

Renzi's online supporters: a hidden declination of Italian populism?

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Abstract

“Populism” is a word currently associated to some right-wing European movements that are growing under the pressure of certain issues, such as national sovereignty and citizens' anger against political parties (Tarchi 2003). In Italy, “populism” has been frequently related to the ideas expressed both by Matteo Salvini (leader of the nationalist movement “Lega Nord”) and Beppe Grillo, head of “Movimento 5 stelle”. Nevertheless, an application of the definitions of this term (deepened by some recent scientific contributes) would not save even the Italian Democratic Party from this label. Or, at least, some supporters of its leader.

Therefore, in my paper I will analyse visual posts published on Facebook by Matteo Renzi's supporters during the last two weeks before the constitutional referendum (4th December 2016). I will take into consideration non-verbal contributes published in a Facebook's group dedicated to the former Italian Prime Minister.

After giving a definition of “populism” based on the most recent scientific contributes (Mudde 2004, Diamanti 2014, van Kessel 2015), I will proceed with an analysis of the visual materials. In order to do this, my method of analysis will necessarily involve both quantitative

and qualitative criteria. Then, I will compare these elements with the ones produced by Matteo Salvini's followers on their leader's page.

This work wishes to generate elements which may be useful to answer to two general questions: do social media aliment aggressive and anti-democratic attitudes? Are these attitudes transpolitical?

Introduction.

Difficulties in defining populism.

“Populism” is a term that is used very often in current political talk. Yet, a precise and definitive definition of this concept seems hard to be made, for it is a definition that regards a wide range of political movements and political leaders. In fact, it has been adopted to describe both Trump's agenda and Alexis Tsipras' governmental decisions; it has been used to value Marine Le Pen's electoral program and Podemos' electoral strategy. Could populism consist of all these shades?

Taking as a starting a recent study by Gidron and Bonikowski, populism may be considered as an ideology, a political strategy and a discursive style (Gidron, Bonikowski 2004). In the first case, populism would be composed of a set of concepts that characterize the so-called-populist movements. Actually, there is quite a common consensus (Diamanti 2014, Mudde 2007, Lukacs 2006) in defining ‘populism’ as an aggregate of behaviours, that may be encountered both in left and right parties. These behaviours include a deep resentment against the political establishment (Tarchi 2008), an exaltation of national sovereignty, and Euroscepticism.

By intending populism as a discursive style or a political strategy, “contraposition” is the key-word of this interpretation. Populist discourses and strategies are marked by a pronounced tendency to oppose “the people” (its will, its ‘good’) to the elites (Incisa di Camerana 1999).

As it emerges from this brief recognition about populism's definitions, the perspectives cited above imply a politician-based approach to the definition of populism. This approach is characterized by a focus on politicians' attitudes, agendas, political strategies or discursive styles; yet, it tends to underestimate the active role of the electors. Therefore, we may say that these definitions are characterized by an absence of a detailed comprehension of populism as a social-produced-phenomenon. Even the third perspective (populism as a discursive style) emphasizes the role of the sender of a political message, while it undervalues the communicative action of the receiver, who may re-produce a political discourse, turning it into a social narration.

Also, these three perspectives are marked by a substantial underestimation of the relationship established between the leaders and their voters (Pasquino 1994). Some recent neuroscientific studies (Liuzza et al. 2011) have demonstrated the importance of the eye-contact relationship between electors and their leaders. Psychoanalysis (Freud 2016) has explained the importance of the relationship between these two subjects, underling how some social processes as identification and idealization move from the community to their leaders (not the other way round). Max Weber has deeply investigated the concept of 'charisma', linking it to the masses' desires and needs.

Therefore, the expressions of nowadays' so-called-populisms should be searched even in particular social environments. These social environments' productive processes may suggest further indications about the emersion of nowadays' political impulses. Focusing on this topic, the image of the leaders produced by their supporters acquires an indubitable centrality, as a way to express feelings and desires that constitute an embryonic political agenda.

Aim of the research.

This paper proposes a study of the social construction of political meanings in a particular (online) context. The research has been guided by the idea of a stratification of meanings, that are socially-built. These meanings are aggregated in all those social objects produced in a social environment. This research adopts Roland Barthes' definition of "mythology", taking into consideration a leader's iconography, as it emerges from the Net. This paper moves from the idea that social objects which represent the leader reveal the way his voters see him. Do they communicate something through their leader's icon?

The aim of this paper is to detect the characteristics and the functioning of Matteo Renzi's iconography, and to confront it with Matteo Salvini's one.

Therefore, this research is about Renzi's image, emerging from a particular, online context. This work investigates the *perception* and the *socialization* of this object, based on the interactions between users and contents. The research focuses on determining Renzi's 'social portrait'. I considered his online iconography, built by his own supporters. Then, I developed an evaluation of these representations, not on the political leader *per se*.

My research faces just one main issue: how does the image of Matteo Renzi circulate in this particular context, throughout his supporters? This paper proceeds from this fundamental question, trying to detect the characteristics of the consumption of Renzi's iconography.

The paper is divided into two different parts. I will firstly expose the results of the analysis regarding Matteo Renzi; then, in the second section, I will proceed to compare these results with Matteo Salvini's representations.

This research will reach its definitive aim after a further step. This step will include an analysis of the online conversations, in order to fully determine the meanings built by the supporters onto their leader's icons.

Method of analysis.

Fronting the problem of determining how this iconography is built, I hypothesised three main ways:

1. Visual construction
2. Textual construction
3. Contextual adjustment

Focusing on the representation of the leader, I collected all the images published in "*Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi*" Facebook group between 4th November and 4th December 2016. In this period, users posted 602 images. Then, I picked out all those visual elements that represented Matteo Renzi (138) and I analysed them.

In order to understand the supporters' interactions with their leader's iconography, the criteria by which I analysed the images have been selected in order to face the following questions:

- What is the most common function of these representations? What kind of representation is used to express this main function?
- Are the images collocated in a particular **context**? Is there any link to **political mentions**?
- What is the **engagement rate** of these posts?

