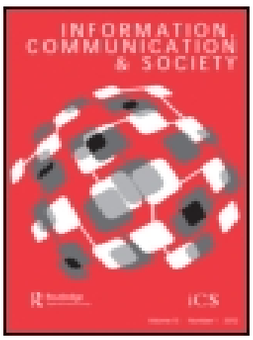

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Define the populist political communication style: the case of Italian political leaders on Twitter

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ABSTRACT

In the hybrid media system, many processes are reforming political communication: popularisation, disintermediation, personalisation, intimisation and of course populism. This study proposes an empirical definition of political communication style with the aim of identifying characteristics of the populist political communication style. Between 2015 and 2016, the Twitter timelines of the main political leaders in Italy were analysed for 16 months. Applying an MCA allowed us to identify two key factors that characterise the communication styles of leaders: (1) communication mode, comparing negative and positive; and (2) communicative focus, comparing personalisation and political/campaign. The intersection of these two factors resulted in four different political communication styles: 'Engaging', 'Intimate', 'Champion of the people' and 'Man of the street'. The latter two were clearly characterised by the presence of populist ideology fragments and traits, but were not strictly related to the leaders' ideological positions. This result supports the hypothesis that populist style is less and less connected to the right/left political cleavage, but rather the result of a varied combination of gradations that mix different individual aspects of the leader's political communication style.

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Populism; political communication style; Twitter; political leaders; popularisation

Communicational approach to the populist style

Identifying the constitutive traits of populism is problematic (Tarchi, 2015) since the term is vague (Canovan, 1999), slippery and 'chameleonic' (Taggart, 2000). The concept of populism becomes central, given that in recent years electoral support was gained by parties and leaders characterised by populist references (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Kriesi, 2014), highlighting a progressive slide towards 'mainstream populism' in western democracies (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mény & Surel, 2002).

Rather than a degenerative pathology haunting democratic regimes (Gellner & Ionescu, 1969), populism has become a 'zeitgeist' (Mudde, 2004), embodying the typical disintermediation of 'going public' instead of taking root in the ideologies and programmes of populist actors (Mancini, 2015). There is a shift in perspective in which populism loses all negative connotations and becomes 'colourless' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), evolving

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into a communication strategy for the man on the street that is based on simplicity, straightforwardness and clarity (Taggart, 2000).

According to the theoretical approach of 'media populism' (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003), populism can be analysed and understood from the framework of media influence, which continually shapes its constitutive features (Mazzoleni, 2014). This relationship between populism and media can be summarised by two symmetrical processes that comply with the dynamics of 'popularisation and populism of politics' identified as key characteristics of the third age of political communication: 'politicians are impelled to speak in a more popular idiom and to court popular support more assiduously. Media organisations are driven to seek ways of making politics more palatable and acceptable to audience members' (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 220). Thus, on the one hand, media becomes populist in the ways that it talks about politics, mixing information and entertainment to popularise politics in a process based on spectacularisation and personalisation dynamics inherent in the media logic (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009). On the other hand, political actors exploit political mediatisation by adopting a style and language that suit the requirements of media (Taguieff, 2003). In this case, populism can be considered 'a style' for reporting the typical communication practices of audience democracy (Manin, 2010), deductible by the presence of similar communication features, themes and performances among leaders from different political parties (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). The result is the diffusion of a type of 'soft populism', anchored to direct and simple communication frames through which political leaders, interest groups, and journalists can identify with the people and speak in their name, paradoxically and simultaneously underscoring the distance between them (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013).

Populism in the media has been analysed empirically regarding different formats (e.g., talk shows, infotainment and debates) and channels: television (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2011; Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007); newspapers (Bos et al., 2011; Rooduijn, 2014); election manifestos and party programmes (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). However, these analyses have not come up with a definition of coordinates within which populism could be framed as a communication style, fostering a progressive confusion between populist ideology and populist style (Wirth et al., 2016). Studies focused on populism in social media are even less widespread; notwithstanding their essentiality in media studies to provide a complete analytical picture of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) in the fourth age of political communication (Blumler, 2016). Social media is characterised by the opportunity of not being bound to the mediation of traditional gatekeepers, supporting a direct link between politics and citizens that bypasses professional norms and news values of mass media (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016). In fact, political actors have been able to speak directly 'to the people', given that they use communication forms that are structurally disintermediate. Indeed, several scholars have highlighted the suitability of social media platforms for the communication purposes of populist politicians (Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2015).

Among these new media, Twitter plays a central role in hybridising and redefining the traditional cycle of political information (Chadwick, 2013; Jungherr, 2016), since conversations that take place on the microblogging platform often influence the coverage and agenda of traditional media, forcing the media to pursue independent statements of the elite (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Meraz, 2011). Tweets have become a digital version of

soundbites, and politicians use them to reach a wider audience thanks to the structural features of Twitter: 'the medium fits the message: it is distributed, non-hierarchical and democratic' (Bartlett, 2014, p. 93). Perfect for the embodiment of populism.

In the study by Engesser et al. (2016) emerges the idea that political leaders in social media manifests populism ideology in a fragmented form due to the absence of traditional gatekeepers and news value filters. These authors have explained the use of fragmentation by political actors based on three main reasons: (1) to reduce the complexity of the ideology to simplify their messages; (2) to blur the populist ideology to facilitate the inclusion of their message in 'personal action frames'; (3) to easily diffuse fragments of populist ideology among like-minded people.

Considering that: (i) populist leaders exploit a disintermediated environment to spread their ideologies, and (ii) these ideologies propagate in 'fragments of populism' well-fitting social media, this work aims to understand the communicative characteristics of this ideology.

