Celebrity politics and changing performances over time. The case of Italian populist leaders

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Abstract

Celebrity may be a successful strategy for political leaders. The article intends to detail how this happens, what specific styles are adopted, how they are differentiated and especially how they have changed over time. We will argue that, while legacy media have produced certain models of political celebrity, the opportunities offered by the communicative structures of social media have encouraged the introduction of new elements. Starting from the assumption that celebrity may help leaders to reinforce their claim of closeness to the people, the article focuses on Italian populist leaders. It discusses commonalities and differences with the aim of advancing the comprehension of how celebrity operates in political contexts. The choice of covering two distinct periods – from the early 1990s to the 2000s, and from the 2010s to the present – allows a diachronic comparison with the aim of identifying possible trends.

1. Introduction

According to the relevant literature (Street 2004, Wheeler 2013), the primary feature of the phenomenon of celebrity politics is that politicians use formats and codes of popular culture and promote themselves in a way that has many points in common with the approach of the stars of the media and entertainment industry. t'Hart and Tindall (2009, p. 258) have distinguished between *celebrity politicians*, who enter politics with a visibility and popularity previously gained in a non-political field, and *politician-celebrities*, who are office-holders 'whose public behaviour, purposeful association with celebrities, and/or private life' project them 'into the celebrity sphere'. In this article we will refer to both categories simply as 'celebrity leaders'.

As Street (2019, p. 6) has pointed out, 'celebrity-ness can adopt a range of styles' and we need to be sensitive as to 'how celebrity politics might operate'. A step forward in this direction is the typology proposed by Wood, Corbett and Flinders (2016), who distinguished two types in terms of the strategies employed to acquire and embody celebrity. *Superstar celebrity politicians* use traditional broadcast media; act in controlled settings designed to enhance their appeal; present themselves as exceptional, strong leaders; maintain a distance from ordinary citizens. *Everyday celebrity politicians* privilege interactive media, like social media or reality television; pursue spontaneity; they engage in ad

hoc visits; take photos with ordinary people; make gaffes; try to appear as authentic individuals.

In this article we intend to explore the nature of political celebrity not only by expanding the analysis on what differentiates leaders, for instance based on nationality and ideology, but also by looking at how celebrity has evolved over time. As Ryfe (2001, p. 408) argues, historical enquiry and historical methods may 'invigorate' the research agenda in many areas of political communication. In our view, time appears to be a crucial variable to better understand forms of celebrity politics, especially if one considers that, in recent years, online culture has transformed the public sphere. As P. David Marshall (2014), a pioneer of the studies on celebrity and power, observes, our celebrities have been reconstituted to adapt to the transformation of the media environment and in particular to the world of social networks.

Wood *et al.* (2016, p. 595) make the point clear: "the openness and accessibility of contemporary social media may open up opportunities for pushing the 'everyday' element of celebrity further and potentially enable a more thoroughgoing democratisation in the process".

The goal of the present article is to develop this line of analysis. Starting from the assumption that celebrity can be identified in terms of strategies, choice of platforms, storytelling and so on, we intend to highlight possible trends over time by comparing two generations of leaders. We choose one country, Italy, and select a number of leaders with a distinguishing feature in common, that of being leader of a populist party or movement according to the classification proposed by Rooduijn et al. (2019).

We are well aware that not all celebrity leaders are populist. Indeed, as Ceccobelli et al (2020) stress, it is important not to confuse the two phenomena or take for granted that populist politicians use popularization more effectively than others. Outside the circle of leaders of populist parties and movements, we could find examples of potential celebrities, like Matteo Renzi, who would certainly have been an interesting case study. However, we based the choice of focusing on leaders of populist parties on two considerations. First, it serves a methodological purpose. Selecting leaders who have a common trait allows us to hold some variables as constant in order to facilitate the unveiling of empirical relationships among other variables. Thus, a set of populist leaders in the same country consists of the most similar cases that may be analysed. Moreover, this choice responds to our goal of carrying out an analysis that covers two distinct periods. According to Lijphart (1971), a way of achieving comparability is to analyse a single country diachronically. In this sense, Italy is an especially suitable case, being a true laboratory for populism (Tarchi 2015, p. 7). Several authoritative accounts have thoroughly investigated and illustrated the conditions and the reasons for the surge of populist parties, such as the Northern League; and of populist leaders, such as Silvio Berlusconi, in the nineties (Ruzza and Fella 2009, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015, Tarchi 2015). But populism has also dominated the scenario of recent years with the ascent of a new influential populist actor like the 5-Star Movement (Biorcio and Natale 2013).[1] Moreover, as shown by the seminal study of Mazzoleni and Sfardini (2009), the Italian scenario has been a fertile field for any

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[1] For a well-organized and extended review of the research on populism in Italy see Bobba and Legnante (2017).

form of popularization of politics or 'pop politics', intended as the increasing symbiosis between political communication and popular culture.