These questions have been articulated into two different analytical approaches. In fact, I adopted both a quantitative perspective, by which I isolated visual elements and their frequency of occurrence, and a qualitative perspective, by which I identified the characteristics of the images.

In order to answer the questions above, these criteria included:

1. Type and function of the representation, mention of the leader;
2. Presence of text and its function; presence of political symbols, political issues or references to political currents events;
3. Likes, shares, comments and engagement rate.

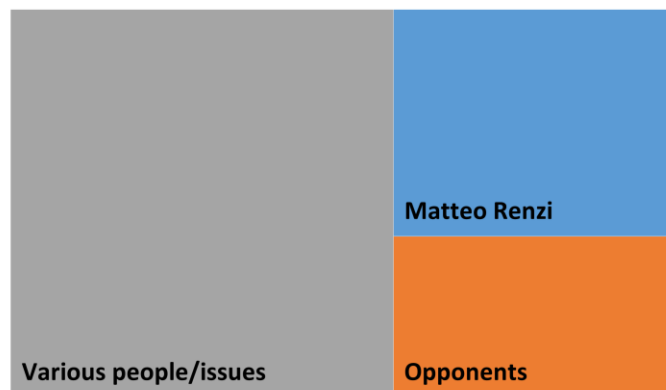
In order to proceed to an effective comparison, I also collected all the images published in *Matteo Salvini Leader* Facebook's group during the same period. I analysed them using the same criteria.

LEADER	How do user call the leader?	Name		
		Name + surname		
		Surname		
		Other		
	Type of image	Photo	Amateur	
			Archive materials	
			Collage	
		Quotation		
		Other		
	Function of the image	Report		
		Celebrate		
		Motivate		
		Inform		
		Attack		
	Presence of text	Yes		1
		No		0
	Anchoring function	Yes		1
		No		0
	Presence of common people	Yes		1
		No		0
	Common people?	Yes		1
		No		0
	Political symbols	Yes		1
		No		0
	Political issue	Yes		1
		No		0
	Chronicle	Yes		1
		No		0
	What fact?	Free text		
	Personal qualities	Yes		1
		No		0
	Which quality?	Free text		
	Engagement rate	(likes+shares+comments) / nr. followers x 100		

Matteo Renzi's online iconography: production and consumption of contents.

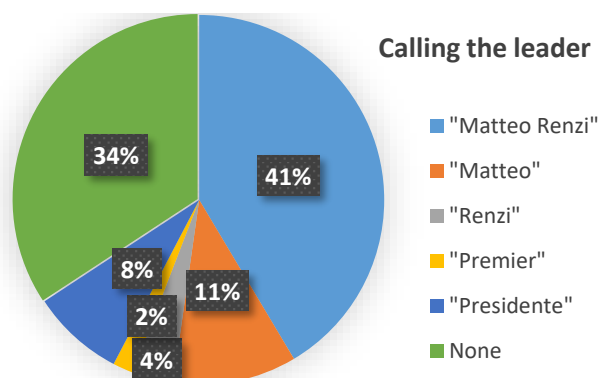
"*Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi*"¹ is a Facebook group that gathers almost 24.000 users. This group is currently managed by an administrator and 5 moderators. The logo of this community is inspired by the symbol of the Italian Democratic Party (PD), edited in order to include the name of the group.

As hinted in the Introduction, 602 images were published between 4th November and 4th December 2016. The incidence of the image of Matteo Renzi is about 25% (148 posts), while his opponents are represented 105 times (17%).



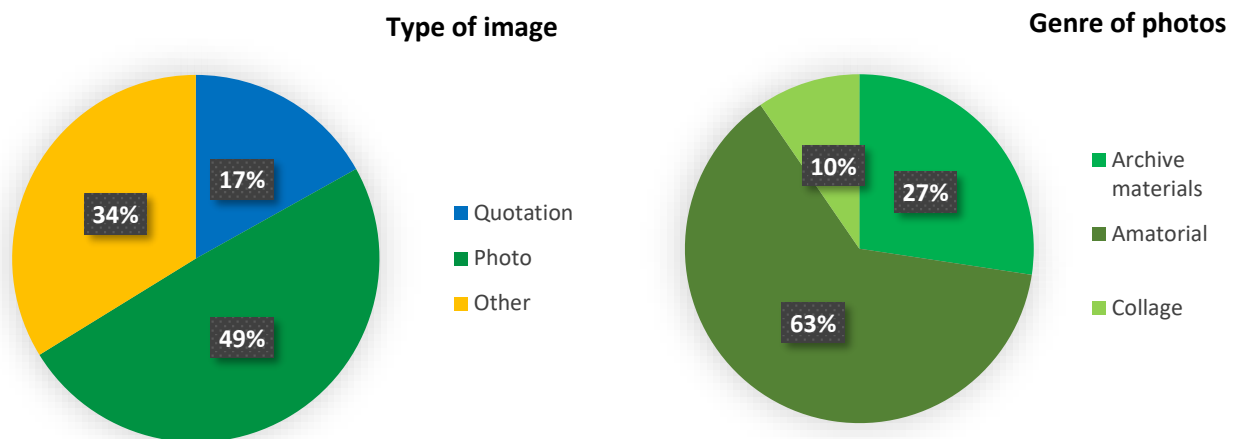
Despite of this group's aim, visual elements containing a representation of the leader are not very numerous. Instead, users seem to prefer contents regarding political issues (e.g. constitutional referendum). This could be evidently due to the particular period this research took into consideration.

I noticed that Renzi's supporters mostly mention the complete name of the leader (41%). He is called *confidentially* by his sole name not very often (11%), while users do refer to him by using his surname rarely (4%). He is mentioned by his institutional appellatives (as "President" or "Premier") just in a few cases (10%), while frequently there is no verbal designation (34%).