This study is based on the 'communication-centred approach', focused on communication, opposite to the 'actor-centred approach', focused on political actors (Stanyer, Salgado, & Stromback, 2016). The first method studies populism regarding the characteristics of populist political communication. The objects of research are populist communication strategies, styles, rhetoric and tactics used by all key political actors. For this perspective, populism is 'a "thin" ideology determined by how political actors communicate' (Stanyer et al., 2016, p. 354), and understood as a peculiar communication style. The second method studies populism regarding the characteristics of populist political actors, analysing the ideology of those defined as populists. 'Populism is a "thick" ideology decoupled from how political actors communicate' (Stanyer et al., 2016, p. 354); communication strategies are only one of the many aspects that characterises the behaviour and choices of populist actors. Notwithstanding, studies that focus on populism from a perspective rooted in the political communication approach are rare, and often shift from an actor-centred approach rather than a communication-centred approach (Cranmer, 2011; Stanyer et al., 2016; Walgrave, 2016).

To achieve this, we first defined and operationalised the communicative style and populist ideology, reconstructing them inductively from the available literature, and trying to identify commonly used indicators, even if labelled differently. Based on these indicators, we built a coding scheme that helped us conduct a standardised content analysis. A multidimensional analysis was applied to the content analysis results so to verify the constitutive dimensions of the populist communication style, regardless of the presence of a populist ideology in the posts. This approach helped us: (i) to verify the existence and characteristics of the populist communication style; (ii) to verify the detachment between populist communication style and populist ideology; and (iii) to test the hypothesis that populist actors may not adopt a populist style of communication and vice versa.

Define the populist political communication style

Considering the increasing mediatisation on the political landscape, political style becomes 'an important conceptual tool for exploring the contemporary political realm' (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 388). Style was often identified as a constitutive trait of populism, included among the main frameworks that were adopted in literature to describe it.

These approaches – summarised into four key dimensions: (i) style/discourse; (ii) ideology; (iii) rhetoric; and (iv) strategy/organisation (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Walgrave, 2016) – are used in a variety of combinations and labels, not mutually exclusive, to outline the coordinates for interpreting the complex phenomenon of populism and its developments. Even non-populist political actors can use a populist communication style, so style must not be considered an indicator *tout court* of populism when a communication-centred approach is used. On the one hand, using a populist communication style is not sufficient evidence to conclude that populist ideology is adopted (Wirth et al., 2016). On the other, 'populism does not need to be understood as an ideology to examine it as a political style' (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 389), because the style is not a function of the ideology. By contrast, to understand populism, it is essential to recognise how populist communication is structured.

As with populism, the definition of communication style does not seem to have clear coordinates for its operationalisation. First, we need to define what political communication style means, its dimensions, and deduce which style can be defined as populist. We can start with a general definition of communication style as 'a heterogeneous ensemble of ways of speaking, acting, looking, displaying, and handling things, which merge into a symbolic whole that immediately fuses matter and manner, message and package, argument and ritual' (Pels, 2003, p. 45). This definition integrates verbal with non-verbal elements to draw up a unique set of communicative performances that characterises the different communication patterns of diverse political actors (Charteris-Black, 2014).

From this definition, it is possible to break down the political communication style into two aspects: form and content. Two aspects that tend to interact with each other and influence events, to the point that often style generates content and content generates style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Pels, 2012; Wodak, 2015). Based on these aspects, we propose a political communication style model able to support 'what is being said' and 'how it is being said'. This model was inductively built, based on the review of contemporary literature covering political communication style and populist style to identify common features among the several perspectives. According to this basis, we consider political communication style as the way political actors stage their political performances, well-aware of the two aspects (form and content) entangled in the communication style. To operationalise this definition, it seemed reasonable to divide the political communication style into: a 'form' dimension constituted by (1) stagecraft, and (2) register; and a 'content' dimension constituted by (3) topic and (4) function.

'Stagecraft' is connected to the symbolic dimension of 'doing politics', rooted in the approach of frontstage performance (Edelman, 1967; Goffman, 1959). Considering the key characteristic of the third age of political communication, communication style can be analysed regarding both the popularising and the populism of politics. The first refers to processes of popularisation defined by personalisation, intimisation and celebrity politics (Stanyer, 2012; Van Zoonen, 2005). The second refers to the act of 'going populist' trough mechanisms of simplification, appealing to emotions of fear and enthusiasm or resentment, and employing highly emotional, slogan-based, tabloid-style language (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Mazzoleni et al., 2003). However, this useful distinction in theory, on an empirical level these processes are often affected by an overlap of indicators. Certain key features of popularisation are the same used in the populist style, such as dramatisation, emotionalisation, personalisation, anti-establishment attitude and simplification, because

they fit the media logic (Bos et al., 2011, 2013). Therefore, using these communication strategies is not necessarily an indicator of the presence of a populist ideology, but could be a symptom of other types of performances that political actors put into play to challenge the requirements of media logic (Wirth et al., 2016). The indicators of this dimension are:

