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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1661838> since 2021-03-15T10:59:26Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1057/s41304-017-0141-8

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Social Media Populism: Features and ‘Likeability’ of Lega Nord Communication on Facebook

Giuliano Bobba

Abstract Social media have changed the way politicians communicate with and relate to their constituencies during election campaigns and routine periods alike. Many scholars have postulated that populists would benefit most from the new digital media. Despite their growing importance, few studies have addressed the features of online populist communication and how to assess its success. The purpose of this article is to fill this gap by providing a framework for the analysis of populist communication on social media. Taking the case of Italy’s Lega Nord (LN, Northern League) as an example, the article will clarify which aspects of online communication are most valued by LN supporters, in relation to both the key elements of populism (references to ‘the people’, ‘elites’ and ‘others’) and the expression of an emotional style in the messages. The article analyses the controlled communication that LN and its leader, Matteo Salvini, published on their Facebook profiles during a sample period of thirty days. Our findings demonstrate that populism, emotional style and, in general, the role of the leader as a source of communication positively affect the ‘likeability’ of a message.

Keywords Social Media · Political Communication · Populism · Northern League

Introduction

Social media have changed the way politicians communicate with and relate to their constituencies during election campaigns and routine periods alike. In particular, it has been observed that they provide a powerful tool for populists to use to mobilise their followers, in addition to the traditional channels of political communication and mainstream media (Kriesi, 2014: 367). If, in the 1990s, populist parties obtained visibility thanks mainly to tabloid media

coverage (Mazzoleni, 2003), the advent and widespread diffusion of social media platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook) among citizens has now provided them with a way to communicate directly and more spontaneously with their audience (Bartlett, 2014). Populist parties also use social media as key means for placing the blame on political opponents. The emphasis on the emotional elements in populist communication, known as ‘emotionalised blame attribution’, is a determinant of the persuasiveness of the populist message (Hameleers et al., 2017). Despite the growing importance of social media, few studies have examined the features of online populist communication and addressed how to assess the success of their online posts (a notable exception is Ernst et al., 2017. Further evidence from Greece, Portugal and Spain is presented in this symposium; see Stravakakis and Katsambekis, 201X; Salgado, 201X; and Kioupkiolis and Seoane Pérez, 201X).

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap by providing a framework for the analysis of populist communication on social media. Taking the case of Lega Nord (LN, Northern League) as an example, the article will clarify which aspects of online communication are most valued by LN supporters, both in relation to the key elements of populism (reference to ‘the people’, ‘elites’ and ‘others’) and to the expression of an emotional style in the messages. For our purposes, LN and its leader, Matteo Salvini, are a suitable case study because the party is widely recognised as a populist party and its current communication is conveyed mainly through social media. Salvini is the most active Italian political leader on social media and especially on Facebook. He is also one of the politicians with the most fans (around 1.9 million), together with Beppe Grillo, who, however, does not personally manage his FB page and owes his success mainly to his blog (www.beppegrillo.it). The study focused on the controlled communication that LN and Salvini published on their Facebook profiles during a period of 30 days (1–30 November 2015). The material collected was analysed for content to assess the features of LN communication and the determinants of its online success.

The structure of the article is as follows: in the next section, we examine the main pillars of the populist discourse and outline our case study. The second section presents the research methodology, while the third presents the results. In the final section, we will demonstrate that the success of LN messages on social media is strongly related to the presence of references to the category ‘others’ (i.e., immigrants, Roma people, homosexuals, welfare recipients, etc.) and to the leader of the party, Matteo Salvini, as the source of the message.

The core of populism and the LN case

The definition of populism is contentious. Generally, scholars agree that a populist discourse centres on the juxtaposition of a ‘good people’ with a series of ‘bad elites’. Moreover, especially in the case of right-wing populist discourses, the people’s values, identities and rights are said to be endangered not only by the actions of elites but also by those of a series of ‘others’ to whom, it is claimed, preferential treatment is given by elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2007, 2014; Taggart, 2000; Canovan, 1999). The pillars of populist discourse are thus ‘the people’, ‘the elites’, and ‘the others’.

Presenting themselves as the ‘real’ democrats, populists in established democracies pose the questions: ‘what went wrong; who is to blame; and what is to be done to reverse the situation?’ (Betz and Johnson, 2004: 323). Generally, their answers to these are: democracy, which should reflect the will of the people, has been usurped, distorted and exploited by ‘elites’; the elites and ‘others’ (i.e. non-elites who are also not of ‘the people’) are to blame for the difficult situation in which the people find themselves; ‘the people’ must be given back their democratic voice and power through the populist leader and party.