¹ The group changed its name after the defeat of the constitutional referendum.

In order to comprehend how the leader is represented by his followers, I firstly observed the visual elements that characterize these images. The visual representation of Matteo Renzi embraces various types of images. Yet, photographs (picture 2) are surely privileged by the subscribers. As we can see in the graphic below, they represent the 49% of the materials published in this period.



The most of them are amateur (49%) and some others are taken from other media (27%). A discrete minority (10%) of these contents consists of “collages” – compositions of two or more different photos (both original and not). Generally, it can be noticed that a relative majority of collages consists of photographs produced directly by the users.

Another significant information comes from the second most shared kind of images (34%), the ones I grouped under the label “other” (image 1). This category gathers all those images that are in some way ‘personalized’ (or customized) by the subscribers.

This type of images shows how the representation of the leader is figuratively re-managed, re-adapted or at least re-produced differently inside this particular, online context. We may say that in this category the iconic figuration of the leader “isn’t enough”, and it needs some kind of reinforcement.

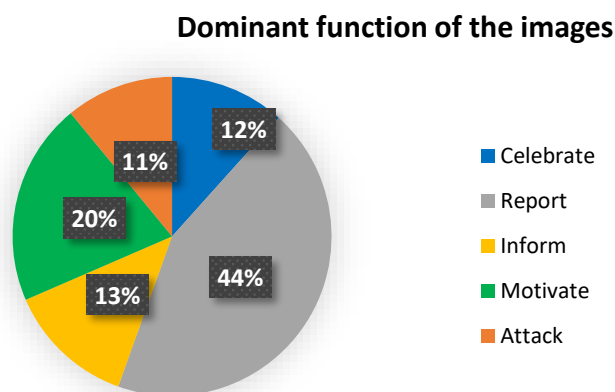


Image 1



Image 2

A clear and subjective will, beyond the depiction of the leader, is what differentiates this label from the others. Yet, the objective wish dominates the collection.



According to the data, the iconography of Matteo Renzi is used in order to achieve an interesting variety of aims.

Two main macro-functions may be detected: an emotional and a rational one. The first consists of sub-functions as celebrating, motivating and attacking the opponent, while the second one consists of functions as informing and reporting.

The dominant function is “reporting” (44%), while “motivating” is the second commonest function (20%). “Motivating” is related specially to quotes (34%) and customized contents (66%), while the ‘rational’ functions are fully associated to photographs. Amateur photos (68%) are prevalently intended to report a particular event, such as meetings (*image 3*) or “Leopolda” conference (*image 4*).



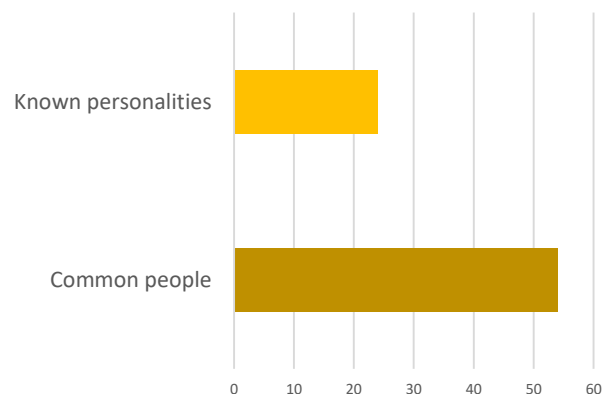
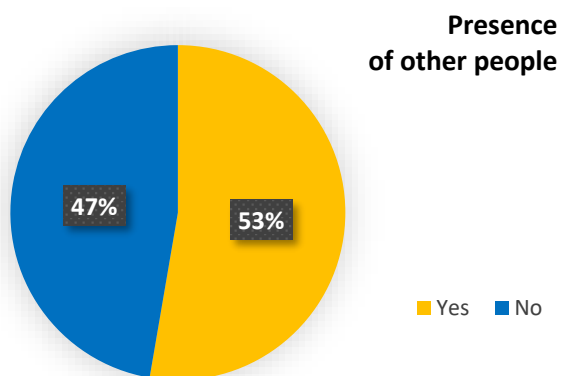
Image 3



Image 4

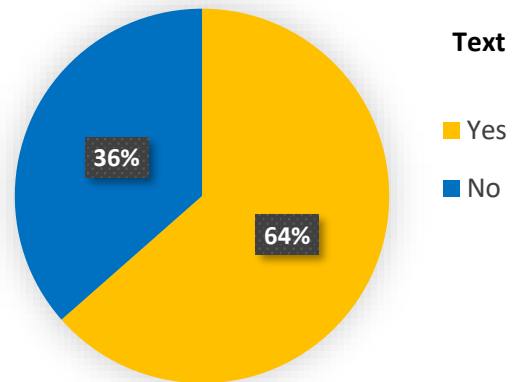
If we presume that the emotional functions reveal the necessity of an empathic accent on the icon of the leader, we should notice that this “addition” is not experienced here.

The figure of Matteo Renzi is often shown in company with other people (53% of the posts) that are generally “common people” (69%).

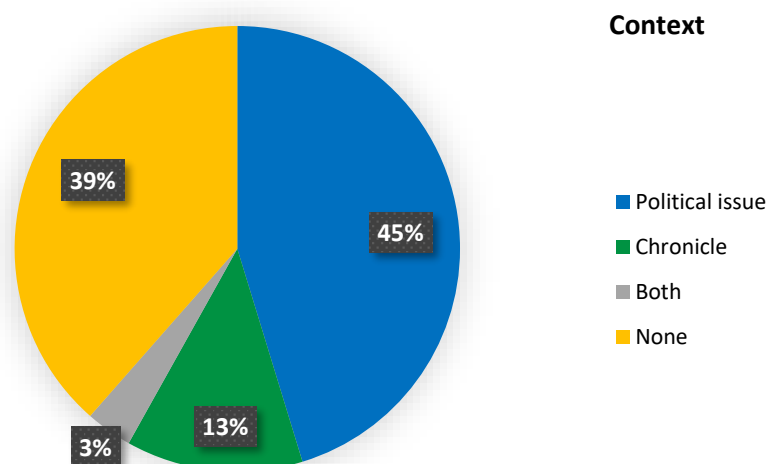


The frequency of textual descriptions, placed in these visual posts, is relatively high (64%). These texts have an anchoring function with respect to the visual representation (63,5%), but they often do not have an argumentative approach.