- Emotionalisation: sharing emotions or revealing insights (Bos et al., 2011, 2013; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010);
- Informality: adopting a direct, simple, non-formal and non-institutional style (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014);
- Instrumental actualisation: exploiting specific events in order to support political bias and applying a sort of incorrect inductive reasoning (cherry-picking fallacy) based on current events (Krämer, 2014);
- Intimisation: recounting his/her own life (Stanyer, 2012);
- Negative affect: appealing to emotions of fear or using apodictic registers to arouse interest, alarm and mobilise people on negative feelings (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Caiani & Graziano, 2016);
- Simplification: oversimplifying issues and solutions, offering easy solutions to complex problems (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Caiani & Graziano, 2016);
- Storytelling: narrating politics in a way that is rich with allusions, puns and empty rhetoric, in order to seduce and enchant interlocutors (Ventura, 2015); 'exaggerations; […] the frequent recourse to proverbs, stereotypes, clichés and other expression of "popular wisdom"' (Tarchi, 2016, p. 102);
- Taboo breaker: breaking taboos and fighting against political correctness; being the first to do or say something that is commonly considered politically incorrect or even impolite to distinguish oneself from the elite (Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Krämer, 2014; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014);
- Vulgarism: using vulgar language to reach 'ordinary people' (Cosenza, 2014; Mastropaolo, 2008; Tarchi, 2016).

'Register', 'topic' and 'function' dimensions are less problematic because they are often codified in literature, focused on the content analysis of tweets in political communication (Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2015, 2017; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van't Haar, 2013; Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2016; Jungherr, 2015, 2016). Considering these references, we defined several indicators for each dimension.

'Register' dimension, the communicative tone adopted to 'staging' the tweet, refers to the style of the 140 characters. Its indicators (Bentivegna & Marchetti, 2015, 2017) are the following:

- Referential/neutral;
- Aggressive/provocative;
- Humorous/ironic;
- Conversational/participatory.

'Topic' dimension identifies the main argument of the tweet. Its indicators have been taken from Patterson's classification (1960) to which Bentivegna and Marchetti (2015, 2017)

added a 'current affairs' one to identify themes related to news. 'Topic' indicators include the following:

- Political issues: talking about politics, ideologies, and questions regarding the relationship among parties and institutions;
- Policy issues: referring to specific issues (often local) to be examined or resolved; explaining programme and proposal to resolve problems;
- Campaign issues: referring to the management or performance of the campaign;
- Personal issues: personal reflections or issues regarding his/her private life;
- Current affairs: referring to non-political issues that are still current events (sport, events, news and TV programmes).

'Function' dimension refers to the main purpose detected in the tweet. Its indicators (Graham et al., 2013; Jungherr, 2015) include the following:

- Campaign updating: informing voters about the candidate's activities;
- Self-promotion: promoting leader's activities (relaying of interviews, statements or communications);
- Setting the agenda: publicising general information on political and current affairs;
- Position-taking: intervening in political and campaign issues and problems;
- Call to action: urging commitment by supporters;
- Opposition/violence: attacking or provoking others (politicians, the media and citizens);
- Endorsement: supporting one's own party, candidates, etc.;
- Irony: being satirical or ironic, asking rhetoric or ironic questions;
- Request for interaction: directly or indirectly mentioning or enquiring other politicians/media/citizens, 'calling them into question';
- Pointless babble: sharing gossip, comments and general chit-chat.

Define populist ideology

Using the communication strategies set out above does not indicate a populist ideology. Therefore, it is worth examining the presence of a populist ideology to understand which elements of the communication style are associated with it. Based on the current literature (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2016; Cranmer, 2011; Engesser et al., 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016), populism was broken down into the following dimensions: (1) Emphasising sovereignty of the people; (2) Attacking the elite; and (3) Ostracising others.

(1) 'Emphasising sovereignty of the people' means referring to the people. The word 'people' becomes a 'catch-all' concept that politicians use, irrespective of their political affiliation, to unite the electorate. Its indicators derive from several studies (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Biorcio, 2015; Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012; Krämer, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000) and are:

    - Refers to the people: displaying closeness to the people, simply talking about or appealing implicitly to the people;

- Refers to 'ad hoc' people: referring to an idealised or 'imagined' community in concrete and contemporary forms, identifying and depicting a segment of people as a 'temporary people';
- Direct representation: referring to a direct political representation without intermediaries.

(2) 'Attacking the elite' is build on anti-elitism and anti-establishment. Anti-elitism refers to all the rhetoric discourses that emphasise the distance between 'us' and 'them' (Bos et al., 2013). 'Us' stands for the common citizen and 'them' represents the common enemy established by the dominant elite, which may sometimes be identified under different categories (politics, media, economic powers, etc.) (Canovan, 1981; Mény & Surel, 2002; Taggart, 2000). Its indicators (Akkerman et al., 2014; Biorcio, 2015; Caiani & Graziano, 2016; Hawkins et al., 2012; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004; van Kessel & Castelein, 2016) are:

- Generic anti-establishment: stressing the distance between people and the elite;
- Political anti-establishment: targeting political elite, parties, government, ministers, etc.;
- Economic anti-establishment: targeting multinationals, employers, trade unions, capitalists;
- European Union anti-establishment: referring to the European Union as a regulatory machine working against the ordinary lives of citizens;
- Institutional anti-establishment: targeting state, administration, civil services, etc.;
- Anti-elitism media: targeting media tycoons, journalists, etc.;
- Anti-elitism intellectuals: targeting universities, writers, professors, etc.

(3) 'Ostracising others' involves a storytelling based on the 'dangerous others' concept (Mudde, 2004) that creates a common enemy in groups of the population that are 'stigmatised and excluded from "the people"' (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 324). This is a new contraposition between 'us', 'the people' as a homogenous category, and 'them', an enemy within the people. The indicators of this dimension (Biorcio, 2015; Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004) are:

- Dangerous others: identifying isolated groups within the people as an internal enemy; stigmatising and excluding segments of the people from the specific population;
- Authoritarianism: referring to a strong leader or severe political measures.

