The multi-modal frames of German politicians' personalization on Instagram

Keywords: Political personalization, multi-modal frames, Instagram, picture analysis, election

Extended Abstract

Background: Politicians increasingly use social media to interact with the public by posting their daily activities and opinions (Meeks, 2016; McGregor et al., 2017; Metz et al., 2019). A growing number of researchers argue that in some mature democracies, electoral judgments are more and more based on personal non-policy factors rather than purely programmatic ones (Clarke et al., 2004; Hacker, 1995), hence posting personalized content on social media accounts might becomes a strategy for politicians. Political personalization refers to "a process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines". Its characteristics contain individualization (focuses on specific candidates or politicians) and privatization (depicts politicians as private individuals) (Adam & Maier, 2010; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Van Aelst et al., 2012). However, current research analyzes politicians' personalization based on either text or images posted on media, there's limited empirical evidence in the multi-modal context. Therefore, this study aims to investigate (RQ1) what visual topics politicians use on Instagram? and (RQ2) how politicians present personalization frames in multi-modal contexts. The findings will help develop the political personalization theory and provide strategies for politicians to show personal images on social media to achieve their career aims.

Methods: This study collected 2,576 Instagram posts with 5,606 images from 20 politicians' Instagram accounts from 26.09.2020 to 26.09.2021, which is one year before the latest German election. Politicians were randomly selected from the German Bundestag. Regarding RQ1, object detection technology is adopted to identify objects in pictures first, followed by agglomeration subgroup analysis to cluster images into image topics. Regarding RQ2, Under the guidance of the political personalization theory, this study defines the collective frame, individual frame, professional frame, and private frame, according to the characteristics of political personalization. The collective frame and individual frame depend on politicians focusing themselves more or presenting their parties or organizations more. In pictures, it is identified by if there are other politicians, and whether the politician presents a full-length, half-length, or headshot of himself. For the textual part, this study checks if their parties or organization, other party members, and districts are mentioned in the hashtags or mentions in their posts. The professional frame and private frame depend on what topics they show or discuss. For pictures, the results from RQ1 would be used to classify into the professional frame or the private frame. For text information, political related topics are defined as professional frame and non-political topics are defined as private frame. In the end, frames for image and text are put together for each post, and multi-modal frames are identified by the case cluster analysis based on image frames and text frames.

Results: 12 image topics emerged in this research, including: posters and selfies, text content, meetings and speech, natural scenery, campaign events, eating and drinking, visiting, interviews, music, military, animals, and sports. Three main multi-modal frameworks were summarized. The first is the picture-text consistent frame, in which both image and text focus on individual and professional frames; the second is the picture-text balance frame, in which both are focus on the professional frame, while images are usually more about individual, and the text is more about collective and describes deep meanings to show the professionalism of politicians; the last multi-modal frame is the picture-text conflict frame, in which private pictures are normally combined with professional topics in the text.

Conclusions: It can be said that politicians' strategy is to use picture symbols to highlight individuals and to use text symbols to highlight occupations, which is inseparable from the essential properties of picture information and text information. As for the multi-modal frames, the picture-text balance framework is used the most, reflecting a more objective, serious, and deeper information transferred from picture to text. Also, image symbols are good at highlighting a single individual, while text symbols are good at expressing more abstract and collective things, such as expressing a political party just with one word, which is hard to show in pictures. It intimates that visual and linguistic information both hold mode-specific communicative potentials, their interaction shapes the frame meanings. Frameworks relying on only one information type can have more bias. This study dresses the importance of multimodal frameworks, integrates visual information and textual information into a measurement framework, and provides a method of the normative standard used for evaluating personalization in a multimodal context.

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Table 1. the codebook of personalization for image and text

	Individualization		Privatization	
	Collective frame	**Individual frame**	**Professional frame**	**Private frame**
image	Contains other politicians, or logos/text about parties/organizations; The owner of the social media account has similar size with other politicians in the picture.	Without other politicians and party/organization logos/text; or other politicians are showed as a background; The owner of the social media account has half-length, or headshot of himself.	Image topics about: posters and selfies, text content, meetings and speech, campaign events, visiting, interviews, military	Image topics about: natural scenery, eating and drinking, music, animals, and sports.
text	parties or organization, other party members, and their districts are mentioned in the hashtags or mentions	parties or organization, other party members, and their districts are not mentioned in the hashtags or mentions	Political topics	Non-political topics

Figure 1. the image-label networks of "interview" topic and "natural scenery" topic
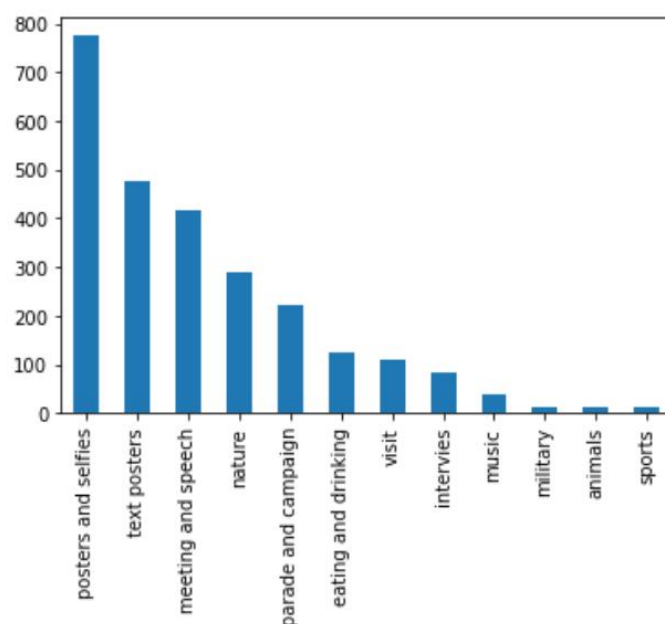
Figure 2. the frequency for each image topic

Table 2. the frequency of image frames and text frames

	Collective frame	Individual frame	Professional frame	Private frame
image	856	1720	1943	633
text	1637	939	2164	412