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FASHIONABLE POLITICS: HOW ITALIAN LEADERS TRANSFORM INTO SUCCESSFUL BRANDS IN CONTEMPORARY COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *Political communication is inherently intertwined with social dynamics and cannot be considered a separate field of study. Symbolic elements, slogans, and the leadership of political figures have permeated human history, influencing and often determining political action. This study has analyzed the phenomenon of personalization as compelling evidence in the field of contemporary political communication. The analysis is based on a study of Italian cases, aiming to provide an in-depth insight into the strategies adopted by political parties to personalize their leaders' image and engage voters. In particular, the focus has primarily been on party symbols incorporating the leader's name. The research was conducted to identify party personalization mechanisms and their impact on public opinion. The result highlighted the role of political communication in asserting the individual as a brand at the expense of the party organization, with significant implications for democracy and political participation.*

Keywords: *Personalized Politics; Political Brand; Political Communication; Political Identity; Political Marketing; Contemporary Politics; Italy*

INTRODUCTION

In the current scenario we are immersed in, political communication assumes a position of primary importance, highlighting the inseparable interconnection between political and social dynamics (Mazzoleni 1997; Voltmer 2006; Grossi 2009; Campus 2014; Giansante 2014; Haddon and Loos 2016; Cepernich and Novelli 2018; Perloff 2021). The dissemination and configuration of political messages profoundly correlate with the cultural and social context in which they are conveyed. Thus, political communication is an intermediary between the political and social realms, reflecting and driving transformations in public opinion, collective perceptions, and evaluative systems (Davis 2010; Mancini 2015; Yarchi et al. 2021). The synergistic interaction between political communication and social dynamics is reinforced through symbolic elements and slogans, which, throughout human political history, have proven to be inherently effective tools for guiding consensus and promoting collective adherence (Cacciotto 2006). Symbolic elements, catchy slogans, and even the figures of political leaders have permeated the historical fabric of human political interactions. From ancient civilizations to modern movements, these components have acted as semantic bridges between the masses and political ideologies. Emblematic are the cases in which flags, colors, and slogans have become distinctive emblems of political factions, catalyzing group identity and social cohesion (Battista 2023). The magnetic aura of leaders also imbued with symbolic and narrative connotations, has had a tangible influence on the course of political events, channeling collective energy toward common goals

(Tucker 1995; Peele 2005). These elements constitute indispensable components in the study of political communication as they form their semantic and emotional foundations (Segatori 2010; Staiger et al. 2010; Demertzis 2013). Of course, emerging technologies, including social media, are contributing to shaping and restructuring individuals' cognitive structures, as emphasized by De Kerckhove (2001). This process of redefinition implies a significant revision of mental architecture, as these technologies act as catalysts in the evolution of modes of learning, communication, and human interaction. This phenomenon reflects the mutable nature of technological spheres. It suggests a profound shift in how information is perceived, processed, and shared, introducing a new cognitive and social experience configuration paradigm. The primary purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of a significant mutation observable within communicative dynamics, namely, the emergence of personalization as a constitutive feature of contemporary political communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political branding has catalyzed a significant evolution within political marketing, emerging as a distinctive and crucial field of study in the contemporary landscape (Scammell 2015). This phenomenon reflects a trend toward an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the communicative and strategic dynamics that permeate electoral campaigns and political image management. The transformation has created a body of specific knowledge and methodologies that have developed in response to the changing needs of modern political contexts (Barile 2022). This development has involved an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from political theory, social psychology, mass communication, and sociology to understand the processes of building and managing political brands fully. Not only is there a set of marketing strategies applied to the political context, but there is also a field of study constantly evolving, characterized by particular attention to the complexity of interactions between candidates, parties, voters, and the media. This perspective requires a critical analysis of the narrative, symbolic, and visual strategies used to influence the perceptions and opinions of citizen voters.

Moreover, it fits within a broader theoretical framework that explores the concepts of political leadership, public trust, democratic participation, and political culture. Introducing these assumptions is fundamental to fully understanding the importance and impact of this concept in the contemporary political arena, as the conceptualization and investigation of political brands have evolved considerably since the mid-1990s with the work of Lock and Harris (1996). Still, analyzing political brands' positioning by political actors and their understanding by citizens remains a prominent area of study in every political latitude (Baines et al. 2014; Nielsen 2016). Despite significant progress in understanding the subject matter, research on this topic in different political contexts and environments remains limited. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, the complexity and multidimensionality of the concept of political branding must be considered. Each country has its own political culture, history, institutions, and unique social dynamics, making it difficult to generalize findings from one political context to another.