Research design and methodology

Research questions

According to Wirth et al. (2016), the use of a populist communication style is not sufficient to prove the adoption of a populist ideology. We think that populist actors do not always use a populist style, because the communicative performance is strictly related to several factors (as topic and function), which are not necessarily related with the populist ideology. In other words, a populist communication style could be also adopted by politicians with little or no relationship with populist ideology, and vice versa. This consideration seems sustained by the fact that politicians are increasingly encouraged to adopt a popular

language and style to gain popular support and media coverage (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). Indeed, disintermediation and mediatisation processes, currently operating in the media ecosystem, allow political leaders to speak directly 'to the people' (Engesser et al., 2016). Considering this context, the first research question is:

> RQ1. Which communication style do leaders use on Twitter, and which features characterize each style? Does the operationalization of the populist communication style fit the ideology indicators emerged in literature?

Considering the populist communication style as a peculiar style not necessarily related with the populist ideology and vice versa, the second research question is:

> RQ2. Do populist and non-populist leaders adopt a populist communication style?

To verify the link between populist actors, populist ideology and communication styles we formulated a third research question:

> RQ3. What is the relationship between the adoption of a particular communication style and the presence of populist ideology?

Case selection

Analysed leaders were Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni, Beppe Grillo, Matteo Renzi and Nichi Vendola. The selection was based on multiple criteria: representativeness from an electoral perspective, being the main party leaders in Italy; representativeness from an ideological perspective, covering a wide spectrum of different political views. Matteo Salvini is the secretary of the Northern League (NL), a right-wing party. Giorgia Meloni is the president and founder of the conservative party Brothers of Italy (BI). Beppe Grillo is the informal leader of the Five Star Movement (5SM), an auto-defined neither right-wing party nor left-wing one. Matteo Renzi is the national secretary of the Democratic Party (DP), centre-left-wing party, and he was the Italian prime minister until December 2016. Nichi Vendola was the president of Left Ecology Freedom (LEF), a left-wing party, until its dissolution in 2016.

According to the 'actor-centred approach' some of these leaders and their political parties are traditionally considered as populist, as in the cases of Matteo Salvini and the NL (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008); and Beppe Grillo and the 5SM (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013). In our knowledge, there is no empirical evidence in literature that Giorgia Meloni could be recognised as populist, even if her party was in the centre-right coalition People of Freedom (leaded by Silvio Berlusconi) which was identified by scholars as populist (Bobba & McDonnell, 2016). We choose to analyse also leaders who are not necessarily recognised as populist by literature (i.e., Nichi Vendola and Matteo Renzi), because we aim to identify the characteristics of the populist political communication starting from a 'communication-centred approach'.

Methodology

We choose to analyse the main Italian political leaders' Twitter timelines (@matteosalvinimi; @beppe_grillo; @matteorenzi; @nichivendola and @giorgiameloni). Their tweets were downloaded (via Twitter API) by the MediaLab of the Political Sciences Department

Table 1. Twitter productivity of Italian political leaders from 01.01.2015 to 01.07.2016.

Leader Name	Party	Tweets	Daily (average)	Followers	Received retweets (average)	Received favourites (average)	Account creation date
Matteo Salvini	NL	2643	4.84	263,062	96.3	178.4	2011-03-23
Beppe Grillo	5SM	1781	3.26	2,107,825	150.8	116.0	2009-01-16
Giorgia Meloni	BI	1856	3.39	271,628	171.6	85.1	2010-04-07
Matteo Renzi	DP	578	1.05	2,451,309	425.6	723.7	2009-01-08
Nichi Vendola	LEF	914	1.67	513,899	32.7	34.8	2009-05-04

of the University of Pisa. All original tweets (11,848; no replies or retweets) were extracted from the leaders' timelines between 1 January 2015 and 1 July 2016. Because of the great number of tweets produced by Matteo Salvini (6719), a stratified random sample was used based on monthly production, and thus the number was reduced to 2643 (40% of its total production). In total, 7772 tweets were analysed (Table 1).

Six thoroughly trained coders conducted a standardised content analysis[1] of leaders' tweets. They used a content analysis coding schema built according to the political communication style and the populist ideology operationalisation previously illustrated. Indicators were transformed in a set of dichotomous variables in order to highlight the presence, or the absence, of each indicator in leader's tweets. For the populist ideology dimensions were built three additive synthetic dichotomous indexes by adding together the indicators for each of the three dimensions of populism. The total for each dimension was then converted into a dichotomous variable based on the presence or absence of at least one element of populist content.

The dataset was divided into two categories of variables: 'active' and 'illustrative'. According to our research questions, we labelled 'active' variables the indicators constituting the political communication style, and 'illustrative' variables the indicators constituting the populist ideology.

Then, we applied a multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), a standard research strategy used for multivariate procedures of categorical variables, to summarise the high number of variables of political communication style dimension. Therefore, 'active' variables were used to do the statistical analysis to identify characteristic traits of different communication styles; based on the dimensions of stagecraft, register, topic and function. Instead, 'illustrative' variables were used to describe and explain the factorial plane to identify the presence of populist ideology in relation to different communication styles.

Results and discussion

To have an overview of the leaders' activity in Twitter, several metadata were aggregated using R software: the daily average of the number of status; received retweets; and received favourites. Table 1 reports the main 'demographic' features of the leaders' accounts.

