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The memetic cult of personality of politicians during the pandemic

Abstract

Our contribution aims at conceptualising the notion of ‘memetic cult of personality’, which originates from the memetic production surrounding political figures, especially during periods of intense media coverage, like that triggered by the Coronavirus outbreak. To do so, we focus on two case studies from the Italian political sphere: former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Governor of Campania Region Vincenzo De Luca, both prominent media figures during the first lockdown. Relying on digital methods for the data collection, our empirical inquiry focuses on a corpus of static image memes, memetic videos and newspaper articles collected across different platforms. By adopting a combination of automated visual analysis and discourse analysis, we demonstrate that memetic cults show some of the traits traditionally attributed to personality cults, while displaying unique features as well. At a general level, it is maintained that memetic cults are co-constructed by users participating in the collaborative practices of memetic production and circulation. Leveraging the ambiguous logic of meme culture, we also illustrate how these cults fuel doppelganger characters and alternative narratives, in which support and mockery are blended together.

Keywords: Meme; Cult of personality; Pandemic; Politicians; Digital methods

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1. Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals remained globally housebound, subjected to unprecedented measures of confinement and curfew, communicating more than ever through social media (Koeze and Popper, 2020). The pandemic favoured a ‘rally round the flag’ effect (Bordignon et al., 2020), as typically observed during periods of crisis: from their social accounts individuals commented, discussed, and disputed the actions and declarations of politicians, especially those with administrative duties. One consequence of this phenomenon is the development of a conspicuous memetic production around political figures, treated as ‘celebrity leaders’ (Campus, 2020).

Existing research has demonstrated that memes are employed not only to ironically express dissent and criticism towards political figures (Fang, 2018) but also to fuel politicians’ consensus (Laineste and Kalmre, 2017) and, occasionally, as propagandistic tools (Woods and Hahner, 2019). In this context, the study of memetic production in support of political figures has mainly focused on highly significant but contextual cases, like the alt-right memetic exaltation of ‘God Emperor’ ascribed to Trump (Hine et al., 2017), or more recently to Putin (Denisova, 2019). However, there is a lack of studies advancing a general explanatory model of the phenomenon mechanisms.

This article outlines the first contribution to fill this gap: building upon the claim that memes can foster charismatic leaderships (Denisova, 2019: 115-124), we propose the notion of

'memetic cult of personality' as a conceptualisation to interpret contemporary phenomena of memetic production in support of political figures. Our work stands in continuity with existing research on political fandoms, seeking to underline both similarities and differences with Pisch's (2016) notion of personality cults.

To accomplish this aim, we undertake an empirical analysis combining digital methods (Caliandro and Gandini, 2016), automated visual analysis (Duhaime, 2019), and multimodal discourse analysis (Rose, 2016) to qualitatively explore the memetic production around two Italian political figures during the pandemic: Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Governor of Campania Region Vincenzo De Luca.

In the following sections, we first review the literature on the political use of memes and on the cults of personality in the digital sphere. Then, we detail the methodology employed for the analysis and illustrate the empirical findings in two separate subsections, one per politician. Finally, the discussion outlines the notion of memetic cult of personality and its main features, specifying the contribution of such a concept to the existing literature.

2. Literature review

Meme politics

Coined in 1976 by Dawkins (1976), the term 'meme' was originally introduced as the cultural counterpart of biological genes and widely discussed within the research area of memetics (Schlaile, 2021). In recent years, media studies scholars have re-employed the term to indicate a type of user-generated digital object virally circulating on the web: in this sense, the currently shared definition of memes is that of multimodal cultural artefacts, which are created, remixed, and shared by users across various digital platforms (Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Davison, 2012). According to this conceptualisation, users' manipulative practices play a key role in the dynamics of meme diffusion. The remediation of elements from popular media culture (Huntington, 2013) and/or current events (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019) enhances the accessibility of memes to a large audience (Laineste and Voolaid, 2019), thus boosting their circulation as well as fostering further re-elaborations.

Aside from recreational purposes (Milner, 2013), existing research contends that memes have implications for collective identity building, public discourse, and commentary in a participatory media environment (Gal et al., 2016; Miltner, 2018; Milner, 2016; Phillips, 2015; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Nagle, 2017). A growing body of literature has demonstrated an increasing tendency in the use of memes to frame political issues, create shared political imageries, affect public opinion, and promote social movements (Hristova, 2014; Wang and Wang, 2015; Denisova, 2019), with some scholars referring to this phenomenon as the 'memeification of politics' (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019). Thus, it is argued that the creative use of ironic and humorous elements like visual-verbal jokes is pivotal in memetic culture (Shifman, 2012; Vasquez and Aslan, 2021), insofar as it encourages participatory practices and contributes to memes' spreadability. Nevertheless, the extent to which memes offer alternative ways of political participation and affect citizens' mobilization is still open to debate, pitting scholars who regard memes as a device to boost polyvocal participation (Heiskanen, 2017) and challenge traditional gatekeepers (Moody-Ramirez and Church, 2019) against those contending that memes neutralize political dissent, while reinforcing hegemonic narratives (Hristova, 2014).