The second reason we are focusing on populist leaders is that we agree with Moffitt (2016, p. 83) that celebrity may well be a key strategy for such leaders, who are 'incredibly opportunistic about media appearances, particularly those that ostensibly bring them closer to the people'. They may draw advantage from certain aspects of celebrity, specifically those in which they are represented in non-elitist media and content, such as tabloids, entertainment TV, pop music, etc. In other terms, if a wide variety of leaders, not just populists, may engage in performative acts that mix together politics and entertainment in order to gain visibility and, sometimes, a star aura, populist leaders are especially interested in using the formats and codes of popular culture to affirm their proximity to ordinary citizens.

It is worth remembering that a typical feature of populism is anti-elitism (Mudde 2004). In the juxtaposition between the good people and the bad elites, obviously populist leaders must represent the values of the people (Meny and Surel 2000) and be of the people and beyond the people at the same time (Moffitt 2016). Jagers and Walgrave (2007) propose considering populism as a communication style. But do leaders actually communicate their 'being of the people' only through their speech and declarations? Or do they also use their performance in a broader sense? Regarding this, their concrete communicative repertoires need to be thoroughly investigated. Schneiker (2020) suggests turning to the literature on celebrity politics. As argued by some pioneers in the field, such as Van Zoonen (2005) and Dahlgren (2009), mass culture and entertainment media may serve well the goal of mobilizing citizens insofar as they create an emotional bond. Therefore, although being 'pop' is not an indicator of populism (Bracciale and Martella 2017, 1314; Ceccobelli et. al 2020, 448), analysing how populist leaders establish an emotion-driven connection may help to highlight aspects of the celebritization of politics.

In light of all the above considerations, we have selected six Italian populist leaders, as listed in Table 1, belonging to two different phases of Italian politics. Our primary aim is to detail what type of celebrities they are, what specific styles are adopted, how they are differentiated and especially how things have changed over time. In particular, we will argue that, while legacy media have produced certain models of political celebrity, the opportunities offered by the communicative structures of social media have encouraged the introduction of new elements that we will illustrate in the following sections.

Table 1. Italian populist leaders

	Leader	Socio-demographic Information	Party	In office
First phase (early 1990s–2009)	Umberto Bossi	Born: 1941 Place of Birth: Cassano Magnago Education: High school diploma Professional politician	Lega Nord (Northern League)	1989–2012
	Silvio Berlusconi	Born: 1936 Place of Birth: Milano Education: Law Degree Outsider (Entrepreneur)	Forza Italia (Go Italy)	1994–now
	Antonio Di Pietro	Born: 1950 Place of Birth: Montenero di Bisaccia Education: Law Degree Outsider (Public Prosecutor)	Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values)	1998–2013 (previously PM)

		Born: 1948 Place of Birth: Genova Education: High school diploma Outsider (Comedian)	Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement)	2008–2014
	Beppe Grillo			
Second phase (2010–now)	Matteo Salvini	Born: 1973 Place of Birth: Milano Education: High school diploma Professional politician	Lega (League)	2013–now
	Giorgia Meloni	Born: 1977 Place of Birth: Roma Education: High school diploma Professional politician	Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy)	2014–now

Source: own elaboration.

2. Research questions and methods

The first question addressed is whether the six selected leaders may be regarded as celebrity politicians according to the characteristics proposed by the existing literature (Street 2004; t'Hart and Tindall 2009; Wheeler 2013) (RQ1). To answer this question, in Section 3 we describe their style of communication based on a heterogeneous set of data: from autobiographies and books written by the leaders themselves to the works of political observers; from existing scholarly research to newspapers and media reports of events; from interviews to other types of documentary evidence (See Appendix for a complete list of sources). It must be observed that it was not possible to make a direct comparison for all items taken into consideration. For instance, autobiographies were not available for all; for others we analysed other types of hagiographical materials, such as the magazine *Una Storia Italiana* that Berlusconi delivered to Italian citizens. As for gossip media and social media contents, we relied on existing research and on our direct observation of relevant examples. Having shown that celebrity status could be attributed to all six leaders and how they express their celebrity status, in Section 4 we compare them with the aim of answering the research question of whether some different traits emerge between the two historical phases under analysis (RQ2). We look at two relevant aspects: the first is the overall image of the leader, that is to say if he/she appears as a *superstar*, a figure of destiny, true diva or, to the contrary, an *ordinary* person, a common man or woman. This dimension corresponds closely to Wood *et al's* (2016) 'performative role', one of the three dimensions of their typology of superstar/everyday celebrity politicians.[2] Our goal is to shed light on what image the six leaders want to project. Therefore, the operationalization of this aspect is based on two indicators: 1) *storytelling*, i.e., how leaders narrate themselves explicitly but also through the exhibition of their lifestyle; 2) *channels of intimization*, i.e., what platforms and outlets leaders use to disseminate pieces of personal information, for instance autobiographies, gossip media, social

