 26, 2022, to celebrate her victory in the national elections. The text, which is identical on Facebook and Instagram and appears in an abridged version on Twitter, says:

Today, we wrote history. This victory is dedicated to all militants, leaders, sympathizers, and every single person who—in recent years—has contributed to accomplishing our dream, offering heart and soul spontaneously and disinterestedly. To those who, despite the difficulties and the most complex moments, have remained in their place with conviction and generosity. Above all, it is dedicated to those who have always believed in us. We will not betray your trust. We are ready to revive Italy. THANK YOU!

The message received over 234,000 likes on Facebook, 377,000 on Instagram, and 13,000 retweets (and 81,000 favorites) on Twitter. Also, the other posts that have met the approval of Meloni's followers are about the elections. For example, a message with a photo of a drawing of the leader's little daughter aiming to celebrate her mother's victory in September 2022 obtained over 170,000 likes on Facebook and Instagram. As for Twitter, among the most successful posts, some contain hints of international issues, including solidarity with the population of Florida after Hurricane Ian, solidarity with Ukraine and its president Zelensky, solidarity with Iranian women, memories of the footballer Pele and Pope Johannes Paulus II. Generally, communication on Facebook and Instagram almost always concerns intimate aspects of personal life or other issues framed in a nonpolitical way (the intimate style and the women of the street style pointed out by Bracciale and Martella, 2018). These aspects include the leader's birthday, the wishes for the (Christian) holiday of the Immaculate Conception, messages addressed to her little daughter, Christmas wishes, and even her attendance at the inaugural concert of the Scala Theatre in Milan.

An example is a post published on December 8, 2022, to celebrate Immaculate Conception Day. A photo of Meloni decorating a Christmas tree with her daughter is included in the post. The text is: "Happy celebration of the Immaculate Conception to each of you." It achieved considerable success, namely, 191,000 likes on Instagram (resulting in second place for preferences received) and almost 120,000 on Facebook (resulting in ninth place). The results suggest a higher similarity in followers' reactions between Facebook and Instagram (in contrast with findings in other countries—see Larsson, 2020). On the other hand, communication on Twitter takes place at a slightly different level because it also points to an audience located beyond Italian borders and because Meloni often uses this platform to disseminate messages for official or organizational communications. To summarize, the topics in her messages confirm how she engages her followers by appealing to events that have little to do with politics.

This result is confirmed by observing a post published on Facebook and Instagram on 26 September 2022, that is, the day after the successful elections. The post contains only the heart emoji and a photo of a drawing made by the little daughter of the FdI leader. These words are written on the drawing: "Dear mummy! I am so happy you won. I love you! Too much!"¹ The message received an incredible number of likes—over 282,000 on Facebook and over 175,000 on Instagram—as well as many comments (22,000 on Facebook and 14,000 on Instagram). Although it was successful in engaging the followers, the post was not replicated on Twitter. This may be related to Meloni's assessment of Twitter as a social media platform primarily devoted to institutional communication—in line with the results of research on the topic (Lilleker et al., 2015; Jensen & Schwartz, 2020). The image of the little girl's drawing is undoubtedly a catalyst for positive feelings, which do nothing but increase the leader's popularity. On Twitter, however, it was not published because it was evaluated as unnecessary. Therefore, it is clear that the decision to replicate posts across social media platforms is guided by considerations regarding the specificity of the single platform she intends to use and its users' target audience (confirming the politician's awareness of audience diversity across platforms; see, for example, Enli and Skogerbø, 2013).

As far as Salvini is concerned, there is a slight difference in the order of popularity of the messages across platforms. For example, the tweet that received the most retweets (2,264) was published on the eve of the general elections on September 23, 2022. In the post, he comments on a speech by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. The text is: “What is it, a threat? Shameful arrogance. Respect the free, democratic, and sovereign vote of the Italian people! Friends of all, servants of none.” The same message appears on Facebook and Instagram but is not in the top positions, although it received around 10,000 likes on Facebook and 14,000 on Instagram. Considering Facebook, the most successful post (over 162,000 likes) is dated May 14, 2021. It comments on the sentence of a trial (against Salvini) held in the city of Catania for having avoided the landing of migrants rescued by NGO ships: “ACQUITTED! No to the trial due to a lack of evidence! Thank you, friends, for supporting me, I love you ❤️.” The message received about 78,000 likes on Instagram and is not in the top preferred. Finally, the post that received the most likes on Instagram (over 135,000) was published on July 12, 2021, and contains photos of the embrace between two famous Italian footballers, Mancini and Vialli, after the European championships. The text says: “The most beautiful, moving, and powerful image. Two friends, two great champions, two great men, on and off the field 🟢🤍❤️.” The same message received 73,000 likes on Facebook and 124 retweets on Twitter and was not in the top 10 for popularity.