Scholars have recognised that while most memes aim to delegitimize specific political actors, ideas, or positions through satirical humour (Pearce and Hajizada, 2014; Heiskanen, 2017), they may also serve to support candidates and issues (Tay, 2012). The impact of memes on

the political sphere became apparent during the 2016 US presidential election, when it is believed that memes circulated by online right-wing supporters were crucial to Trump's victory (Ross and Rivers, 2017). An analysis conducted on political memes and images spread on 4chan and Reddit reveals that the content shared by users conveyed a powerful male narrative (Dickerson and Hodler, 2020), which depicted Trump as a saviour or martyr engaging in a holy war against terrorism: in this context, intertextual references to games and historical facts were remediated to convey a typical far-right ideology, which framed "patriarchy, sexism, racism, and even racial purity as a heroic and cartoonish narrative" (Lamerichs et al., 2018: 1). These findings resonate with the claim of a reactionary turn in political fandoms (Stanfill, 2020; Blodgett, 2020).

Fandoms have not been traditionally perceived as a political activity and are often overlooked by academia for their apparent incompatibility with the rational discourse of the political sphere (Hinck and Davisson, 2020). Yet, the increasing presence of fandoms populating the digital scene has led scholars to consider how they intertwine with web-specific participatory practices, thus exploring the extent to which fandoms can be considered as a form of grassroots mobilization, activism (Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012), and their use in support of political figures (Davisson, 2016). Alternatively, Fang's (2018) analysis of 'toad worship memes' maintains that users may join memetic production for a variety of non-mutually exclusive reasons, ranging from the manifestation of political dissent to pure entertainment. Fang also contends that this fluidity of motivations may contribute to the depoliticization of the fandom and its political icon, "by growing numbers of people drawn by the humour and entertainment" (2018: 16). Consistent with existing research (Miltner, 2014), Fang (2018) concludes that the connective nature of memetic circulation makes memes a form of ritual satire and a shared code, which creates a bonding effect for the members of the communities consuming those memes.

Political cults of personality in the digital sphere

The conceptualisation of the 'cult of personality' is generally credited to Nikita Chruščëv (1956), who used it in the secret denunciation of Stalin during the XX PCUS Congress; it was then applied to many other political leaders. In a historical reconstruction of the debate about personality cults, Pisch (2016: 54) summarises the definition as follows:

Key features of each of these definitions are the elevation and glorification of an individual, the use of symbolism and ritual, the fact that the image or persona of the leader is manufactured and heavily managed, the use of mass media for the dissemination of the cult, and parallels to religious phenomena.

To advance such an agenda through mass media, a political leader needs a complex and pervasive propaganda machine that usually requires direct state planning and a personal relationship between the leader and the state. In the pre-digital world, only media moguls (Mazzoleni, 2006) could probably satisfy these requirements in democratic regimes. However, three conditions have paved the way for the birth of memetic cults of personality in contemporary Western politics.

The first condition regards the collaborative and interactive relationship between public and media in the digital sphere – conceptualised as the 'convergence culture' enacted by digital media (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008). This condition opens the possibility of cults of personality not built by large-scale, expensive bureaucratic or mediatic machines, but by crowds of digital users (Arvidsson et al., 2016). The second condition relates to a process that characterised Western politics long before the advent of digital media: 'mediatisation' (Ciaglia et al., 2014; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Splendore and Rega, 2017) and spectacularization (Debord, 2013; Kellner, 2003), i.e. the growing dependence of politics on the media – whereby it

becomes a political actor in itself (Eberwein et al., 2016) – and the establishment of the political arena as a mega-spectacle by itself. These phenomena blurred the lines between political leaders and media celebrities in a new ‘celebrity politician’ paradigm (Campus, 2020; McKernan, 2011; Street, 2004). The third condition remains connected to the mediatisation of politics but is more specifically tied to the new relationship between leaders and citizens in the age of digital media. If the leader becomes a celebrity politician, political supporters become a fandom (Sandvoss, 2013; Smith, 2017). The bond between them becomes more intimate and emotional (Papacharissi, 2014), leading to the active engagement of the fandom in a continuous celebration through social media of the ‘hyperleader’, using a myriad of memes, images or hashtags (Gerbaudo, 2018).