Passing to determine which is the offline context these images interact with, the main political issue cited by the subscribers is the constitutional referendum (60 times). They have been relieved 5 posts related to politics, 12 about the political system and 11 on Renzi's meetings and rallies.



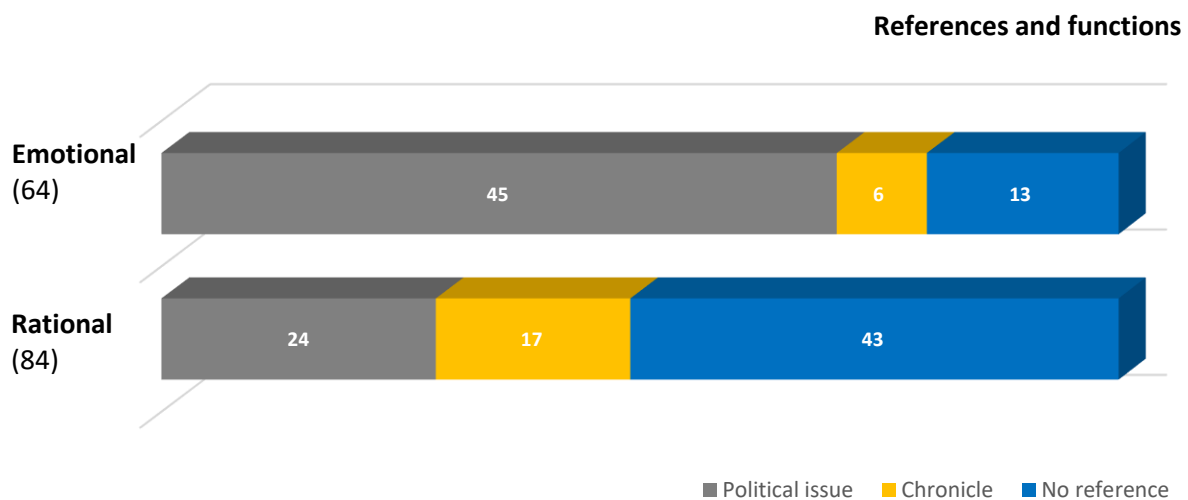
45% of the materials contain a mention regarding a political issue, while 39% of posts name a fact of chronicle. Sometimes (3%), these two types of contextual references are cited together, despite in the other cases (13%) there's no allusion. Political references are usually expressed through a statement or directly by visual elements contained in the image. Instead, parties' symbols are not cited in the images².



Comparing these types of contextualization with those information regarding the functions of the images, it can be noticed that political issues and current events are typically associated to emotional functions. As underlined in the graph below, rational function ('reporting' and 'informing') are usually performed in photograph that are rarely associated

² Occurrence of parties' symbols is about 30%.

with a precise political event. Instead, emotional representations of Matteo Renzi are more disposed to include political and chronical references.

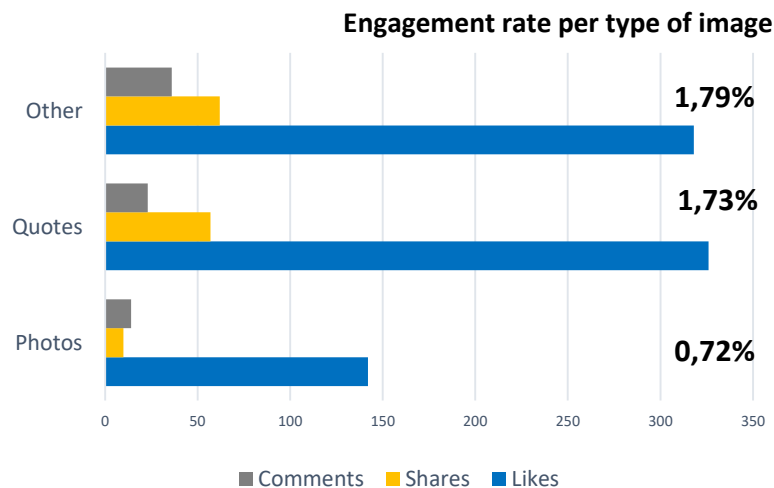


Moving to the quantitative criteria used in the collection, it can be observed that the indicators show an important level of engagement. The engagement rate is collected in order to establish which is the kind of portrait appreciated most by the group. Considering all the posts taken into consideration by this research (148), the average engagement rate³ (ER) per element is 1,25%⁴.

³ Obtained through the following calculation: (nr. average likes per post+ nr. average shares per post + nr. average comments per post) / nr. followers x 100

⁴ 234 likes, 35 shares, 23 comments.

In producing these contents, *the emotional investment pays*. In fact, Renzi's emotional representations obtain an average engagement rate of 1,80%, higher than the rational illustrations' ones (0,82%). Reportative and informative images get an average of 160 likes, 14 shares and 17 comments; on the other side, we see that emotional posts (attacking the opponents, motivating the other users and celebrating the leader) gain an average of 323 likes, 65 shares, 31 comments). Furthermore, images with an emotional function that refers to a political issue are much more appreciated by the users than the other types. They obtain



an ER of 1,81%, with an average of 328 likes and 51 shares per post.

Passing to analyse the relation between the types of Renzi's representations and the feedback of the users, we notice that the engagement rate of photos is below the average overall (0,72%). Instead, the categories "Other" and "Quotes" are more liked and shared by the subscribers.