This requires a targeted and contextualized approach to analyzing political brands in different environments. Secondly, access to data and resources for in-depth research on political brands may be limited. Political data can be sensitive and subject to regulatory restrictions,

making it challenging to access detailed information on the internal decision-making processes of political parties or the branding strategies adopted by individual political actors.

Additionally, there is often a lack of consensus on measuring the success of political branding effectively. While some metrics, such as opinion polls or electoral results, can be used to assess brand recognition and the impact of branding strategies, these metrics alone may not be sufficient to capture the phenomenon's complexity. Finally, the dynamic nature of politics and branding strategies must also be considered in relation to the voracious adaptation to social platforms (Battista and Uva 2023). Political actors constantly seek new ways to adapt and refine their branding strategies in response to changes in the political environment, voter preferences, and emerging challenges. This means that research on political brands must be able to capture these rapid changes and adapt accordingly. Addressing these challenges can lead to a greater understanding of the dynamics of political branding and its implications for democracy and political participation (Foglio 1999). However, what appears certain today is the awareness that political brands are multifaceted and often complex entities designed to differentiate themselves from the competition (Pich et al. 2018).

Furthermore, their political customization through creating an adequate image is a relevant activity, as evaluating a political line and ideology is often inseparably linked to the overall assessment of the party and its members (Marland and Flanagan 2013). Examining the challenges associated with understanding political branding can increase awareness of the dynamics of democracy and political participation. Understanding how political brands influence the perceptions and decisions of voters can help promote greater transparency and accountability in the political process, thereby strengthening democratic institutions. Ultimately, research on political brands represents a vital field of study for understanding the complex interactions between politics, communication, and society.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO PERSONALIZATION IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The trend towards personalization represents a distinctive feature that permeates the entire landscape of politics in modern democracies, manifesting with increasing prevalence. This inclination results in the progressive weakening of the emphasis placed on political programs and traditional parties, which are relegated to less central positions in the political arena (Mancini 2011). There is an ongoing shift where political parties, seen initially as the driving force behind popular political participation, have rapidly acquired a position of primary fragility within the representative system (Orsina 2018). In response to this evolution, an uncontrolled race for popular consensus has occurred, devoid of any political filter, and in this context, the traditional role of political parties as agents of political synthesis within the overall system has progressively diminished (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). To a significant extent, a transformation emerges in which identification with the political party gives way to identification with the charismatic leader (Ceccobelli 2017). This transformation represents a fundamental shift in the dynamics of political participation and the orientation of the electorate. Historically serving as a vehicle for individuals to express their political preferences, the traditional identification with the political party weakens as the focus of attention and voters' adherence toward the charismatic leader.

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In this context, the concept of charisma in leadership comes into play, an idea that was pioneeringly formulated by M. Weber in its modern sense. The notion of charisma is elaborated as one of the three principal forms of legitimate authority alongside traditional and legal-rational authority. According to this perspective, charismatic individuals emerge as those whose power and influence derive from extraordinary personal characteristics and the ability to elicit devoted adherence from followers.

Charismatic leadership theory underscores the fundamental importance of the presence of exceptional qualities and skills in the leader. These extraordinary attributes can take various forms, such as personal charisma, innovative vision, persuasive eloquence, or even remarkable courage. In this way, the leader's charisma becomes the primary driver of their ability to attract followers and guide them towards shared goals. Charismatic leadership theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding how leaders can exert extraordinary and transformative influence on organizations and society through inspiring, mobilizing, and guiding their followers. In the contemporary approach, leadership, on the other hand, plays a central role, especially in attracting and mobilizing supporters, reflecting an evolution in the very nature of political representation. The fervent quest for recognition with the political leader can be interpreted as a personal and emotional connection between the electorate and the charismatic political leader, often based on the leader's image and rhetoric (Salmon 2014; Battista and Salzano 2022). Exploring how and why this transition occurs is essential to understanding the events of contemporary politics better and addressing the challenges it presents to democratic representation.

The permanent campaign (Blumenthal 1980) plays a crucial role in contemporary politics and influences this state of affairs. The same notion represents the expansion of the electoral process beyond traditional periods, with politicians constantly seeking to influence public opinion, maintain support, and promote their policies by using media and digital communications to stay in touch with voters. It is not surprising, therefore, that the frenetic search for consensus by political leaders and charismatic figures has often led to strategies and behaviors aimed solely at capturing the approval of the electorate (Funiciello 2023) without necessarily considering a broader political framework or the need to negotiate compromises among different interests and opinions. Due to this confluence, there has been an increase in the phenomenon of personalization in the political sphere in the context of a present marked by the dominance of individuality. Hence, the clear awareness that the rise of personalization in politics implies an accentuation of the importance of the image and rhetoric of political leaders (Barisone 2006; Ohr and Oscarsson 2011; Moroni 2019; Campus 2020; Battista 2023b) and a significant loss of relevance for the structure and internal cohesion of political parties. This paradigmatic shift has significant impacts on political participation and the orientation of the electorate, as a substantial portion of individuals increasingly tend to be attached to the leader's figure rather than the principles or programs of their political party (Calise 2011).