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[2] While Wood et al.'s (2016) typology was an important source of inspiration, it is important to stress that we are not adopting their analytical approach since we are not trying to classify our leaders in predefined categories. Rather, we intend to describe in detail the leadership image that our six cases project and what media and tools they use to talk about their intimacy. Analogously, the second aspect we take into consideration – vertical/horizontal interaction – is not used to classify leaders as closer to a superstar or an everyday model, as Wood et al. (2016) interpret their own dimensions of media outlet and marketing techniques. Rather we are interested in highlighting if the two groups of populist leaders, whatever the celebrity role they choose to perform, show some clear differences in their way of relating with citizens.

media. We refer here to Stanyer's (2013) concept of intimization, intended as the process through which the personal life of politicians is disclosed in the mediated public sphere and to the concept of private self-personalizaton online (Metz et al. 2019).

The second aspect by which we will examine the six leaders is the *vertical/ horizontal relationship*. We will look at leaders' ways of communicating: television and/or social media and/or interpersonal offline interaction, with the aim of revealing changes in the channels that leaders use to relate to citizens and so presumably nurture their leader/fans bond. In particular, we consider if leaders make the attempt to have a direct and sometimes interactive contact with citizens or prefer top-down messages. Comparing two temporal phases allows us to highlight the changing function of social media, which help politicians to create connectedness (Ekman and Widholm 2017) and 'performative intimacy' (Marvick and Boyd 2011) with citizens.

3. Populist Celebrities, Italian Style

This section will explore if the leaders, albeit different in many respects, may all be considered as celebrities, and what their celebrity repertoires are. The first group we analyse are all leaders connected to the political earthquake that occurred in Italy in the early nineties, following huge scandals and corruption trials. Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Northern League who defied the old parties and survived their collapse, may be seen as an instance of a new breed of politician, whose primary goal was to mark a difference from the old political class. From the very beginning Bossi appeared to be an unconventional politician, evident in his casual and crumpled clothes – one of his iconic hallmarks became the 'canottiera', a white vest (Belpoliti 2012).

Bossi used provocative language that, according to Biorcio (2003, p. 89), was a break from the language of the Italian political class. In general, the communication style of the Northern League had two characteristics: first, it relied on elements of everyday language reinterpreted in political terms (Ruzza and Fella 2009, p. 101); second, dirty talk allowed it to appear anti-establishment. On several occasions Bossi exhibited these 'bad manners' that can be seen as an aspect of a populist "disregard for 'appropriate' ways of acting in the political realm" (Moffitt and Tormey 2014, p. 392).

If at the beginning the Northern League was ignored by the media, after the first electoral successes, the party started receiving more coverage (Biorcio 2003, p. 79 and ff.). Bossi was the face of the party and became a recurrent guest on TV programmes (Fatelli and Norci 1995, p. 85, tab.1) where he could display his outspokenness and spontaneity. In a phase in which the evolution of political television was marked by the advent of new programmes and talk-shows aimed at giving voice to the people, Bossi's unconventional style appeared more acceptable to, and compatible with the new TV formats. In such a changing scenario, as Calabrese wrote (1998, p. 39), he actually became a very effective actor in the spectacle of politics.

Bossi can also be seen as a pioneer of other aspects of celebritization and intimization. In 1991, well before Berlusconi removed the line of division between public and private spheres in Italian politics, he had pictures taken in his pyjamas in a hospital bed, recovering from an illness. Belpoliti (2012) observes that this can be seen as 'pop behaviour', anticipating much of what would follow.

In sum, it can be argued that the emerging popularization of political media formats and the birth of infotainment were functional in amplifying Bossi's anti-establishment message. If his followers saw him as a charismatic leader with 'a political sixth sense as to the tactics that need to be employed to defend their interests' (Ruzza and Fella 2009, p. 71), before the wider public his image was forged by some typical features of the celebrity politician, included a remarkable acting ability (Belpoliti 2012).