Our contribution builds upon existing research on personality cults (Pisch, 2016), the use of memes to create alternative narratives (Lamerichs et al., 2018), and the connective function of memetic rituality (Fang, 2018) to introduce the notion of ‘memetic cult of personality’. Our main goal is to explore how memetic production and circulation are exploited to create nationally shared cults of personality around prominent political figures.

3. Methodology

In this article, we undertake a multi-case study approach (Meyer, 2001), using a variety of techniques, including digital methods, automated visual analysis, and discourse analysis. As is the norm in case studies research, we followed a theoretical sampling design (Eisenhardt, 1989) to identify cases that could fit the purpose of our research, to enrich the notion of memetic cults of personality by looking for variation. Thus, we analysed the memetic cults developing around two prominent political figures during the pandemic: former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Governor of Campania Region Vincenzo De Luca, who acquired relevance in the first phases of the pandemic for his public speeches.

Data Collection

For each case study, we used digital methods (Rogers, 2013; Caliandro and Gandini, 2016) to collect a corpus of memes from three platforms – Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube – and a selection of news articles was gathered using Google News.

Digital Methods are now an established methodology in the field of political communication research (Jungherr, 2015; Caliandro and Barina, 2015), due to the rise of relevance of digital media. This article contributes to the recent but flourishing research stream adapting digital methods to the study of online visual content (Highfield and Leaver, 2016) and in particular to memes (Askanius, 2021). In the following paragraphs, we illustrate the methods employed for the data collection and analysis, in order to facilitate the transparency and the replicability of the study.

The collection on Instagram and Facebook was performed with CrowdTangle (2021), a tool provided by Facebook for the analysis of public content on social media. Among other functions, CrowdTangle enables the creation of customized lists of Facebook public pages and Instagram public accounts, querying specific keywords. On Facebook, we created a list of pages searching for the names¹ of the leaders: excluding the politicians’ official channels, we identified pages with at least 10,000 followers at the time of the data collection. The same procedure was followed to create a list on Instagram, for accounts with at least 1,000 followers. Tables 1 and 2 detail the lists and the numbers of posts retrieved for each page or account.

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TABLE 1. List of Facebook pages extracted with CrowdTangle

¹ For reasons of completeness we searched for both the leaders’ full name and their surname, filtering for irrelevant content (e.g. cases of homonymity).

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TABLE 2. List of Instagram pages extracted with CrowdTangle

We then collected a corpus of posts published by the pages/accounts in the lists between 9th March 2020 and 9th March 2021. We selected the Italian lockdown as the period in which the cults originated, considering the high media coverage surrounding the two leaders, even in the international press (e.g. Giuffrida, 2020). From the beginning of the first national lockdown, we extended the data collection over a year to observe the development of the cults from their origins to their mature stage.

Subsequently, the datasets have been manually inspected to identify the memetic instances, analytically conceived as items displaying signs of manipulation, i.e. insertion of text lines or image editing, and manifesting a clear humoristic intent. Consistent with existing research (Brubacker, 2018; Dynel, 2021), we considered remix and humour as the core essential features of memes. The broadness of our formulation also allows us to move forward from the traditional conceptualisations involving fixed layouts (Brideau and Berrett, 2014) and 'image-macro' templates (Dynel, 2016), whose presence in the dataset may be marginal (Dynel, 2021).

We relied on the researchers' competence and evaluations to identify humour, defined as a perceived incongruity between what is said and what is meant in an utterance (Attardo, 2008). To reduce possible biases deriving from partial perceptions of humour (Dynel, 2021), we relied on the typology of online ironic markers proposed by Gal and colleagues (2020), focusing on *platform*, *participants*, and *style* markers. Specifically, *platform* markers identify more or less explicitly a page or an account as ironic, while *participants* and *style* markers contribute to framing content as ironic, by creating a sense of incongruity with the leaders' public image or exaggerating some of the traits attributed to them. After filtering out non-memetic content, the final collection totalled 6,481 Facebook posts and 2,029 Instagram posts.

Digital data on YouTube was collected with YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015), searching for videos containing at least one of the politicians' surnames in the title. The output is a list of video titles, including original links, which were manually filtered to retain the memetic videos, conceived as videos attracting "creative user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work" (Shifman, 2012: 190). Thus, we retained compilations of the leaders' speeches, songs created using remixed actual quotes, and videos employing deepfake techniques (e.g. the video 'Scarface Vincenzo De Luca'). In addition, we relied on metapragmatic indicators (Dynel, 2021) to keep videos explicitly labelled in their title as 'parody' and/or 'meme'. The final dataset contains 95 memetic videos for Conte and 85 for De Luca.