Like Meloni, Salvini also engages his followers by communicating events related to his private life rather than discussing political issues. For example, the messages that received the most positive reactions from followers are about a birthday, the death of a boy, another boy who defended a woman from immigrants, a little girl who recovered from cancer, a fun tattoo, the Olympic champion Marcell Jacobs, the European football championships, or the wishes to everybody of a happy Sunday by calling them “friends.” Therefore, he aims to narrate straightforward stories to interact with Italians, capture their attention, increase sympathy, and give the impression that the leader is “one of us.” Consequently, the reaction is generally more positive on Facebook and Instagram when messages concerning the most intimate and personal spheres are published. On the contrary, on Twitter, perhaps also due to the different purposes and profiles of the followers, positive reactions are more related to messages discussing political issues.

However, the League leader tends to homogenize his communication between Twitter and other platforms, especially when the messages are not purely political. Here, the strategy is different from Meloni’s, who did not publish on Twitter the message with the drawing of her daughter—rich of intimate content linked to her maternal role. Salvini instead frequently posted messages on Twitter, sharing aspects of his private life. An example is a post published on his birthday, March 9, 2021, on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The text read: “Today I am 48, but I feel like I turned ten! THANK YOU for your affection and good wishes. I love you and am happy to walk and grow together with you.”²

The message includes a photo of a young—maybe 7–8 years old—Salvini, smiling and wearing a yellow rain cape. The post has received over 130,000 likes on Facebook, over 60,000 likes on Instagram, over 4,000 favorites, and 200 retweets on Twitter. In this case,

the leader of the League assessed that publishing an image that inspires positive emotions, such as the photo of himself as a child, would still bring benefits to promote his campaign. Twitter, therefore, is not always considered a platform with purposes and user profiles different from those of Facebook and Instagram.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of two years of Salvini and Meloni's online political communication allows us to draw conclusions about how radical right populists use social media. First, despite the specific affordances that different platforms may offer, there is a significant overlap of content across platforms. This result is consistent for the two leaders when comparing Facebook and Instagram and slightly less so for Twitter, possibly due to Twitter's word limit. Generally, across all three platforms, the text is identical in most cases. However, not only do social media platforms differ in their structure (Instagram being primarily focused on images, Twitter on short texts and retweet dynamics, and Facebook on personal messages, comments, and a variety of reactions), but they also have different audiences. Nevertheless, these differences do not appear to be a significant concern for the two politicians, who communicate similarly on all three platforms.

Given these results, the answer to RQ1 is that communication is essentially the same across the three social networks; therefore, there is evidence of platform convergence. Related to this result, considering RQ2, we found that the data does not show a great attempt at tailoring the communication on the social network used—not only the content, then, but the style of communication is similar, too. Communication with voters generally occurs similarly, and most messages are replicated from one platform to another.

Regarding the most popular social media messages, the topics are often related to personalization and intimacy (e.g., Meloni with her daughter or Salvini wishing his audience a good Sunday), the celebration of sports events or athletes, or religion and religious festivities, aiming at presenting the leaders as ordinary fellow citizens. Even when the communication is political, it tends not to focus on ideas and positions but on more superficial elements. For instance, Meloni's most successful publication on all three social media platforms is a celebratory text of her party's victory in the 2022 national elections. This message is devoid of genuine political content, while it is framed mainly through an emotional tone, with the use of words such as "dream," "heart," "soul," "generosity," "betray," and "trust." Salvini, on the other hand, exploits some political events (a speech by the European Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen and his being on trial for his immigration-related policies and actions while he was Minister of Foreign Affairs) to once again shift from political content toward strong personalization. This style, as previously noticed in Salvini's communication (Berti & Loner, 2023), is based on polarization: in the first example, Salvini attacks (directly) von der Leyen, while in the second, he presents himself as a besieged leader whose action is reinforced by the love of his supporters. In these messages, too, rather than political content, Salvini mobilizes emotional content: in the first

case, emotions are aroused through expressions such as “shameful arrogance” (attributed to von der Leyen’s speech), while in the second, Salvini focuses on love, both through words and “emoticons.”