First and foremost, Silvio Berlusconi was a celebrity well before entering politics thanks to his background as the tycoon of commercial TV and the owner of one of the most successful football teams, AC Milan. Berlusconi used marketing techniques to project the image of the 'Italian dream'. In 2001, he sent to millions of Italian citizens copies of the pamphlet 'Una storia italiana' (An Italian Story), whose incipit was: "*Chi è veramente il leader di Forza Italia, come vive l'uomo che vuole cambiare il Paese? Abbiamo ripercorso la sua vicenda umana, dall'infanzia Milanese al liceo dei Padri Salesiani. E poi, l'università, il lavoro, le sfide e le vittorie. Ma, soprattutto, vi raccontiamo gli affetti, le passioni, le amicizie, gli amori di Silvio Berlusconi*" (What is the leader of FI really like? How does he live, the man who wants to change the country? We tell his story, from his early years in Milan to his Salesian high school. And then university, work, the challenges, the victories. But, above all, we will tell you about Silvio Berlusconi himself, his passions, his friends, his relationships' (p. 4). Undoubtedly it was a large-scale experiment of entertaining politics both for the format – a glossy magazine – and for the content, as it was narrated like a fairy tale (Amadori 2002).

This kind of storytelling is evidence of Berlusconi's ability to embody the role of the superstar celebrity politician and, in particular, of the television star. As Mancini (2011, p. 21) illustrates well, Berlusconi is not just the owner of television channels: 'he is the television, in particular commercial TV, with its culture, values, discourses, practices, and aspirations'.

Berlusconi has always been well aware of being a performer before an audience: his message is accurately crafted; his communication is mainly top-down. But the popular press gave its contribution to his marketing strategies as well. A good example of the celebration of his achievements is found in the photo-news magazine *Oggi*, whose cover displayed Berlusconi impersonating Humphrey Bogart in a 1980 photo.[3] An 11-page feature followed, in which the leader talked about his youth, his enterprises and AC Milan Football Club. On other occasions, he used the gossip press to disclose details of his private life and introduce his family members, showing how much he cared about his children and grandchildren. For example, the gossip magazine *Chi* published pictures taken at the traditional Christmas lunch at Berlusconi's luxury home, where he had gathered all the members of his family (Mazzoni and Ciaglia 2015).

The personal history of Antonio Di Pietro is crucial to understanding the essence of his celebrity. He became famous as a public prosecutor involved in the *Clean Hands* corruption trials of the early 90s. Di Pietro became a national hero and the recipient of the Italian people's trust and high hopes. He was actually revered, as shown by the numerous writings on the walls of Milan: 'Forza Di Pietro' (Come On Di Pietro), 'Grazie Di Pietro' (Ceccarelli 2018, p. 320). He received a multitude of letters thanking him for his battle

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[3] 'Le foto mai viste dall'album privato di Berlusconi', 11 July 2010, 'Oggi'.

against corrupt politicians (Carlucci and Di Pietro 1995). Television played a remarkable role in transforming him into a superstar: his consecration as a hero is also related to the Cusani televised trial, which involved a number of important political leaders of the First Republic and was a media event 'avidly followed by public' (Giglioli 2001).

In 1996 Di Pietro decided to end his career as prosecutor. He entered politics and then founded his personal party, Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values). What kind of celebrity leader was Di Pietro? As already said, his enormous popularity and his key role in *Clean Hands* conferred upon him an aura of exceptionality. As for his style, he spoke with a strong southern accent, in a way that was "colourful and informal, free of technicalities, flavoured with proverbial sayings and idioms, a language that was quickly dubbed in the media 'dipietrese'" (Newell, 2015, p. 218). His physical appearance – often unshaven, in crumpled suit and short socks – was particularly well-suited to elicit identification mechanisms with ordinary people (Ceccarelli 2018, p. 322). In sum, he was the hero who had courageously fought political corruption in Italy, but, at the same time, he was also the country boy, who was born into a rural family in a small village. Such a powerful narrative of the national folk hero (Pozzi 1997, p. 317) was extensively diffused by the press. Perhaps the most symbolic portrait of Di Pietro that appeared in the press shows him driving a tractor near his country house in Molise.[4]

To conclude, Di Pietro was a star, whose personal narrative exalted the popular values with which a multitude of Italian citizens could identify. This was huge capital when he sought political office. In the subsequent years, he remained a celebrity but his ability to renew his bond with the Italian people gradually diminished. His image had been forged as that of the leader of a nation, not of a political group (Pozzi 1997, p. 339); thus, when he became party leader, his symbolic impact was somehow reduced.

In recent years new populist actors have joined the political scenario. Above all is the 5- Star Movement, an interesting example of a populist movement born on the Internet through the initiatives of an unconventional leader, Beppe Grillo. The comedian Grillo became a very popular TV star in the 1970s and 1980s. Amidst controversies, he was then removed from public television. In the following years, his theatre shows revolved more and more around the themes of environmental issues and protest the political and economic establishment (Biorcio and Natale 2013). In contrast to Berlusconi and Di Pietro, for quite a long time Grillo was a celebrity politician of the second type according to Street's (2004) definition – supporting political causes, organizing mass protests (the V-Days) and offering his well-known blog as an instrument to a network of fans that started forming lists and running for local elections. Even after the official birth of the 5-Star movement in 2009, he still remained an anomalous leader, as he has never been a candidate for any political office. On the other hand, especially until the 2013 elections, his role was paramount as he was entirely in charge of communication as the spokesperson of the movement.