These statistics as very useful for determining a central difference between the production and the consumption of Renzi's online iconography. As we saw in the first part of this section, users tend to publish more frequently images with a rational function, representing the leader with common people. Photos (archive materials, amateur photos and collages) are the most diffused type of image, but they are less appreciated by the users than the other kinds. Also informative and reportative posts, which represent the majority of the collection, are liked less than the emotional-functioning ones.

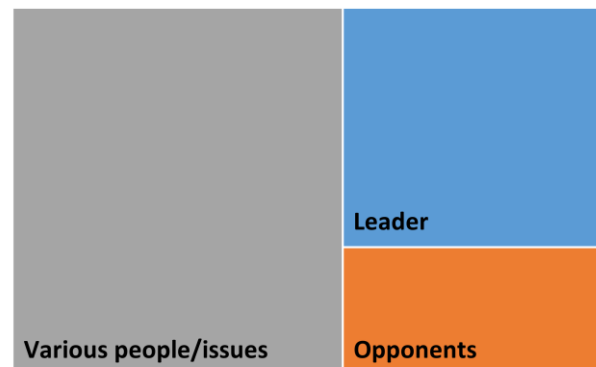
Renzi's persona emerging from this research is deeply conditioned by the its fruition. Users seem to prefer an empathic, non-argumentative representation of their leader. Textual elements are often used to enforce the message that the prosumer wants to convey.

In fact, users do choose the image through which they build a conversation. The stratification of meanings, experiences, desires and needs is constructed on these selected materials.

The emphasis on the fruition of posts underline a wide fragmentation between what is 'said' and what is 'listened'.

Comparison between Matteo Renzi and Matteo Salvini.

“Matteo Salvini Leader” (MSL) is a Facebook group that gathers more than 55.000 users⁵. This group is currently managed by an 9 administrators (Matteo Salvini himself is an administrator of this group) and 1 moderator. This online community has no logo. Yet, the cover image of the group consists of a representation of the Lega Nord's federal secretary. We can observe two main differences between *Matteo Salvini Leader* and the Facebook's group dedicated to Matteo Renzi:



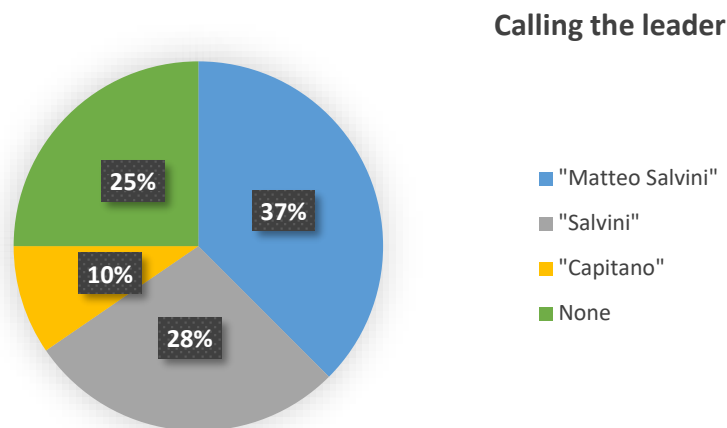
- *Matteo Salvini Leader* is supervised by the leader himself, while *Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi* (SPMR) look more like a fandom.

- MSL's "headquarter" is bigger than SPMR's one. In *Matteo Salvini Leader*, Luca Morisi (spin doctor of LN's federal secretary) is an administrator, while SPMR's administrators are not part of Renzi's official staff.

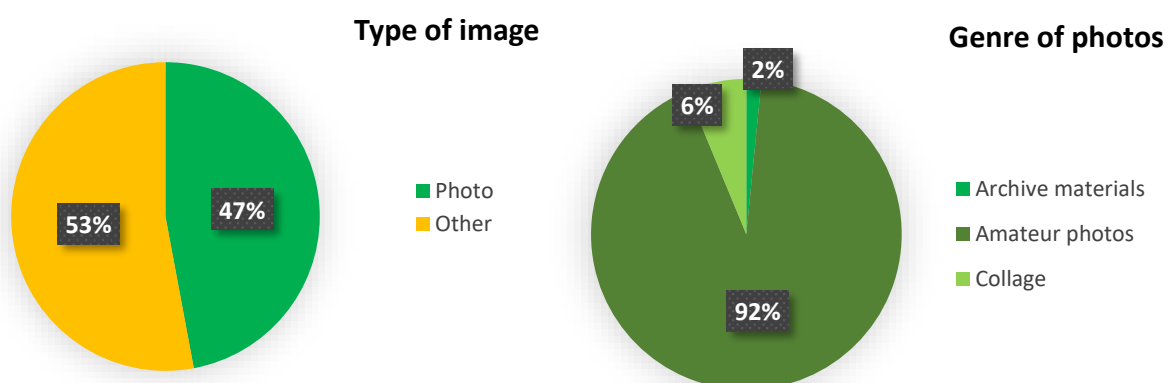
2026 images were published in this group between 4th November and 4th December 2016. The incidence of the figure of Matteo Salvini is about 28% (575 posts), while his opponents are visually cited 308 times (15%). Considering the amount of elements, it is superfluous to highlight the difference between the two groups' frequency of posting. In my research, I took into consideration a sample of Matteo Salvini's iconography, analysing all the posts published between 27th November 2016 and 4th December 2016 (136 materials).

⁵ Up to 15th January 2017

The aim of the group is supporting Matteo Salvini. In some posts there's a precise explication of what kind of leadership this group's name is referred to. Matteo Salvini is supported not as head of Lega North, but as leader of a future centre-right coalition. Salvini's online supporters usually name him by using his complete name (50%), while in some cases they prefer the sole surname (37%). Another appellative by which they indicate him is "Capitano" (captain).