First, huge differences emerge regarding leaders' popularity: Beppe Grillo and Matteo Renzi are very popular (more than 2Mfollowers) compared to Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini (about 250k followers). Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni and Beppe Grillo are the most productive leaders in Twitter, instead Matteo Renzi appears as the less productive one. The latter is also the most retweeted and favourited leader. Despite their low popularity, Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni received the same average number of retweets

and favourites as Beppe Grillo. In Table 1 does not emerge a specific pattern relating 'demographic' elements of each account with users' involvement (represented by the number of Retweets and Favourites received). So, it seems reasonable to suppose that the specific style adopted by each leader could play a role in users' involvement, helping to fill the popularity gap.

After the application of the MCA, two main dimensions emerged which explain the variability of 79.6% of inertia, re-evaluated according to the 'optimistic' formula of Benzécri (1979).

The first factor (66.3%) describes the communication mode of the leader, comparing positive (positive half-plane) and negative (negative half-plane). Sets of close and opposing modalities identify the shift from an aggressive communication style (negative half-plane), geared towards attacking opponents and other parties (register: aggressive; function: opposition/violence), to a more colloquial style (register: neutral or conversational), geared towards self-promotion (positive half-plane). The first factor places most characteristics of populist style, described in the most recent literature, in the negative half-plane: aggressive register (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014); to attack others by opposition and violence (van Kessel & Castelein, 2016); negative effect (Caiani & Graziano, 2016); instrumental actualisation (Krämer, 2014); simplification (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016) or informality (Caiani & Graziano, 2016). By contrast, in the positive half-plane we see the typical traits of a style in which registers are mainly neutral and the function of communication are geared towards self-promotion, or the promotion of the leader's activities and focusing on their abilities.

The second factor (13.6%) outlines the contraposition with respect to the communicative focus of leaders: in the positive half-plane, political or campaign issues were noted (topic: political issues and campaign issues; function: campaign updating); in the negative half-plane, aspects on the personalisation of politics were identified (stagecraft: intimisation; topic: personal issues; function: emotionalisation). In the negative half-plane of the second factor, purposes relating to emotionalisation, pointless babble and intimisation were recorded, while topics were linked to personal issues and current affairs. Conversely, in the positive half-plane, campaign issues and campaign updating were the main elements of online shared content, together with endorsement objectives, calls to action, requests for interaction and calling into question. Thus, in this factor, elements of political communication based on the personalisation and the typical chit-chat of social media are opposed to a communicative register strongly tied to content, strictly political or campaign-related.

Based on these two factors, we can identify four different communication styles for each quadrant of the factorial plane, responding the first research question (which communication style do the leaders adopt on Twitter and which features characterise each style?) (see Appendix). Clearly, each quadrant represents an ideal type of the political communication styles, so tweets do not necessarily fit all the features emerged in each quadrant/style.

Quadrant I – 'Engaging' style

The first quadrant is defined by the intersection between the positive communication mode (factor 1) and the political/campaign communicative focus (factor 2): the 'engaging' political style. Indicators in this quadrant describe a non-aggressive communication style, aimed at engaging the audience in political topics in the campaign, promoting oneself and

one's party, and calling supporters to arms through calls to action and requests for interaction. A tweet with these characteristics is the one written by Giorgia Meloni on 24 March 2015 during the regional election campaign:

> A Perugia per la presentazione del simbolo per le regionali in Umbria con candidato alla Presidenza @claudioricci964 (In Perugia for the presentation of the symbol for the Umbria Regional election with the presidential candidate.)

There is also an embedded photo of the political leader smiling with the presidential candidate during the presentation. This tweet has been classified as: campaign issue (topic), endorsement (function), neutral (register); and informal (stagecraft). The tweet scores 0 in all the indicators of the populist ideology section.

Quadrant II – 'Champion of the people' style

The second quadrant is defined by the intersection between the negative communication mode (factor 1) and the political/campaign communicative focus (factor 2): the 'Champion of the people' political style. The predominant features of this quadrant are political issues and a narrative register based on simplification, position-taking and taboo breakers. This creates an aggressive communication style primarily aimed at representing oneself as a defender of the people against the elite. The following is a tweet with some of its typical features:

> Libertà di coscienza Pd = libertà di pisciare in bocca agli elettori (Freedom of conscience for Democratic Party = freedom of pissing in voters' mouth).

In this post, Beppe Grillo attacked DP for its opposition to the request for arrest for the senator Antonio Azzolini, charged for bankruptcy involving fraud and criminal association[2] (29 July 2015). This tweet was codified as position-taking and opposition/violence (function), political issue (topic), informality, simplification, negative affect, vulgar (stagecraft) and aggressive/provocative (register). The tweet scores in both 'Emphasising sovereignty of the people' and 'Attacking the elites' dimensions.

Quadrant III – 'Man on the street' style

The third quadrant is defined by the intersection between the negative communication mode (factor 1) and the personalisation communicative focus (factor 2): the 'Man on the street' political style. Characteristics include using vulgar language and exploiting fear and news, with greater focus on policy issues related to current events and/or local interests to create a communication style. Leaders adopt this communication style to legitimise themselves in front of 'the people', exploiting concerns about everyday life. The following tweet includes several aspects of this style:

> #Salvini: ne ho le palle piene di chi ammazza nel nome di Allah, tornate a casa vostra! #ballarò (I am really pissed off by those who kill in the name of Allah, Go back home!).

The tweet reports a statement of the NL leader during a political talk show (Ballarò), as showed by the embedded photograph, regarding the suicide bombing in Brussels, on 22 March 2016. This tweet was codified as vulgar, instrumental actualisation, negative affect, simplification (stagecraft), opposition/violence (function), aggressive/provocative

(register), and political issue (topic). The tweet scores in the 'Ostracising others' dimension of the populist ideology section.