Grillo is a very gifted showman. More than any other, he is a performer of the spectacle of politics. Nevertheless, he is not a typical celebrity. For instance, his personal narrative is not a central element of his communication. If Berlusconi embodies the role of the great entrepreneur and Di Pietro that of the humble hero, it is difficult to match

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[4] See: https://www.corriere.it/gallery/Politica/vuoto.shtml?2008/06_Giugno/dipietro/1&1 (accessed on 2 April 2022).

Grillo with some archetypal character. Perhaps, being a comedian, he regards the stage as his natural environment, and he does not need a special part to play. This does not mean that he is less captivating and persuasive. If his personal disclosures are limited – brief mentions during his speeches or in interviews – Grillo, nonetheless, uses his *persona* as a powerful means, starting from his flamboyant body language to the crafting of media events like swimming across the Strait of Messina.[5]

As for his communication style and strategies, in the 2013 campaign, Grillo's *Tsunami Tour* around the country marked a return to the politics of rallies, of direct interaction with the public. On those occasions, Grillo sought physical contact with people.

'Grillo's complete, almost physical fusion with his audience depends on his extreme body language: he is not content with looking at his interlocutors, but if there are just a few he gets very close to them, touching and hugging them; whereas when he is on stage in front of thousands of people, he always leans forward as if he wanted to fling himself into the crowd' Cosenza (2014, p. 94-95). In short, whatever Grillo does in such live performances reinforces a horizontal relationship with his followers and fans, even a sort of identification. "'I am you', says Grillo in his public speeches. Yet also: 'You can trust me as I trust you'" (95).

A peculiar aspect of Grillo's communication has been the choice of deserting television, the broadcast media *par excellence*. However, the emphasis of the 5-Star Movement on digital politics has not automatically led him to adopt a conversational model. In the 2013 campaign, his use of Twitter followed a broadcast scheme: he posted announcements of the Tsunami Tour and re-launched tweets by 5-Star followers (Bentivegna 2014).

Another leader of the new era is Matteo Salvini. He became leader of the Italian Northern League in 2013, when the party was undergoing a severe crisis, and led it to a sort of resurrection. Arguably a component of what Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone (2018, p. 645) call a 'personal style of leadership' is his celebrity status, achieved through his storytelling, his ability to attract large, appreciative audiences and, last but not least, the coverage received by entertainment media outlets.

Salvini is often a guest on TV talk shows and mingles with people at public events, appearing in dozens of selfies, which are a crucial communicative practice in the process of political celebritization (Ekman and Widholm 2017). He wrote an autobiographical book, *Secondo Matteo* (According to Matteo) (Salvini et al. 2016). He is very popular on social media (Bobba 2018), which has provided him with a powerful tool for appearing genuine and authentic. A hallmark of his online communication is his intimization: he talks about his role as a father, makes comments about sports events or song contests, and above all posts pictures of what he is about to eat. In short, Salvini projects the image of an ordinary man, 'un uomo normale', as he defines himself (Salvini et al. 2016, p. 9), close to the citizens, who enjoys their same simple pleasures and shares their same tastes.

But the most paradigmatic example of his celebrity strategies online is the 'Vinci Salvini' (Win Salvini) contest. During the 2018 campaign, he launched a contest whose

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5   See: https://www.corriere.it/cronache/12_ottobre_09/grillo-gli-allibratori-scettici-sulla-riuscita-della-traversata_95a19b90-121f-11e2-919a-606647d2c25a.shtml (accessed on 2 April 2022).

prize was the opportunity to meet Salvini himself or talk on the phone with him. People could participate by liking the posts on his Facebook page. In such a way, Salvini was able to meet both the goal of increasing his webpage online interactions and that of reinforcing his bond with his followers and fans (Carone and Cavallaro 2018, p. 66-7).

A key role in establishing Salvini's status of celebrity has been played by photo-news and gossip magazines. The front-cover of *Oggi* (10 December 2014) featured him bare-chested, with only a green tie, the colour symbol of the League. Indeed, Salvini auctioned five of these photos on his e-Bay account: bidders received a signed photo with a personal message. Just as in the case of 'Win Salvini' the leader of the League has demonstrated acumen with the logic of consumption underlying the world of fandom, whose members appreciate such forms of personal contact with their stars.