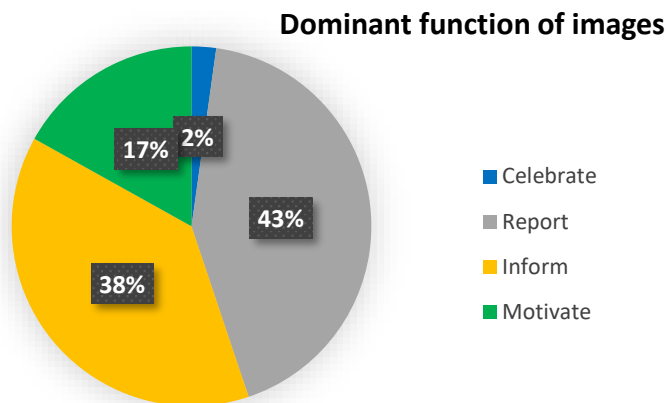


Regarding the representation of Matteo Renzi, it has been noticed that there were three main types of image. Referring to Matteo Salvini's iconography, there are two main categories: photos and "other". The first label gathers amateur photos, archive material and collages, while the second one consists of visual elements that have been modified or personalized by the users. In the most of cases, this adulteration involves an addition of textual elements. Posts belonging to this last category are the most numerous (57%); photos (47%) are prevalently amateur (92%). Archive materials are substantially absent (1%) and the tax of occurrence of collages is very low (4%).



Comparing these first materials with the ones belonging to *Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi*, we notice that amateur representations of Matteo Salvini are much more diffused. Yet, the predominance of “other” materials renders this information quite irrelevant.

Looking at the functions of Matteo Salvini's online iconography, it is easy to recognise some similarities with Matteo Renzi's one:



1. “Inform” and “Report” are the two main functions of the images;
2. Just a few posts do manifestly celebrate the leader;
3. Therefore, the “rational” functions prevail on the “emotional” ones.

Despite of these observations, it has to be underlined that Salvini's ‘rational’ images are strongly more numerous than Matteo Renzi's ones.

In *MSL*, Salvini's photograph are typically related to the reportative/informative function, even if the “other” materials are still very numerous (51 out of 110). Instead, almost all the celebrative/motivate images consists of these personalized materials.

Amateur photos are usually posted in order to report Salvini's presence on TV (image 7) or his daily routine (image 8).

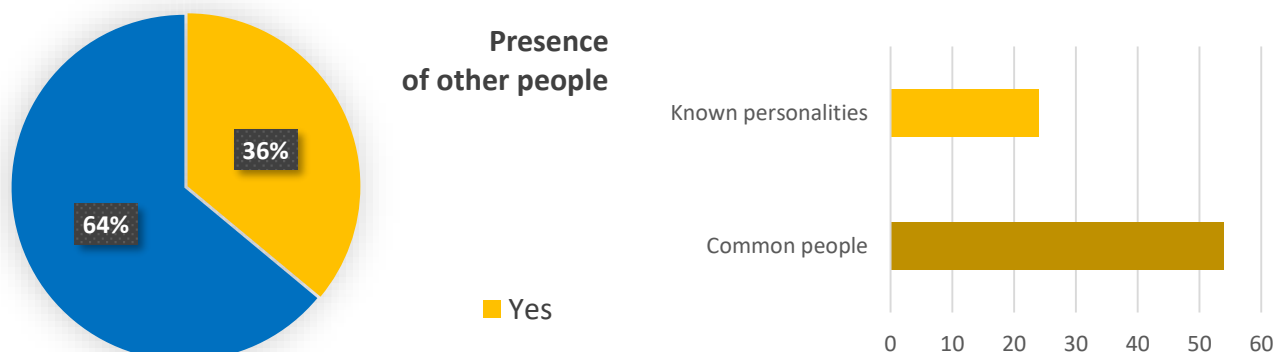


Image 7

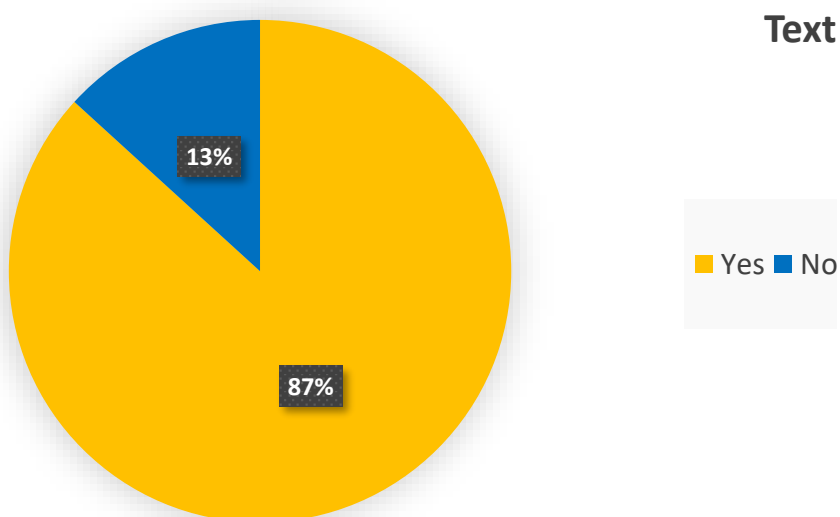


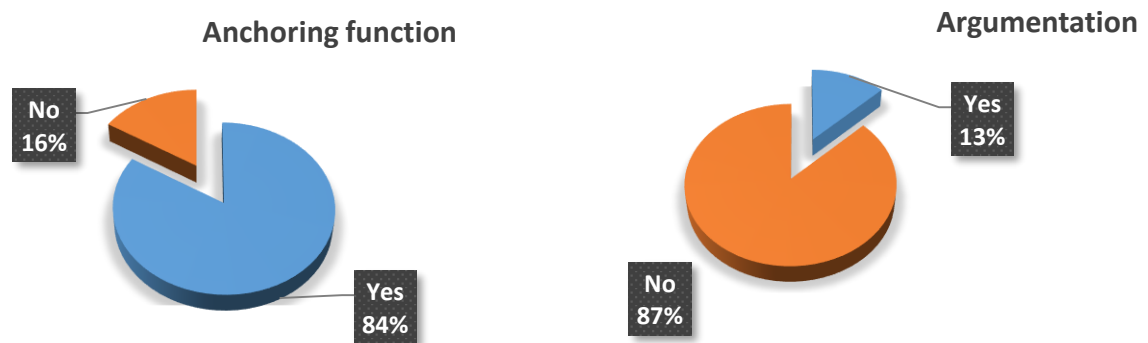
Image 8

Matteo Salvini is usually represented alone (64%). When he appears with other people, he is generally associated with common people rather than with known personalities.