Quadrant IV – 'Intimate' style

The fourth quadrant is defined by the intersection between the positive communication mode (factor 1) and the personalisation communicative focus (factor 2): the 'intimate' political style. Based on sharing emotions and private life aspects, and the leader's ability to tell stories (storytelling); indicators related to chit-chat and non-political discussions build a personal political narrative aimed at self-disclosure. This creates a connection not just with supporters, but with all citizens by sharing intimate and personal stories. This tweet by Matteo Renzi includes some of its characteristics:

> Spettacolo! Vedere il 2–0 in diretta con Hollande e Merkel a Berlino non ha prezzo #ForzaAzzurri (Awesome! Watching live 2–0 with Hollande and Merkel in Berlin is priceless #GoItaly).

The tweet refers to the European Championship 2016 football match between Italy and Spain, won by Italy 2–0 (27 June 2016). This tweet was codified as emotionalisation and intimization (stagecraft); conversational/participative (register); pointless babble (function); and personal issue (topic). The tweet scores 0 in the populist ideology section.

In response to the second research question (do both populist and non-populist leaders adopt a populist communication style?), the first factor is very important. In the negative half-plane, there are numerous elements recorded in literature specific to the populist communication style, such as an aggressive nature, the exploitation of fear and anxiety, instrumental actualisation, and oversimplification of solutions and issues. Populist style indicators set out in relation to communicative focus elements (factor 2) create two different communication styles that can be classified as populist. The first, identified by the second quadrant, was labelled 'Champion of the people', because the leader acts as a defender of the people. The second, identified by the third quadrant, was labelled 'Man on the Street', because the leader talks like a common citizen. These results, compared with the location of the leaders' timeline in the factorial plane, allow us to answer the second research question. In Figure 1 it is possible to notice that leaders' timelines tend to locate among the style indicators which mainly characterise their communication style. It seems that leaders recognised as populists adopt both populist communication styles (Grillo and Salvini); Giorgia Meloni mainly prefers an 'engaging' style. Obviously, the timeline location represents primarily a tendency and it does not imply that leaders adopt always only one specific communication style.

To confirm a possible link between populist style and populist ideology, and to answer the third research question, the populist indexes were projected onto the factorial plane (Sovereignty of the people; Attacking the elite; and Ostracising others) (Figure 1). The results clearly show that all populist ideology indicators are on the negative half-plane of the first factor, the one that identifies the two types of populist communication styles. Therefore, we can conclude that the elements used to describe populist styles confirm the empirical operationalisation proposed in literature. Indeed, the projection of populist ideology indicators, used as an illustrative variable, demonstrates a clear and coherent link between the populist style features and the populist ideology elements emerged in literature.

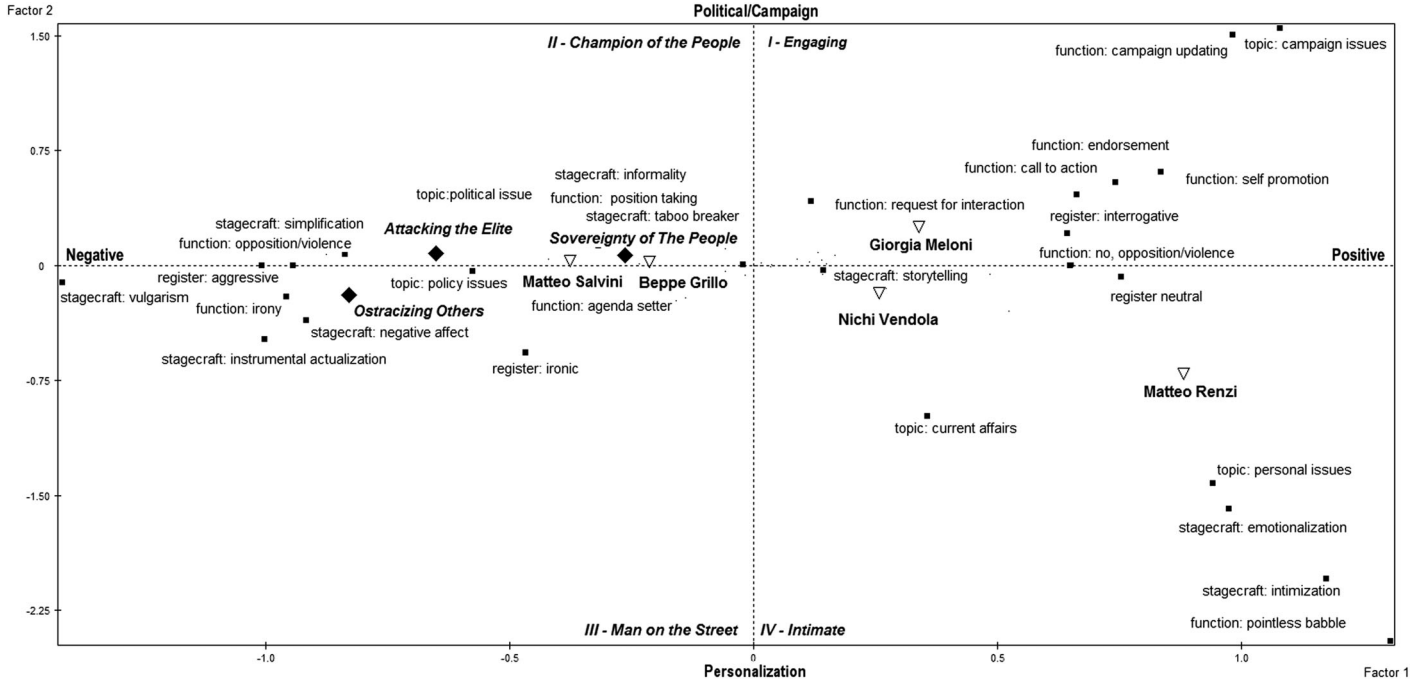

Figure 1. Populist political communication style.