Salvini presents himself as an ordinary man but does not disdain attending showbiz events that may give him visibility. This is, for example, the case of the Festival di Sanremo, the most popular Italian song contest that he attended together with his ex-girlfriend Elisa Isoardi, a television showgirl, in February 2018, a few weeks before the elections of 4 March. Photographs of the couple in the Festival's audience were featured in popular magazines (Mazzoni and Mincigrucci 2021, p. 56).

To conclude, together with social media, the Italian world of entertainment has contributed to the portrayal of Salvini as a celebrity closely in tune with Italian people. Another example of his way of interacting with his public is the party that he attended at a trendy beach club, Papeete, on the Adriatic coast in the summer of 2019. Salvini enjoyed himself, took selfies and stood at the DJ stand. During the party people around him sang and danced to the notes of the national anthem.[6] At the same beach club he also held a press conference, thus neatly displaying the complete overlap between the spaces of power and of entertainment.[7]

But while playing the role of 'one of us', Salvini does not underestimate the need to appear as a strong leader. He is called 'capitano' (captain), a nickname launched by his spin doctor, Luca Morisi, reputed to have been the strategist behind Salvini's presence on social media,[8] in an attempt to strike a balance between his personal (but politicized) sphere and his public image (Mazzoni and Mincigrucci 2021).

Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the right-wing party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) is the latest addition to the group of Italian political celebrities. Since 2014 Meloni has been the president of FdI, and one of the few women party leaders seen in the country. In this capacity, she has gained considerable visibility: she regularly appears on TV; she is increasingly popular on social media; electoral posters with her portraits – so polished that they are mocked for being excessively photoshopped (Cheles 2020, p. 248) – have lined Italian streets in recent campaigns. Last but not least, during the summer of 2020, Meloni appeared on the cover of *Novella 2000*,[9] a gossip magazine, sunbathing in a green, white and red swimsuit, a clear reference to the colours of the Italian flag.

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[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMAvROsLV34 (accessed on 2 April 2022).
[7] https://www.giornalettismo.com/conferenza-papeete-beach-salvini/ (accessed on 2 April 2022).
[8] https://www.panorama.it/news/politica/salvini-intervista-luca-morisi-web-facebook/.
[9] 'Giorgia. La sirena tricolore', 13 August 2020, 'Novella 2000'.

An interesting feature of Meloni's communication is her aptitude for playing with the popularization of politics. She indulges in some forms of intimization, as shown by her exhibition of herself in the role of mother (Moroni 2018, p. 114). For instance, at Christmas 2019, she released an interview to *Chi*,[10] where she appeared together with her partner and young daughter. But her most forceful marketing action was the publication of an autobiography, where she disclosed a great deal of her private life (Meloni 2021). One of Meloni's traits is to stress her origins, having grown up in a popular Roman neighbourhood: "*La Garbatella è il mio quartiere non solo perchè lì sono cresciuta e ho vissuto per lunghi anni, ma perchè abitare in un determinato luogo non ci è mai indifferente, imprime dentro di noi un certo modo di stare al mondo*" (Garbatella is my neighbourhood, not only because I grew up and lived there for many years, but because living in a certain place does not leave us indifferent: it impresses on us our way to be in the world) (Meloni 2021, p.16 ebook).

One of her most distinctive traits is that of sending more or less explicit political messages through characters, symbols, and stories from popular culture. Once she dressed up as Spiderman;[11] another time, to support her anti-immigration stance, she posted images of herself impersonating a Game of Thrones' character fighting the 'Others' (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019, p. 99). In a speech in Parliament she compared the prime minister Giuseppe Conte to a Smurf.[12]

Meloni has often become a good subject for memes. This has happened with her posters. But the most famous meme is the video 'Io sono Giorgia' (I am Giorgia), dance music accompanied by extracts from one of her passionate speeches. The video, intended to mock her conservative views on traditional families, went viral. The Times[13] included her among the ten faces to look out for in 2020. Meloni herself declared she liked the meme, perhaps understanding that the jingle could serve to spread her fame.

To conclude, Meloni has been following Salvini's path insofar as she also uses the popularization of politics to win over the sympathies of the public. However, she has a different style, less exuberant and light-hearted, and more ironic. Especially, in contrast to Salvini, Meloni does not play (at least not yet) the role of a 'captain' and, therefore, offers the best instance of a performance centred on ordinariness and normal lifestyle.

4. Features and Trends of Italian Populist Celebrity Leadership

The descriptive analysis in Section 3 allows us to answer the RQ1 positively: all six leaders fit the definition of celebrity politician. Section 3 has served to (a) confirm that populism and celebrity go well together; (b) show that there are differences and nuances in the way to be a celebrity, and different celebrity strategies. We will proceed now with discussing findings (see a synthesis in Table 2) by focusing on the aspects of image and relationship with citizens in order to answer RQ2: have there been changes in the way of building and maintaining a celebrity status across time?