In other words, politics today is becoming more polarized and polarizing, as the loyalty and identification of citizens are increasingly linked to the figure of the leader (Holmberg and Oscarsson 2011; Bordignon 2013; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). All of this has further accentuated the perception of a distance between traditional political parties and the will of the people, contributing to the complex current dynamics in the context of political representation.

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This evolution inevitably results in a significant concentration of media attention and public interest on individual leaders, who become central figures in political communication and the formation of voter preferences and decisions (Van Aelst et al. 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an empirical approach based on the qualitative analysis of the symbols of Italian political parties and the political marketing strategies used to promote the image of leaders and engage voters. To conduct this analysis, a range of parties and politicians in the national context were selected. The selection was based on their representativeness in the current Italian political landscape to make our work as comprehensive as possible.

Considering the roles and relevance of these figures across various spheres of Italian politics - national governance, opposition leadership, and regional administration - provides a comprehensive view of their representativeness and influence in shaping political discourse and decision-making processes in Italy. In the current Italian political context, Giorgia Meloni holds the position of Prime Minister, leading the governance and political direction of the nation. Meanwhile, the Partito Democratico stands out as the main opposition party. Additionally, in regional governance and social media presence, Vincenzo De Luca has garnered attention for his effective leadership as the Governor of Campania (Battista 2024). The sample consists of the official symbols of the selected political parties. It compares symbols that incorporate the party leader's name as an integral part of the logo or symbol itself with a symbol that does not feature the leader's name. This is done to compare the different types of representation across various dimensions. These data aim to investigate how and to what extent the name of the political leader has been incorporated into the party symbol.

Through the lens of the "Five W" proposed by Lasswell in his 1948 communication model, we focus on the "what" and the "way" in which this message is conveyed, with a focus on the construction of an electoral brand. In this context, we recognize the sender as the political subject and the recipient as the citizen-voter (Foglio 1999; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). The centrality of determining the motivations underlying the creation of a specific electoral brand is evident in terms of the style and language used and in reference to the topics addressed. It is important to note that the context significantly influences the intrinsic meaning of the political message, as a change in the context can lead to a substantial variation in the perception and interpretation of the message itself. Therefore, the relevance of the referential dimension of the context, as identified by Jakobson in 1963, which establishes an intrinsic relationship between the communicated message and the reality to which the message refers, can be emphasized. This analysis has proven significant as it has allowed for exploring personalization and the cult of personality dynamics within the contemporary political sphere. It has also defined the degree of electoral impact. The degree of emphasis placed on the leader's name within the party symbol has emerged as a significant variable in political communication strategies and the public perception of leadership, shaping how the leader's figure is presented and perceived within the political sphere.

The data were collected by systematically analyzing party visual communication materials, including posters and promotional material, and examining official websites and other

public resources. The qualitative analysis of party symbols focused on reviewing the use of the leader's name within the symbol context and evaluating any visual emphasis given to the name compared to other elements of the symbol itself. This study strictly adhered to ethical and legal standards related to the collection and use of publicly available visual and textual data, and no privacy or copyright regulations were violated during data collection. It should be noted that this analysis is based on publicly available data, and there may be limitations related to the accuracy and completeness of the information collected. In any case, the purpose of the pursuit is to provide a sensible overview, without claiming completeness, of the practices of personalization of Italian political parties through the analysis of their political marketing brands.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Political formations constitute an intrinsically complex and diverse field of study. Among the prominent issues addressed are creating and managing political brands, related political communication strategies, and their influence on citizens' perceptions and the political decision-making process. In this context, analyzing political brands is essential for understanding the dynamics of political identity formation and consensus building. Political brands are extremely complicated elements to decipher in the broad field surrounding the focused phenomenon (Billard 2018; Lees-Marshment 2009; Lock and Harris 1996; Phipps et al. 2010). However, it is appropriate to outline a preliminary distinction, as previous research has particularly focused on analyzing political brands associated with political parties (French and Smith 2010; Milewicz and Milewicz 2014; Grimmer and Grube 2017). In parallel, there has been significant interest in examining political brands associated with political personalities, a dimension often referred to as human-political brands (Davies and Mian 2010; Guzman et al. 2015; Jain et al. 2018). This conceptual division reflects awareness of the intrinsic diversity between political brands of parties and those of individual political figures. Such differentiation is based on theoretical and methodological considerations and the practical implications underlying these distinctions. Thus, the research landscape offers a more articulated and nuanced perspective on analyzing political brands, considering the different dynamics underlying these categories, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of political communication strategies and dynamics of public perception. In a more essential formulation, the concept of "personal branding" can be delineated as applying principles and paradigms inherent in traditional branding to the individual (Chen 2013). Indeed, "personal branding" has been characterized as a "process in which an individual actively works to manage others" perceptions of their competencies, skills, and experiences (Johnson 2017). Additionally, "personal branding" is strategically employed by celebrities, sports professionals, journalists, business leaders, entrepreneurs, students, and politicians as a strategy aimed at projecting an authentic and distinctive image, differentiating themselves from rivals and competitors (Cortsen 2013; Gehl 2011; Lair et al. 2005). In essence, this fundamental concept of "personal branding" denotes the systematic application of branding principles to the individual context, with the protagonists of this strategic process varying widely and encompassing both public figures and professionals from various sectors, all engaged in creating and promoting a distinct and authentic personal identity to achieve specific goals and stand out in a competitive environment, as is also the case in our field of study.