'Attacking the elite' and 'Emphasising sovereignty of the people' indexes are arranged in the second quadrant, identified by the 'Champion of the people' style, which supports the hypothesis formulated on the 'anti-politics' of defending the people from the elite. The third quadrant sets out the 'Ostracising others' index, which identifies 'the enemy' and stigmatises specific groups of the population. This ideology dimension seems to be in line with the representation of the leader as a common citizen, understanding people's anxieties and fears, as described in the 'Man on the street' style. Based on these results, performance and contents tend to blend together to create a unique political style, as hypothesised in the general definition of style by Pels (2003), used in this study.

Conclusions

As far as we know, this research study represents a first attempt to provide an empirical definition of political communication style and the operationalisation of populism as a political communication style in social media, based on the communication-centred approach.

The first part of this study aimed to create an empirical definition of communication style, starting from the theoretical definition by Pels (2003) and using an inductive approach, allowing the identification of four integral dimensions of style (stagecraft, register, topic and function). The political communication style was systematised and operationalised to identify the existence of one or more communication styles that can be defined as 'populist', irrespective of the ideology shared, which only then were reintroduced into the analysis.

In the second part, an MCA was applied that revealed two specific aspects that helped define the communication style used by leaders: communication mode (positive vs. negative) and communicative focus of the tweet (personal vs. political/campaign). The first dimension, particularly important in identifying a populist communication style, was expressed in two different communicative performances: firstly 'Champion of the people', a style geared towards defending the people against the elite, which mainly covers political issues, position-taking, simple and informal; and secondly 'Man on the street', characterised by a more vulgar language exploiting anxieties, fears, news and local policies. Conversely, the positive half-plane of the first factor was key in highlighting the presence of two styles, characterised by communicative registers that were mainly neutral and colloquial. Based on the communicative focus of the tweet, the first was labelled 'Intimate', a style aimed at personalising the political narrative through sharing emotions and private life aspects or simple chit-chatting about current affairs; and the second was labelled 'Engaging', geared towards the electoral campaign, self-promotion and audience engagement. This factor represents an important part of the 'popularisation' of politics, driven by media logic that is increasingly and avidly fuelled by political actors with storytelling, and personal and intimate stories. Indicators of populist style and personalisation of politics present two very different communication approaches in social media, in which the presence of populist ideology in tweets is characteristic of a populist approach to online political communication.

A final observation concerns the position of Italian political leaders on the factorial plane. The 'populist' half-plane (quadrants II and III) includes Beppe Grillo (5SM) and Matteo Salvini (NL), both populist leaders according to studies that follow an actor-centred approach. Therefore, it is interesting here not so much that they are in this quadrant, but their position:

they are both very close to the horizontal axis, demonstrating the use of both populist communicative registers identified by the styles of 'Champion of the people' and 'Man on the street'. This result supports the hypothesis that populist style is less connected to the right/left political cleavage, but rather the result of a varied combination of gradations that mix different individual aspects of the leader's political style (Stanyer et al., 2016). This observation is supported by the presence of Giorgia Meloni, a right-wing leader often referred to as a populist, in quadrant I. Her style aims to engage supporters, based on a party and campaign-related focus, using a less aggressive style compared to Beppe Grillo (5SM) and Matteo Salvini (NL). Analysing data, it seems that Giorgia Meloni accurately choose to adopt a political communication style less characterised by populist elements, focusing mainly on self-promotion, endorsement and call to action (functions); campaign issue (topic); and neutral/referential (register); probably because in 2015 she was very active in endorsing her party's candidates; and in 2016, she was also candidate to major in Rome. Furthermore, she could have done it to distinguish herself from Salvini, whom concur for the lead of centre-right coalition, and Grillo, who represents the main opposition party in Italy. In quadrant IV, mainly devoted to the personalisation of the political narrative, we observe both left (Vendola) and centre-left (Renzi) leaders. The former Italian Prime Minister, however, leans heavily towards the formation of a style based on personalisation and intimisation of political communication. Furthermore, his topics were often associated with personal issues and current affairs. While keeping in mind a bias in the performance stated in his online communication style, which results from his institutional role, it seems there are certain signs characteristic of the popularisation of politics that fit the populist mood, without necessarily embracing the ideology dimension.[3] This is a useful framework from which to empirically confirm the definition of communication styles and their features in social media, as well as the probable detachment between populist content and populist style if this specific point of view is assumed.

Further study and limitations

The intensity of the populist communication strategy varies not just in relation to the speaker's objectives, but also regarding the platform used to convey the message (Cranmer, 2011). Therefore, due to its structural format (e.g., 140 characters), Twitter could be the platform with the highest percentage of examples of populism, to the extent that more than half of the tweets analysed were characterised by the presence of at least one populist trait. The results of this study mainly refer to the communication style adopted by leaders through Twitter and may not be generalised to other types of social media. Based on these considerations, steps for further research in this direction could involve testing the presence of different communication styles on other social media platforms, such as Facebook, and confirming the public resonance and engagement generated according to the communication style used.