The idea of ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2004: 544) is at the centre of populism. The ‘pure people’ constitute a homogeneous and virtuous community, a place where, as Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 12) observes, ‘it is crystal-clear who is “one of us” and who is not, there is no muddle

and no cause for confusion'. The people are said to be united, with divisions dismissed by populists as the creations of political, intellectual and media elites (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 5–6; Taggart, 2000: 92). Most importantly, the people are – or should be – sovereign. As such, politics should be a direct and non-mediated expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004: 544).

Populism relies on a 'Manichean outlook' that combines the positive valorisation of the people with the denigration of their enemies, namely, the elites and the 'others' supposed to be neither homogeneous nor virtuous (Panizza, 2005: 16–17). The elites generally comprise political, media, financial, judicial and intellectual elites, who are accused of being incompetent and self-interested when not actually conspiring against the people and seeking to undermine democracy. The identity of 'the others' differs from case to case but, for right-wing populists in Europe, it usually includes groups such as immigrants, homosexuals, welfare recipients, Roma communities and other specific social categories who are held not to be 'of the people'.

With regard to our case study and its more general context, it is worth noting that Italy has experienced more innovative and durable forms of populism than other European countries in the last few decades. It has been defined, among others, as the 'promised land' (Tarchi, 2015), an 'enduring market' (Bobba and McDonnell, 2015) and a 'breeding ground' for populism (Bobba and Legnante, 2016). The emergence of the LN in the late 1980s and the unexpected performance of Silvio Berlusconi at the head of Forza Italia (FI, 'Go Italy') in the early 1990s were the first stages of the recent history of populism in Italy. Moreover, the recent success of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, 'Five Star Movement') since 2013 has expanded the varieties of populism (Caiani and Graziano 2016) to include non-right-wing parties.

The LN has often been classified as ‘populist radical right’, however we consider it to be more accurately described as an ethno-regionalist populist party (Spektorowski, 2003; McDonnell, 2006). Whether advocating independence for Padania in the mid 1990s or federalism/devolution for the regions of northern Italy thereafter, it has always appealed to a specific territorial area and an ethnically defined people, while opposing immigration and strongly criticising national and supranational elites. In terms of electoral results and institutional roles occupied, the LN has been one of Europe’s most successful regionalist parties over the past decade, serving in right-wing governing coalitions led by Silvio Berlusconi in the periods 2001–2006 and 2008–2011 (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). After the resignation of the Berlusconi government in 2011 and a series of scandals involving the LN party establishment, in 2012, the historic leader, Umberto Bossi was replaced by Roberto Maroni, who gave way to Matteo Salvini in 2013. The latter, current leader of the LN, is redefining the ideological position of the party by supporting views closer to those of populist radical-right parties on issues such as nationalism (instead of regionalism), anti-Europeanism and immigration. Social media are the preferred instruments of his communication strategy, particularly Facebook, where he is one of the most active and most followed of Italian political leaders. Once elected secretary of LN, he managed to increase its fans on Facebook from less than 50,000 like in December 2013 to more than 1,840, 000 in June 2017. He currently ranks second among Italian politicians for Likes: Beppe Grillo has 1.9 million, while the former Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, has slightly fewer than 1.1 million. Moreover, the content published on his page has a high engagement rate: on average, each post received 17,382 Likes and 2,349 Comments and was shared 3,508 times over the thirty days here analysed.

Hypotheses

Literature addressing the study of the new wave of populism in Europe often emphasises the role of the Web in explaining the success of these new parties and movements (Bartlett, 2014; Kriesi, 2014). Recent research also showed empirically that social media are highly compatible with populist communication (Ernst et al., 2017). The underlying concept of these interpretations is that populists can reach a broader range of citizens through social media and thereby are able to increase support for issues that were not so popular previously. A first hypothesis is:

H1. The presence of populist elements increases the number of Likes of a given post.