Passing to analysing the textual component of Salvini's iconography, we can observe that these texts have an anchoring function with respect to the visual representation (63,5%), but they often do not have an argumentative approach. In fact, just the 13% of the sample explicates an argumentation, while the 84% of the texts have an anchoring function with respect to the visual elements. These details are very similar to SPMR's ones, except for the argumentation: Matteo Salvini's images are accompanied by a wider argumentative approach.

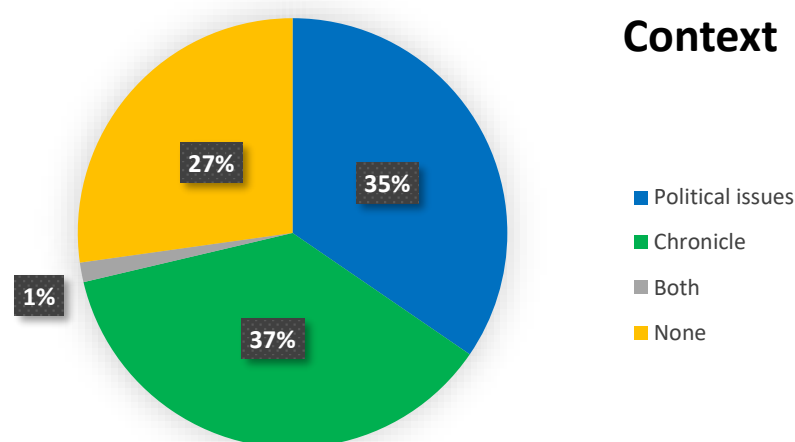




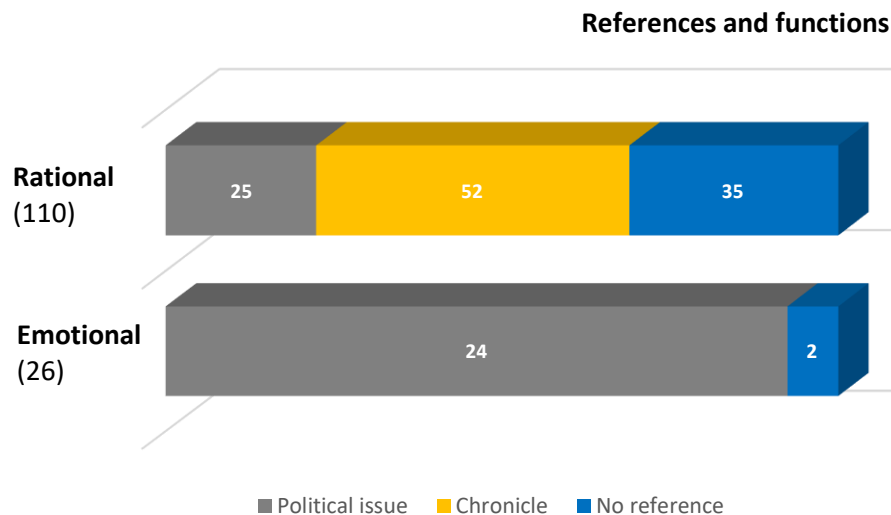
Passing to determine which is the offline context these images of Matteo Salvini interact with, the main issue cited by the subscribers regards Salvini's meetings and rallies (48 times), then the constitutional referendum (41 times). They have been relieved 6 posts related politics and 4 about the political system. The constitutional referendum is not the focal point of the leader's representation, and this is an evident difference between MSL and *Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi*.

35% of the analysed materials contain a reference to a political issue, while 37% of them name or refer to a current event. Just in a few cases (1%) these two types of references are cited together; in the rest of the cases, there's no precise reference to an offline context at all (27%). 45% of the materials contain a mention regarding a political issue, while 39% of posts name a fact of chronicle. Political symbols are not frequently cited (41%).

Therefore, Renzi's online supporters tend to be more inclined to mention a political issue than MSL's subscribers. Even reference to chronicle is more frequent in SPMR.



As done in the first section of this paper, I compared the types of contextualization with the functions of the representations of the leader. I appealed to the distinction between “rational” (reporting and informing) and “emotional” functions (celebrating and motivating).