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[10] 'Con Ginevra è sempre Natale', 24 December 2019, 'Chi'.
[11] See: https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/politica/2018/09/08/meloni-versione-spider-man-mistero-sui-social_Weq0pFO2yHWwu6ctUAILqM.html (accessed on 2 April 2022).
[12] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkqshIO-PPk (accessed on 2 April 2022).
[13] 'Rising stars: Twenty faces to look out for in 2020', 2 January 2021, 'The Times'.

Table 2. Leaders along the continua superstar/ordinary and vertical/horizontal relationship

Continuum		Umberto Bossi	Silvio Berlusconi	Antonio Di Pietro	Beppe Grillo	Matteo Salvini	Giorgia Meloni
Superstar /ordinary	Storytelling and projected image	The Man of the people (of the North)	The self-made magnate	The folk superhero	The people's spokesperson	The common 'captain'	The average woman
	Channels through which intimisation is conveyed	Autobiography, pictures	'Una storia italiana' Talk shows, gossip press	Interviews, hagiographic books and press	Little self-disclosure	Social media/ popular press/ autobiography	Social media/ autobiography
Vertical /Horizontal	Preferred tools for interacting with citizens (television and/or social media and/or interpersonal offline interaction)	TV appearances, rallies, Padania ceremonies	Ads (1994), TV appearances, staged events	TV appearances, presence on social networks	'Tsunami tour', Abstention from TV appearances	TV appearances, social media, gamification, selfies, entertainment (e.g., Papeete beach)	TV appearances, social media, pop culture

Source: own elaboration.

As regards the celebrity role, what we have called the superstar/ordinary dimension, the first row of Table 2 shows leaders' storytelling about themselves, the second row the main channels of their self-induced intimization. Berlusconi appears to be the greatest *superstar* of all, because of his personal history and flamboyant lifestyle. Grillo's performances are also supposed to garner an aura of exceptionality, from his captivating shows on stage to the creation of sensational media events like the crossing of the Strait of Messina. Di Pietro appeared as the 'folk' superhero of *Mani Pulite*. It is worth stressing that, in his case, the process of intimization started well before he entered politics and was due to the almost hagiographic attitude of the press (Ceccarelli 2018, p. 324). From this point of view, Berlusconi and Di Pietro have the superstar image in common. Marco Tarchi (2015, 314) stresses that they both perform the role of man of action (in contrast to the inactivity of professional politicians).

Closer to the common citizen role, on the contrary, are the politicians who have turned into celebrities. Bossi and Salvini belong to different generations, but both are good interpreters of the common man. However, they are both far from complete ordinariness: Bossi never hid his role as the indisputable chief of the Northern League; Salvini is the 'Captain'. By contrast, Meloni is the true prototype of the ordinary leader, spontaneous and, in all and for all, similar to an average woman, intent on balancing family and professional life. In addition, she has certainly shown herself to be an able player with popular and entertainment culture. Therefore, we may conclude that exceptionality prevails in the first phase and ordinariness in the second phase, but in fact the two performative models coexist in both groups.

As regards the vertical/horizontal relationship with citizens, in the third row of Table 2 we identified the six leaders' preferred tools for interacting and consequently for nurturing the relationship with their followers/fans. Television was essential in the image-building of Di Pietro, who, however, from the second half of the 2000s, showed interest in social media as well. For Berlusconi the pulpit has been television while Grillo prefers the stage before an audience. In both cases, the message is mostly top-down. On the other hand, it is to be stressed that the 5-Star Movement was born on the Internet and promotes online grassroots participation, Grillo made the choice of deserting TV programmes, and during his electoral tour had direct contact with his followers.

Television is supposed to have given Bossi visibility. However, he is also the leader of rallies in the North of Italy such as the famous Pontida, where he met 'his people'. His example has been followed by his successor Salvini: one of his specific traits is that of mingling with the crowd and taking selfies. He reinforces the bond with his followers through social media as well. Digital platforms offer the leader of the League the means to cultivate and mobilize his fan communities. His continuous flux of posts showing his intimate life pursues at least the appearance of authenticity. Meloni as well makes an intensive use of social platforms where she employs popular culture to define her style. In her case, the key to putting herself on the same level as the public is also found in the spontaneity with which she speaks in her Roman accent, jokes on social media, and responds to mockery with humour. Popular origins are for her, as for Di Pietro, a powerful means of communicating horizontally with the public.

We have focused on two different generations of populist leaders in order to carry out a diachronic comparison. Our first observation concerns the evolution of celebrity strategies over time. The broadcast model based on television appearances is no longer the predominant formula to create celebrities. The advent of social media has offered a new communicative arena where politicians may have broadcast communication, but also experiment forms of interaction with their public and where they may stage their 'authentic' life. Infotainment and television entertainment also offer audiences the possibility of meeting politicians in (virtual) person; however, social media do more by giving political fans the impression of greater proximity to their idols. Thus, it is not surprising that the younger generation of leaders, like Salvini and Meloni, matches the horizontal model better than the others.