Analyzing the two leaders’ most popular messages shows how populists shift the public’s attention from politics to “non-politics.” Popular themes include sports, religion, the leader’s intimacy, and events of political relevance framed through emotions and personalization. The wide diffusion of social media may have relevant consequences for political communication. First, given the success of nonpolitical content, politicians might use it more and more, putting aside actual political content and leading to a shift toward themes and tones of little or no political relevance. This might foster a vicious circle in which users “reward” non-political content through engagement, leading political leaders to insist on this content to increase their social media visibility and efficacy. Moreover, if social media content increasingly becomes “news,” this change might also influence journalism practice, reinforcing the shift from politics toward non-politics in the public debate.

Our analysis also showed that popular social media publications are often framed through emotions. The exploitation of emotions by radical right populists is by no means a new finding (see, for instance, Cossarini & Vallespin, 2019; Martella & Bracciale, 2022), but their communication has usually been linked to negative emotions such as anger and fear (Wodak, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). In this case, however, the dominant emotions in the most engaging content are positive: Meloni and Salvini mobilized love, gratitude, solidarity, friendship, and pride. The importance of positive emotions in right-wing populist social media communication is reflected in our data; however, current research often ignores these emotions and focuses instead on exploiting negative sentiments and their potential consequences. Future research could focus on the role of positive emotions in right-wing populism, perhaps investigating their importance in constructing populist identity and reinforcing the connection between leaders and supporters. Therefore, while confirming the success of depoliticized political communication on social media and showing the similarities in the content of messages across different platforms, our results point out that, rather than aggressiveness, it is positive communication from populist politicians that generates the most engagement.

Considering RQ3, the answer is affirmative, as most popular messages are often the same among the three platforms, even if the analysis of Twitter highlights some distinctive characteristics due to the limits in the number of characters and its use mainly for “journalistic” and service communications.

Regarding RQ4, our results confirm that the two leaders are in permanent campaign mode. First, the frequency of communication is a robust indicator of the continuous attempt to keep the relationship with potential voters alive. Second, the emergence of personalization elements, combined with aspects of one’s intimate life and a negative campaign to direct the public’s attention, is another element in favor of the permanent campaign hypothesis (Needham, 2005). However, this result should be further explored, considering that both leaders found themselves governing Italy after winning the September 2022 election. Moreover, Salvini’s position appears singular because, to his party’s anti-

system position, he often behaved as if in opposition to the government, even when he was part of it. For this reason, we can speak of a permanent opposition mode.

Moreover, when considering discontinuity in communication between the periods of electoral campaigns and those in which no electoral campaigns exist, our results need further explanation. On the one hand, the social media timeline shows peaks (usually corresponding to elections, as in August 2022) and lows (for instance, Meloni's social media communication slowed down considerably during the first year of government when she became prime minister), confirming that periods of high-frequency communication are followed by those of less frequent communication. On the other hand, the themes of the communication, as shown by the analysis of the bigrams, are typical of radical right populism: from migration to security, from family to welfare policies, and are constantly present in the two years analyzed. During the pandemic, Meloni's criticism of the so-called "Green Pass" was used to attack the Draghi government and could not be mirrored by Salvini, whose party supported the government. While the focus of the two leaders' communication was political (as evident from the bigrams and the peaks corresponding to political events such as elections), the success of their posts was largely due to non-political communication elements. Therefore, rather than a discontinuity in communication, periods emerge in which the effort to interact with voters reaches its maximum. Consequently, the frequency of these interactions is always high, and this is even more so with Salvini.

The condition of the permanent campaign mode also raises questions about populist communication. Our analysis showed that although it contains positive messages, populist communication focuses on the search for and social construction of new enemies to (instrumentally) use to gain consensus. This strategy, which seems generalized among radical right populists, might, however, have negative consequences, such as creating a general climate of mistrust and indifference and stigmatising some people and social categories, such as migrants.

From a methodological point of view, our analysis also proved the possibility of quantitatively comparing the similarities of political communications, opening new spaces for the overall study of the strategies adopted to engage the public across different social media platforms.

Finally, this work also has limitations. First, it includes just one country, Italy, and two radical right-populist leaders. Future research should also consider non-populist leaders and other countries. Second, other social media platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube, should be studied.

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Note

¹ For the original post with the photo, see Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/100044506566624/posts/645197516973795>;

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci-QmZrDSil/>

² The post and the image is visible at these URLs: Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/100050527747831/posts/10158501080693155/>;

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CML0o6wMbsS/>; Twitter:

https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Ev_YXW2XMAIdAV5.png