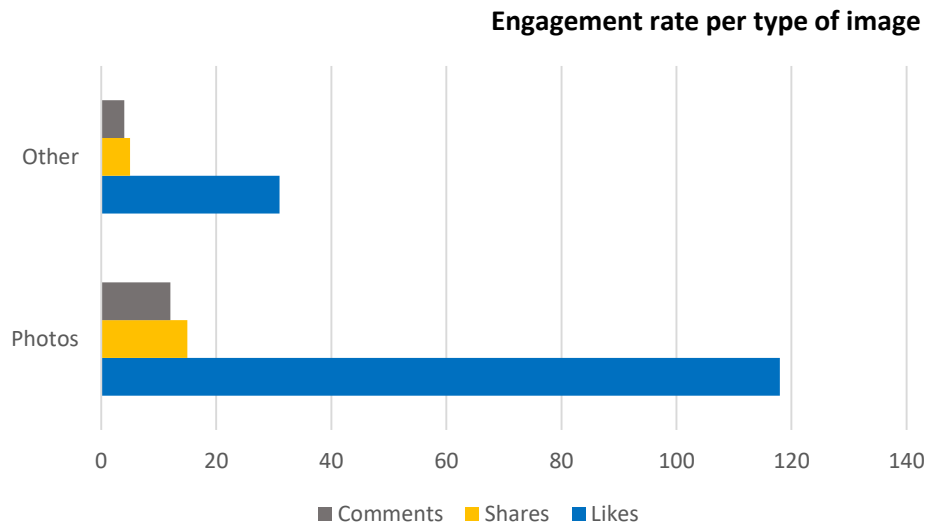


Emotional functions are fully associated with political issues; on the other side, rational functions have a wider contextual reference. All the current events named in this sample are associated with “informing” and “reporting” functions. There are no relevant differences between Salvini’s and Renzi’s items, here. Yet, it can be observed that there is a relative prevalence of political issues’ references in “emotional” MSL’s posts.

After verifying these qualitative correspondences and differences between Salvini’s and Renzi’s representations, I moved on in comparing the quantitative indicators, related to the images. In *Matteo Salvini Leader*, the overall engagement rate is lower than SPMR’s one (0,16%, against 1,25%).

FB Group	Likes (av.)	Shares (av.)	Comments (av.)	ER (av.)
Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi	72	10	8	1,25%
Matteo Salvini Leader	233	36	23	0,16%

In this group, “rational” images obtain a higher engagement rate (0,21%) rather than emotional ones (0,15%). That's a first difference from SPMR, but the one regarding the types of images is even more evident. In *Matteo Salvini* Leader, photos get an average of 118 likes, 15 shares and 12 comments (ER = 0,26%). The images gathered in the “Other” category, instead, obtain a lower ER (0,07%): an average of 31 likes, 5 shares and 4 comments.



The statics regarding Matteo Renzi's representation says just the opposite. We may then say that in MSL, there is homogeneity between the publication and the appreciation of contents. In fact, photos are more numerous and they catch the attention of the users, while in SPMR the 'personalized' representation of the leader was more successful, even if this type of image was not much diffused.

An evaluation of the analysis' results.

In conclusion, the research has described both the attitudes of Matteo Renzi's online supporters and the iconography of the democratic secretary. The former Prime Minister's iconography is characterized by references to political issues and current events. The leader is represented with other subjects (mostly, common people) in images that have a reporting function: even the texts of the descriptions tend to establish a direct relation with the visual item, rather than adding something to it. The iconography is prevalently constituted by amateur photos, published by the users in order to document the episodes of their leaders' political and private life. Passing to consider the attitudes of Renzi's online supporters, the research showed that there is no correspondence between the characteristics of the production and the consumption of the visual contents. For instance, the statistics regarding the objects of these users' engagement indicate that Renzi's emotional representations are more popular than the most diffused ones.

The comparison between the iconography and the attitudes towards these contents shows the characteristics that stimulate the diffusion of these images. The construction of the Renzi's mythology has been compared with Matteo Salvini's iconography, in order to comprehend if there's an online, common behaviour of users who participate to these Facebook's groups. The result is negative.

The differences between Matteo Renzi's and Matteo Salvini's iconographies are related both to the characteristics of the images and to the behaviour of their followers. Yet, a few similarities have been observed.

These similarities regard the type of images that are more diffused into these groups and the prevalent functions these images serve. In fact, the research shows that a neutral representation of the leader is common in these online environments, even if it tends not to obtain a higher quantity of likes, comments and shares. The diffusion "Other" type of representation is published less frequently by the users. Comparing this habit with the statistics on the addition of text, it demonstrates the necessity to say something about the political leader, even if there's no explicit reference to particular, personal qualities. The leader speaks through quotes (Matteo Renzi) and anchoring function of the texts (both in Salvini's and Renzi's representations).

Also, it has been observed that the main function of the images is “reporting”, while the “emotional functions” (as “celebrating”, “motivating” and “attacking” have been defined) aren’t much diffused. However, this information concerns the production of the leaders’ ‘mythologies’, while the statistics about the consumption do differ from this statement. In fact, “celebrating” and “motivating” functions reach an engagement rate which is higher than the one obtained by “reporting” and “informing” functions⁶. Even if the definition of “emotional” and “rational” referred to these functions may be a further object of discussion, it cannot be ignored that the ‘demand’ differs from the ‘offer’. This has been a focal result of this research.

In fact, passing to examine the differences between the two series of contents, they prevalently regard the processes of production and consumption of these items. It has been noticed that Matteo Salvini’s followers tend to prefer the less diffused type of image (photographs). This tendency isn’t confirmed in SPMR, in which “other” categorized contents are preferred to photographs. Yet, the research managed two different amount of materials, and the higher quantity of posts in MSL doesn’t correspond to a higher engagement rate. Even if *Matteo Salvini Leader* gather more followers than *Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi*, its subscribers are less active than the ones of the group dedicated to the former Italian Prime Minister. This diversity may be related to one characteristic of the productive process: MSL’s editors coincide with its administrators and moderators, while this correspondence doesn’t occur in SPMR.

Other differences between the two leaders’ representations regard the presence of a reference to political issues. The research has shown that Renzi’s online supporters tend to be more inclined to mention a political issue than MSL’s subscribers, while MSL’s production is characterized by a stronger tendency to associate the leader to current events.

Furthermore, in *Matteo Salvini Leader* many contents are referred to the presence of the leader in TV. There are also visual materials that remind these virtual meeting of the followers with the politician. This type of content hasn’t been registered in *Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi*.

⁶ In *Simpatizzanti per Matteo Renzi*: emotional functions 1,80%, rational functions 0,82%. In *Matteo Salvini Leader*, emotional functions 0,21%, rational functions 0,15%.

Therefore, the next step of this research will consist in an analysis of the online conversations between the users, in order to collect further information about the stratification of meaning onto the image of the leader.

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