A second important element in assessing the reasons for the success of populist discourse is the frame used by the media to cover populist issues, that is, ‘media populism’ (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). In addition, the way populist leaders and parties implement their communication strategy produces ‘mediatized populism’, the adaptation by populist leaders to media logic (Mazzoleni, 2014). Several scholars have pointed out that populists use an emotional communication style, especially in blame attribution: anger and fear are the frames commonly used to communicate that the people are threatened by elites or by ‘others’ (Fieschi and Heywood, 2004; Ruzza and Fella, 2011). In a recent article, Hameleers et al. (2017) addressed precisely the question of how emotionalised blame attribution could affect the persuasiveness of a populist message. Based on an experiment on a sample of Dutch citizens, they found that the emotionalised style of the populist message influenced its effectiveness in terms of both blame perception and populist attitudes. Similarly, our purpose is to contribute to experimentally observed explanations by analysing the populist communication that LN actually published in Italy. In particular, we aim to assess the role of emotions as a possible explanation for the popularity of Facebook posts. The second hypothesis is therefore:

H2. The presence of emotionalised messages increases the number of Likes of a given post.

Finally, the presence of a charismatic leader is frequently identified as a crucial factor for understanding the relationship between a populist party and its followers (Caiani and Graziano, 2016; van der Brug and Mughan, 2007; Weyland, 2001). Populist leaders usually create and strengthen the bond with their supporters thanks to a particular style and rhetoric (Mazzoleni, 2003). As noted by McDonnell (2013), in many cases, the relevance of the leader tends to transform populist parties into 'personal parties', in which party communication focuses on the leader and the leader dominates the party. Frequently, these leaders are political 'outsiders' who present themselves as morally authorised to speak on behalf of 'the people' and to celebrate both 'spontaneous action at the grassroots and a close personal tie between leader and follower' (Canovan, 1999: 6). The third hypothesis is:

H3. Messages posted by the leader increase the number of Likes of a given post.

The Sample

To tackle these questions, a quantitative content analysis of the messages posted on the official Salvini and LN Facebook accounts was conducted. All messages posted on these accounts – except for shares, links, images or event announcements without any text – were gathered and analysed. In total, the sample consisted of 735 messages. The LN account was much more active ($n = 453$, 61.6%) than that of the leader ($n = 282$, 31.4%). The selected period (1–30 November 2015) was chosen as being a routine period, when no electoral events were scheduled and no major actions of the government or parliament were planned. Nevertheless, two events of a different nature did affect the sample. On November 8, Salvini organised a national rally of the Right against the government led by Matteo Renzi, in Bologna. The other event, on November 13, was a series of terrorist attacks in Paris. Although

the second event did monopolise the political debate for several days, the sample ensures a good level of representativeness of the discourses of Salvini and LN.

Operationalisation and measurement

To assess the extent to which the published posts were or were not populist, we accounted for the three key elements of populist discourse outlined previously: ‘elites’, ‘the people’ and ‘the others’. These are dichotomous variables to which the coders had to answer *yes* (1) or *no* (0). In addition, we also assessed whether a message was framed in an emotional way, utilising the distinction between the ‘anger frame’ and the ‘fear frame’ proposed by Hameleers et al. (2017), Kühne (2014) and Nabi (2003). This distinction relies on words that denote emotional frames. In particular, on the one hand, responsibility attributions, punishment for those responsible for a problem, outrage and frustration with a critical situation were considered to be indicators of anger; on the other hand, pessimism, uncontrollability, uncertainty and a quest for protection were considered to be indicators of fear. Both anger and fear were coded as dichotomous variables. Finally, data for the Likes count of each post were retrieved directly from the Facebook accounts.

Two coders content-analysed the messages. The intercoder reliability, conducted on a subsample of approximately 10 per cent of the entire sample, yielded satisfactory results (Krippendorff's Alpha, $KA > .67$).

In the category ‘elites’ (KA 0.78), we classified criticism of blame attribution to politicians, banks, the media, the judicial system, the EU, etc. In the category ‘the people’ (KA 0.82), we placed references to the ‘common man’, Italian identities, Christian tradition, made in Italy, etc. In the category ‘others’ (KA 0.83), were criticism of or blame attribution to immigrants, Roma communities, Muslims, homosexuals and welfare recipients.