It is worth noting, however, that social media can produce intimization and horizontality through different strategies. Our analysis has shown the existence of different styles. Our opinion, for instance, is that Salvini and Meloni use popular culture in a different way: the former is more self-centred ('Win Salvini' contest is a good example) and his 'personal' posts do not always have a political undertone, while the latter's messages are likely to have an ideological connotation, as when she posts videos where she prepares typical Italian dishes to complain about the European market.[14]

As regards the differences between the two generations of leaders, it is quite revealing to compare Bossi and Salvini. Both leaders played the card of intimization, but in different ways. For Bossi details like the *canottiera* were parts of the role of the politician rebellious to conventions. Salvini showing the human side seems to suggest the adoption of an opposite strategy, that of softening an aggressive image. Does this different approach depend on the personalities of the two leaders or on a different political strategy? It is worth noting that Salvini's League is appealing to a centre-right electorate while Bossi was more interested in differentiating himself from Berlusconi. A parallel with Marine Le Pen and her strategy of de- demonization (Campus 2017) may suggest that, when a rightist populist party tries to expand its consensus beyond initial constituencies, its leader may wish to present a less provocative and radical image. Being an affectionate parent, loving children and pets cannot be of harm, as it may raise sympathies also among non-supporters. In principle, then, analysing a leader's ways of incarnating

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[14] See: https://video.repubblica.it/embed/politica/italia-contro-europa-giorgia-meloni-prepara-la-caprese-nella-cucina-di-casa/283671/284282 (accessed on 2 April 2022).

celebrity should not focus only on personal backgrounds and qualities, but also must take into account what voters he/she is addressing and if their ideological alignments make a difference.

5. Concluding remarks and directions for future research

In this article we have selected a number of populist leaders operating in a country, Italy, in which populism is now a constant trait and presents multiple facets. We have compared two generations of leaders in order to offer reflections on possible changes and trends over time. The description of their communication strategies has confirmed the views of scholars such as Van Zoonen and Moffitt that entertaining politics suits populism well and celebrity may be a resource for populist leaders. Our main goal, however, was to go beyond and analyse the different ways in which our six populist leaders perform celebrity.

A main finding has been the existence of a trend towards a more horizontal model of interaction between leaders and followers. What is the implication for celebrity roles? The pure broadcast and top-down model have perhaps waned as the celebrity-fans relationship itself requires reconceptualization in the era of digital politics. This does not imply that broadcast television does not contribute to the acquisition of celebrity status, but, in the era of hybrid communication (Chadwick 2013), this no longer represents the main route as it was for a leader like Berlusconi. And, certainly, it is not the only available path for superstar celebrities: Grillo, for instance, never exploited television. Horizontality has been enhanced by the contemporary media system especially through social media. We have entered the era of private self-personalizaton online (Metz et al. 2019). That being said, research should focus on the different ways in which it is operated. Our suggestion is that this can be done by means of different performative styles, as the comparison between Salvini and Meloni suggested.

We believe that the comparison between the different celebrity styles of Bossi and Salvini also highlights an important nexus with the ideological alignment of prospective voters. If we assume that celebrity is a communicative strategy, then this suggests that future work should extend the focus beyond leaders' personalities and personal history and direct attention to the ideology of their potential target of voters. Leaders may choose to shape their celebrity performance according to what voters are supposed to appreciate more. Targeting radical voters or rather making an appeal to the wider public makes a difference in their choice of exploiting their celebrity.

Finally, we encountered some apparently country-specific features, like the lack of superstar celebrities among Italian professional politicians. This is in contrast with other national contexts in which superstar celebrities are sometimes career politicians – see, for example, Barack Obama and Nicolas Sarkozy (Wheeler 2013). Might this depend on country- specific features of the cultural and media contexts? Or are there institutional factors that make some political systems more permeable to superstar celebrities? More cross-countries analyses are necessary to fully explain the emergence of some types of celebrity leaders. A comparison with other populist leaders in other countries, especially professional politicians, would also be important to highlight specific aspects of celebrity populism.

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Annex 1. List of sources

Hereafter are listed the multiple sources on which we based our descriptions and interpretations in the article "Celebrity politics and changing performances over time. The case of Italian populist leaders". We confined the analysis to the period when the six leaders were politically active, with the partial exception of Di Pietro, of whom we took into consideration also the process of celebrity-building prior to his direct political involvement. The list includes also relevant sources and references that are not directly quoted in the text but contributed to our narratives on the six leaders.

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