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Turning to our analysis, the framework focuses on three illustrative dimensions of the Italian political scene. Firstly, the party is currently leading the country, with Italy's first female prime minister at the helm. The Democratic Party represents the main opposition party, and it is a regional case that takes on paradigmatic contours due to its transformation into a genuine political brand. The choice to include only the ruling party and the leading opposition party aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the symbolic representation of the leading national political actors. Additionally, including a significant regional case allows for exploring how political parties can evolve into political brands at the regional level, highlighting the dynamics and strategies of political branding that may also be relevant at the national level, given the consistent national prominence achieved. However, it is important to acknowledge that this choice may seem arbitrary, as other major national parties have been excluded from the analysis. The decision to compare parties at national and regional levels was made to explore the differences and similarities in symbolic representation across different levels of governance and political influence. After all, the practice of including surnames in party symbols appeared to have stopped in 2013 when Pier Luigi Bersani, the leader of the Democratic Party at the time, chose not to include his surname in the symbol (Bordignon 2013).

Nevertheless, due to the increasingly pronounced trend of personalization in contemporary politics, it is evident that this practice is now more widespread and relevant than ever. What immediately stands out when observing the symbol of Fratelli d'Italia (Figure 1) is the effective facilitation of the mnemonic process and audience recall, making it easier for the public to associate principles and attributes with the entity represented following its distinctive features (Villafañe 1999). Distinctive features represented by the tricolor flame, originally conceived by former members of the Italian Social Republic who were among the founders of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), constitute the longest-standing and enduring political symbol in Italy. This emblem symbolically represents the persistent historical and cultural continuity of right-wing political orientation in Italy from the Second World War to the present day.



Figure 1: Logo Fratelli d'Italia (Source: Fratelli d'Italia 2024)

Undoubtedly, the evolution of the logo marked its transformation into a brand with the addition of the name "Giorgia Meloni". This process aligns with a pronounced trend of

personalization combined with a balanced amalgamation. This combination involves the manifestation of individual identities, which, in turn, incorporate complex perceptions resulting from the synergy of various personal elements, including distinctive personality traits, past experiences, emotions, beliefs, and intrinsic values (Rampersad 2008; Resnick et al. 2016). Furthermore, the sacralization of the leader's name constitutes an intrinsic element of the broader process of the iconic utilization of words (Benigno and Scuccimarra 2014). This intricate practice can be interpreted as a specific manifestation of rhetorical and semiotic manipulation, where language plays a central role in constructing and projecting political power and authority. In clear contrast to the personalization approach followed by many Italian parties, the Democratic Party has chosen not to adopt a strategy that implies the inclusion of the name of their leader within their institutional logo (Figure 2). This decision can be interpreted as an expression of a different strategic perspective in which the emphasis may be placed on the idea of a party where collective identity and policies are considered more relevant than the individual leading it. This approach could be oriented toward more ideology-focused political communication and political issues rather than the leader's image.