Since it has been demonstrated that on social media ‘populism manifested itself in a fragmented form’ and that this fragmentation ‘could be an empirical expression of populism’s “thin” nature and “inherent incompleteness” ’ (Engesser et al., 2017: 1121–1122), we decided to consider all the posts containing at least one reference to the aforementioned key elements as an expression of populism. Starting from the typology of populist discourse by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), we then combined these three key elements into five different types of messages, according to their content:

- *Complete populism*: posts containing references to all the three key elements;
- *Empty populism*: posts containing only references to ‘the people’;
- *Excluding populism*: posts containing references to ‘the others’ and posts containing references to the ‘people’ and ‘the others’;
- *Anti-elitist populism*: posts containing references to ‘the elites’ and posts containing references to ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’;
- *Contentious populism*: posts containing references to ‘the elites’ and ‘the others’.

Complete and *empty* populism are operationalised as in Jagers and Walgrave: in the first case we coded, each post includes all the key elements together; while in the second one, those posts referring only to ‘the people’. As regards *exclusionary* and *anti-elitist* populism, besides considering the references to ‘the elites’ and ‘the others’ in a given post, the combination of these with ‘the people’ is taken into account. Finally, *contentious* populism is a combination that highlights the aggressive and confrontational nature of messages that are simultaneously against *both* ‘the elites’ and ‘the others’ (see examples in table 1).

As regards emotional frames, we operationalised our variables by following the distinction between anger and fear. On the one hand, the ‘fear frame’ variable (percentage agreement 100 per cent) detects those messages in which fear conditions are emphasised. Thus, the variable

was coded as ‘fear frame’ when the message presented explicit elements related to alarm, anxiety, apprehension, catastrophism, confusion, consternation, defeatism, dismay, distress, fear, fright, horror, hostility, nervousness, panic, pessimism, restlessness, tension, terror, tragedy or worry. On the other hand, the variable ‘anger frame’ (KA 0.72) identifies those messages in which anger conditions are emphasised. This identified messages with explicit elements related to anger, atonement, condemnation, disappointment, discontent, disgust, dishonour, dislike, dissatisfaction, frustration, hatred, humiliation, impatience, insult, irritation, malice, moodiness, nervousness, penalty, penance, punishment, retaliation, revenge, shame, spite and wrath (see examples in table 2).

TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1. Examples of different populist messages

<i>Complete</i> populism	‘There’s Renzi’s [Italian Prime Minister at that moment] Italy and then there’s the country that we envisage, where Italians come FIRST, before those who reach our shores every morning. Is this asking too much?’ 11/11/15, Matteo Salvini FB page
<i>Empty</i> populism	‘Italian FARMERS have been fooled again in Rome today. Farmers will get 36 cents for each litre of MILK they produce, against a production cost of 40 cents. They work and milk to lose out – this is crazy! And at the supermarket a litre of milk costs 1.40 Euros! The Northern League is ready to fight with the farmers. Here’s what I ask to those who buy in our shops: LET’s BUY only ITALIAN PRODUCTS!’ 26/11/15, Matteo Salvini FB page
Exclusionary populism	‘#SALVINI: I want a welcoming country, I want my sons to grow up in a modern and generous country – but Italians come first! WITH 4 MILLION ITALIANS WITHOUT A JOB, MY PRIORITY IS TO GIVE THEM EMPLOYMENT’ 01/11/15, LN FB page
Anti-elitist populism	‘In Sicily bridges collapse, there’s a shortage of water, motorways close down, trains still run on diesel, and youth unemployment is above 50%. What kind of politicians are governing this beautiful region???’ 01/11/15, Matteo Salvini FB page

<i>Contentious populism</i>	<p>‘Abdur Rahman Nauroz alleged Islamic TERRORIST. The Italian State paid with our taxes for his accommodation and gave him benefits after he was recognised as POLITICAL REFUGEE. How many criminals are we supporting???. What could be done? Thorough checks and then...EXPULSIONS!!! Renzi, Alfano and Boldrini [respectively, Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior and House President, and President of the Chamber of Deputies]: you are dangerous’ 13/11/15, Matteo Salvini FB page</p>
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TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2. Examples of different emotional frames

<i>Fear frame</i>	<p>‘I am worried about Italian uncertainty, we must act! Who, in the name of pacifism, does not want to intervene is an accomplice of the terrorists! It’s time for choice! ... They have declared war, we must defend ourselves.’ 17/11/2015, LN FB page</p>
<i>Anger frame</i>	<p>‘Alleged refugees protested in Vercelli [a town in Northern Italy] because they do not have WI-FI. In Latina [a town close to Rome] a family – mum and dad, eighty years old, disabled, without a pension and with an eviction notice – had to sell their WEDDING RINGS. If all this MOVES YOU but makes you also feel PISSED OFF, share this post. I DON’T GIVE UP, we are going to take back Italy!’ 08/11/15, Matteo Salvini FB page</p>