Notes

1. The coefficients of Krippendorff's α for the groups were highly satisfying in terms of almost all variables (Krippendorff's $\alpha > 0.83$) by conventions established in the field (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

2. Italian Constitution, art. 68, "Without authorization from the House to which they belong, no member of Parliament may be submitted to personal or home search, nor may they be arrested or otherwise deprived of personal freedom".
3. Renzi's tweet example seems to embody a secondary meaning: Italians' *revanche* against the French and German heads of the states. This example could help to clarify the importance of the stage crafting that, even with popularizstion elements, allows to send a populist-like massage without any explicit reference to populist ideology.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix. Loadings, contributions, and squared cosines of active categories of MCA

	Loadings of active categories		Contributions of active categories		Squared cosines of active categories	
Label	Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 1	Axis 2
Stagecraft						
Yes, emotionalisation	0.98	−1.59	2.51	11.11	0.10	0.27
No, emotionalisation	−0.11	0.17	0.27	1.20	0.10	0.27
Yes, informality	−0.32	0.18	1.73	0.93	0.17	0.05
No, informality	0.52	−0.30	2.82	1.52	0.17	0.05
Yes, instrumental actualisation	−1.00	−0.48	2.20	0.86	0.09	0.02
No, instrumental actualisation	0.09	0.04	0.19	0.08	0.09	0.02
Yes, intimisation	1.18	−2.05	2.21	11.22	0.09	0.26
No, intimisation	−0.07	0.13	0.14	0.71	0.09	0.26
Yes, negative affect	−0.92	−0.36	3.49	0.90	0.15	0.02
No, negative affect	0.17	0.07	0.63	0.16	0.15	0.02
Yes, simplification	−0.84	0.07	3.08	0.04	0.14	0.00
No, simplification	0.16	−0.01	0.60	0.01	0.14	0.00
Yes, storytelling	0.14	−0.03	0.07	0.01	0.00	0.00
No, storytelling	−0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00
Yes, taboo breaker	−0.11	0.22	0.01	0.04	0.00	0.00
No, taboo breaker	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Yes, vulgarism	−1.42	−0.11	1.41	0.02	0.05	0.00
No, vulgarism	0.04	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.05	0.00
Function						
Yes, campaign updating	0.98	1.50	3.25	12.75	0.14	0.32
No, campaign updating	−0.14	−0.21	0.46	1.81	0.14	0.32
Yes, self-promotion	0.84	0.61	3.75	3.33	0.17	0.09
No, self-promotion	−0.21	−0.15	0.93	0.83	0.17	0.09
Yes, setting the agenda	−0.21	−0.14	0.46	0.34	0.03	0.01
No, setting the agenda	0.13	0.09	0.29	0.21	0.03	0.01
Yes, position-taking	−0.32	0.13	0.84	0.24	0.05	0.01
No, position-taking	0.14	−0.06	0.38	0.11	0.05	0.01
Yes, call to action	0.66	0.46	0.97	0.80	0.04	0.02
No, call to action	−0.06	−0.04	0.09	0.07	0.04	0.02
Yes, opposition/violence	−0.94	0.00	9.84	0.00	0.61	0.00
No, opposition/violence	0.65	0.00	6.79	0.00	0.61	0.00
Yes, endorsement	0.74	0.54	1.64	1.45	0.07	0.04
No, endorsement	−0.09	−0.07	0.20	0.18	0.07	0.04

(Continued)

Appendix. Continued.

	Loadings of active categories		Contributions of active categories		Squared cosines of active categories	
Label	Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 1	Axis 2	Axis 1	Axis 2
Yes, irony	−0.96	−0.21	2.67	0.21	0.11	0.01
No, irony	0.12	0.03	0.32	0.03	0.11	0.01
Yes, request for interaction	0.12	0.42	0.05	1.01	0.00	0.03
No, request for interaction	−0.02	−0.06	0.01	0.15	0.00	0.03
Yes, pointless babble	1.31	−2.46	1.96	11.65	0.08	0.27
No, pointless babble	−0.06	0.11	0.09	0.52	0.08	0.27
Register						
Yes, referential/neutral	0.75	−0.08	5.50	0.09	0.32	0.00
No, referential/neutral	−0.42	0.04	3.07	0.05	0.32	0.00
Yes, aggressive/provocative	−1.01	0.00	10.75	0.00	0.65	0.00
No, aggressive/provocative	0.65	0.00	6.92	0.00	0.65	0.00
Yes, humorous/ironic	−0.47	−0.57	0.19	0.48	0.01	0.01
No, humorous/ironic	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01
Yes, conversational/participative	0.64	0.21	2.44	0.44	0.12	0.01
No, conversational/participative	−0.18	−0.06	0.68	0.12	0.12	0.01
Topic						
Yes, political issues	−0.38	0.21	1.60	0.86	0.10	0.03
No, political issues	0.27	−0.15	1.16	0.62	0.10	0.03
Yes, policy issues	−0.57	−0.04	1.83	0.01	0.09	0.00
No, policy issues	0.15	0.01	0.47	0.00	0.09	0.00
Yes, campaign issues	1.08	1.55	4.05	13.90	0.17	0.35
No, campaign issues	−0.16	−0.23	0.60	2.05	0.17	0.35
Yes, personal issues	0.94	−1.42	1.99	7.57	0.08	0.18
No, personal issues	−0.09	0.13	0.18	0.68	0.08	0.18
Yes, current affairs	0.36	−0.98	0.57	7.21	0.03	0.19
No, current affairs	−0.07	0.19	0.11	1.42	0.03	0.19