Figure 2: Logo Partito Democratico (Source: Partito Democratico 2024)

In this context, the Democratic Party's choice to abstain from personalizing its logo can be seen as an attempt to differentiate itself from the broader trend of emphasizing the leader's figure in political communication, stressing instead the party's identity as an autonomous and distinctive entity. After all, as the logo is conceived as the foundation of a unique sign, it graphically synthesizes the peculiarities and principles that the organizational entity intends to communicate universally. In this case, these principles represent the ideals the organization wishes to instill in citizens (Paniagua 2004). Indeed, one of the most exciting cases of human-political branding is represented by the figure of the Governor of the Campania region, Vincenzo De Luca. This figure constitutes a notable example of the convergence between social dynamics, an explosive combination of personalization, and the "spectacularization" of politics (Pasquino, 2009). All of this unfolds on digital platforms that have become increasingly powerful tools in the hands of politicians (Di Nubila et al. 2023) and can simultaneously influence informal interactions among people and institutional structures (Van Dijck and Poell 2013).

The political presence of De Luca falls into an intermediate category, which we could define as a hybrid between a trending social phenomenon and a fusion of political communication strategies that highlight the individual and make them a strong attraction in the political sphere. His ability to engage the public through his image and the spectacular dynamics used in his political communication represent an interesting case study to understand how political personalities can leverage new media and their online presence to gain visibility and electoral success. It is not a coincidence that in the last electoral campaign where the affiliated party to the Governor ran, the Democratic Party obtained the majority of votes, with a total of 16.9% of votes in favor of the list. What should be highlighted is that the success of the Democratic Party was equaled by the "De Luca Presidente" list (Figure 3), which received a remarkable total of 313,000 votes, positioning itself as the second most popular among the voters.



Figure 3: Logo De Luca Presidente (Source: Elezioni 2020)

These data demonstrate the relevance of Vincenzo De Luca's figure within the regional political context and the effectiveness of his political branding strategy, which allowed his list to achieve significant results in the elections in question. This is tied to the shift from party democracy, where parties act as intermediaries for citizens, to public democracy (Manin 2014), based on a political, communicative, and direct connection between leadership and citizens. The case of Vincenzo De Luca and the construction of his brand is based on various concrete elements, including his style, the interactions he maintains both online and offline, and the actions he takes in the public and political sphere. Even more significantly, this construction is based on immaterial elements, such as personal experiences, autobiographical narratives he shares, the values he promotes, his charisma, and the perception the public has of his authenticity and authority (Chen 2013; Gehl 2011). In summary, personal brands represent a complex and articulated manifestation of individual identities characterized by various intersecting dimensions. These dimensions include both tangible aspects and inherently immaterial elements and play a crucial role in creating a distinctive and influential image.

More generally, these factors converge in the construction of an identity narrative that defines who the individual is and what their distinctive characteristics are.

Furthermore, what emerges from the analysis aligns with the widely accepted concept that brand identity is fundamentally shaped by a combination of vision, values, and aspirations (Dahlen et al. 2010). This implies that the perception and construction of an effective and distinctive brand are not limited to superficial or tangible elements but are deeply rooted in more intrinsic and conceptual aspects. The vision, reflecting the long-term strategic perspective of the organization or individual, is closely intertwined with values and represents the fundamental ethical and moral principles guiding the brand's actions and decisions. Additionally, aspirations outline the desired goals and objectives, helping to define the brand's future direction when associated with a politician. In summary, brand identity emerges as a complex fusion of these conceptual elements, profoundly influencing perception, positioning, and overall success in the broader political landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study has gone beyond the traditional field focused on political party brands (Pich and Armannsdottir 2018; Pich and Newman 2020) and expanded the analytical horizon by focusing on different types of political entities, thus allowing for a deeper understanding of brand identity and perception dynamics in the political context. The selection of this limited sample could influence the representativeness of the results, as the study is based on a restricted number of political parties or leaders and may not capture the complexity of the political environment, which could include a wide range of political actors with different branding strategies and perceptions. Furthermore, the limited sampling might not account for the geographical, demographic, or cultural diversity that could influence the dynamics of political brand identity construction. This could lead to a lack of generalizability of the results at a national or international scale, thus limiting the applicability of the study's conclusions. However, while choosing a limited sample may entail some risks regarding representativeness and generalizability, it can also offer advantages regarding depth of analysis, control, and focused topic exploration. The research has clearly illustrated that political brand identity is constructed and managed by incorporating distinctive personal values and ideology, whether related to political parties or their leaders.

Furthermore, this study has highlighted that political, personal brands have been developed to establish a consistent, clear, and authentic presence in offline and online contexts to communicate a political image that remains consistent in the public's mind. However, it is essential to emphasize that this research has also revealed the complexities and challenges inherent in managing an integrated personal brand identity, particularly given the problematic and often fragmented context of the political system characterized by coalitions and parties. This aspect is vital as it highlights how political, personal brands must navigate a fragmented and multidimensional political environment, where the goals of coherence and authenticity require constant management and adaptation to the changing political realities.

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