Findings

Table 3 illustrates that the number of likes received and the proportion of populist and non-populist messages as well as what type of populism (complete, empty, anti-elitist, excluding and/or contentious) is evoked in the message the reference to each. In line with our expectations, populist messages are the largest portion of the overall online communication of Salvini and LN: 84.5 per cent of their posts contain at least one reference to one key element. Similarly, the fans’ approval of populist content appears much higher than that of the

remaining posts. The average number of Likes obtained by the former (7,692) is almost double those received by the latter (4,621). When we consider the type of populist message, we note that one of these prevails: anti-elitist populism (32.4 per cent). Excluding and contentious types follow, with a more than 10 percentage point gap, while complete and empty are the two categories least observed within our sample (around 7 per cent). The Likes count, however, shows a different picture: while differences between complete, empty and anti-elitist populism in general are less pronounced, the categories contentious and excluding populism stand out, with an average of Likes respectively equal to 8,865 and 12,905.

It is worth noting that this result was probably influenced by the attacks that took place in Paris in mid-November. Nevertheless, this could be mainly due to the emphasis with which the fans reacted to the Paris attacks, rather than a change of priorities in LN communication. Considering the distribution, it is clear that the discourse is not primarily oriented towards ‘others’. On the contrary, the element most frequently invoked in the messages was blame attribution to ‘elites’.

TABLE 3 HERE

Table 3. ‘Likeability’ of populist messages and key populist elements on Facebook

	Likes count avg.	Likes count st. dev.	Post N	%
Non-populist messages	4,621	7,667	114	15.5
Populist messages	7,692	15,377	621	84.5
<i>Complete populism</i>	4,777	7,851	52	7.1

<i>Empty populism</i>	4,719	7,468	53	7.2
<i>Anti-elitist populism</i>	4,888	10,372	238	32.4
<i>Excluding populism</i>	12,905	22,378	161	21.9
<i>Contentious populism</i>	8,865	1,5431	117	15.9
				<i>N</i> 735

Table 4 focuses on instances of emotionalised style observed in the Facebook accounts analysed. It shows the average number of Likes received and the proportion of emotionalised-style messages, also distinguishing between the ‘anger frame’ and the ‘fear frame’. In general, emotionalised-style messages comprise only one-third of the overall number of messages published (35.4 per cent). Nevertheless, as expected, emotionalised-style messages are much more popular, receiving three times more Likes (12,445) than the other messages (4,353). The LN and Salvini discourses, at least in the selected period, made only sporadic use of the ‘fear frame’, although the terrorist attacks would have represented an excellent opportunity for emphasising and taking advantage of feelings such as fear, insecurity and uncertainty. Given the low number of cases (only 21 messages registered), we cannot consider results for the ‘fear frame’ reliable. All the emotional strength of the LN’s discourse relies, therefore, on the second frame, the ‘anger frame’. Feelings of anger, hatred and disgust go together with blame attribution to the Italian government, the state, Europe, immigrants, Islamic people and, obviously, terrorists. This frame was used only in 32.5 per cent of cases but each message received a relatively high success, achieving on average 12.717 Likes.

TABLE 4 HERE

Table 4. Likeability of emotionalised-style messages on Facebook

	Likes count avg.	Likes count st. dev.	Post N	%
Non-emotionalised messages	4,353	9,590	475	64.6
Emotionalised messages	12,445	19,606	260	35.4
<i>Anger frame</i>	12,717	20,189	239	32.5
<i>Fear frame</i>	9,359	10,803	21	2.9
				<i>N</i> 735

TABLE 5 HERE

Table 5. Likeability of Salvini vs Lega Nord accounts

	Likes count avg.	Likes count st. dev.	Post N	%
Salvini account	17,586	19,087	282	38.4
Lega Nord account	760	2,385	453	61.6
Salvini populist messages	18,944	20,150	238	32.4
LN populist messages	700	1,990	383	52.1
Salvini emotionalised messages	21,989	22,397	141	19.2
LN emotionalised messages	1,137	3,284	119	16.2
				<i>N</i> 735

Given the features of the LN and Salvini messages as outlined above, we tested our hypothesis through an Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression model (Table 6). We found that the presence of populist elements, emotionalised style and the leader as the source of communication positively affected the popularity of a message.

However, not all the types of populist message produced significant effects. Anti-elitist populism, despite being the most recurrent type, had no effect on the likeability of the posts, and the same was true for complete and empty populism. The only type of message that significantly affected the number of likes was ones exhibiting excluding populism: messages containing references to immigrants, minorities or welfare recipients gained more than 5,200 Likes compared to other messages. Also, contentious populism contributed to the explanation of likeability, even though it appeared as the variable less relevant in terms of significance and magnitude of the correlation coefficient. This figure confirms our first hypothesis, although with a few qualifications because only two types of populist discourse appeared to be relevant. As regards emotionalised style, we tested only the ‘anger frame’ because the consistency of the ‘fear frame’ sample was too low. We found that messages containing references to feelings of anger, disgust, disappointment and revenge and so on had a positive effect on likeability of posts. This kind of message achieved 3,800 more Likes than the average score. In addition to these two variables, the determinant providing the strongest contribution to the success of a post among the fans was undoubtedly the leader as source of the message. A post published by Salvini achieved over 15,000 more Likes than the average likeability score. This means that the leader was much more important than any other variable in explaining the online popularity of a message among LN fans. Whether it is well known that the presence of a charismatic leader is a crucial factor for understanding the relationship between a populist party and its followers (Caiani and Graziano, 2016; van der Brug and Mughan, 2007; Weyland, 2001), political leadership seems strengthened by social media that offer new possibilities to the leader for non-mediated interactions with his supporters.

TABLE 6 HERE

Table 6. Social media populism success: an explanatory model

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Empty populism	439,555	1937,932
Complete populism	-1667,148	2014,749
Anti-elitist populism	94,450	1354,561
Excluding populism	5202,342***	1478,009
Contentious populism	2953,434•	1619,343
Anger frame	3601,386***	1013,986
Leader account	15594,710***	915,075
<i>Adjusted R²</i>	0.36	
<i>N</i>	735	

Note: OLS regressions. Dependent variable: likes count. Entries are non-standardized b-coefficients and standard errors.

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, •p<0.1

Conclusion

The process of adaptation to media logic by the actors of populism, defined by Mazzoleni (2014) as ‘mediatized populism’, seems to have stepped up. Populists have adapted their style of communication to the new media environment provided by social media better than others have. Populism on social media has benefited from the peculiarities of these media – disintermediation, immediacy and interactivity – to spread its message and strengthen the bond with supporters and sympathisers. However, within this media environment, rather than populist content, the image of the leader and his personal appeal seem to have the greatest effect on the popularity of populist messages.

Several scholars have pointed out that one of the main features of populism is its chameleon-like nature (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Taggart, 2000). It is indeed able to adapt communication to different contexts and times. The importance attributed to each key element within the populist parties' discourse determines their political line, emphasising, in turn, the exaltation of 'the people', the denigration of 'the elites', the discrimination against the 'others' or a combination of these elements. On the one hand, this is a confirmation that on social media populism appears as a fragmented ideology (Engesser et. al 2017). However, on the other hand, we also found that not all populist messages were equally popular over the period analysed. Although Salvini and LN put great emphasis on 'elites', only 'excluding populism' and 'contentious populism' helped to explain the popularity of a message posted on Facebook. This implies that there is no direct relationship between publication of populist messages and their likeability.

In accordance with evidence experimentally observed by Hameleers et al. (2017), this study also found that emotionalised style messages affect citizens. This type of post had a positive effect on likeability. Although in the LN discourse we found only the 'anger frame' (the 'fear frame' was all but absent), emotionalised communication appears as a promising component for a deeper understanding of the relationship between citizens and populist proposals.

It is known that populist leaders usually adopt a peculiar style and rhetoric to create and strengthen the bond with their supporters (Mazzoleni 2003). Our findings show that the party leader, and especially the relationship that links him to his supporters, contribute the most to explain the likeability of LN messages on Facebook. This result underlines a crucial aspect of many populist parties, namely the presence of a charismatic leader (such as Le Pen, Bossi, Salvini, Berlusconi). Since the results of this study are limited to only one party and one country, future research should be based on a comparative sample to provide more generalizable results. This will require closer study of the role of social media in redefining

the ‘charismatic linkage’ (Kitschelt, 2000), rooted in a leader’s personal qualities, which entails an online - and therefore direct and (potentially) continuous - link between leaders and followers.

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