Finally, news articles were collected through a Google News query, for each political figure, retrieving articles containing both the name and surname of the politician and the word 'meme'. The articles were included in the research design as a complementary resource, to further explore the mediatization of the memetic cults by official media outlets. To this end, we created two datasets featuring: titles of the articles, magazine names, dates of publication, first lines of content, and links to the articles. The resulting corpora were filtered to remove off-topic articles not dealing with memes on the politicians, totalling 96 articles for Conte and 87 for De Luca.

Data Analysis

The textual and visual material was explored by means of the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) paradigm, which uses the notion of discourse to address the rhetorical organization and social production of visual, written and spoken materials (Rose, 2016). By using this

methodology, we seek to explore the discursive dimension of the memetic cults, unveiling their distinctive features, topics, and narratives.

According to the original formulation (Fairclough, 2013), CDA is a three-step process involving text analysis, interpretation of discourse practices, and social explanation. Drawing from this conceptualisation and Rose's (2016) application to visual analysis, we combined visual analysis and discourse interpretation. After a preliminary exploration, in which the origin of the cults were retraced, we conducted a visual analysis of the data from Facebook and Instagram, to derive recurrent topics and patterns in the memes. To this end, we relied on PixPlot (Duhaime, 2019), a Python library which processes and clusterizes static images based on pixel similarities. The outputs were two explorable image maps, one per politician, in which images showing similar structures (e.g. the presence of text), colours, and/or content (e.g. recurrent figures or elements) are grouped together.

YouTube videos were watched in their entirety and sorted into three categories according to content: musical parodies, compilations/mash-ups, and deepfake videos. We then looked for key themes (visual patterns and topics), which could resonate with the findings derived from PixPlot image maps.

Finally, we combined the results of the visual analysis to understand how the memetic production around the two political figures leverages recurring topics and visual patterns to construct coherent narratives sustaining the memetic cults. In this context, we used the qualitative analysis of the newspaper articles to deepen the exploration of the public diffusion, reception, and framing of the cults.

4. Analysis

Giuseppe Conte: the memetic cult of the Italian sex symbol

From the analysis of memes regarding Giuseppe Conte, a clear and coherent memetic cult of personality emerges. As Prime Minister during the pandemic, Conte became the object of a vast political memetic production.

However, from a topical point of view, two broad macro-categories of memes regarding Conte are identifiable, with consistency among the different media. The first is a shapeless mass of memes produced on the wave of the political and societal trending topics of the day. The second category consists of memes that are all built around one coherent memetic doppelganger of Conte as the hyperbolic Italian sex symbol, with a high temporal and transmedial coherence. Thus, an overwhelming influence was played by the Instagram page *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte* ('Conte's babes'), which gained an enormous diffusion after the beginning of the Italian lockdown. The success of the page was such that it prompted a vast number of copycat memetic pages devoted to Conte himself and to many other different political figures (none of which reached a comparable relevance).

The origins of the memetic cult

Before delving into the memetic cult of Conte as sex symbol, it is useful to reconstruct its origin on the *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte* page. The expression 'someone's babes' is not original: it took inspiration from a fan page of an Italian TV anchorwoman, *le bimbe di Lilli Gruber* ('Lilli Gruber's babes'), that was by itself inspired – in a parodic way – by the fan page of an Italian Influencer, Giulia De Lellis. However, a semiotic and thematic turn differentiated these two pages from 'Conte's babes': the babes – in the artificial narrative – were no longer women sustaining a feminine TV figure, but rather women idolising a male politician. The Instagram page posted its first photo on 28th May 2018, shortly before Conte's official appointment as PM. However, until March 2021 the page had posted only 7 images, which celebrated Conte

as a sex symbol using plain, non-modified photos of him. It was with the beginning of the Italian lockdown that the production of memes on the page grew dramatically and with them their number of likes. The equivalent Facebook page was also created in March 2021. Thus, the birth of the memetic doppelganger 'Conte Sex Symbol' originated from two factors: the existence of a page insisting on these aspects; and the pandemic and national lockdown, which fostered a 'rally round the flag' effect on Conte (Bordignon et al., 2020).

Official media outlets also had a significant impact on the popularity of the topic, with high media coverage of the Conte's babes phenomenon, particularly by online, clickbait sites (and more rarely by major national newspapers). Media coverage of the *Bimbe di Conte* phenomenon also allows an assessment of the immediate transmediality assumed by Conte's memetic doppelganger: on the same days in which the Instagram page exploded, various newspaper articles reported that Conte had become the most searched query in the Italian version of Pornhub (e.g. Carzaniga, 2020) and covered the growth of a vast series of erotic fanfictions devoted to him on Wattpad, a platform for amateur writers.

Conte's memetic cult on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube

This transmediality strengthened the consolidation of the emerging memetic doppelganger, which from March 2021 became predominant in Conte's representations on Facebook and Instagram pages. Aside from *Le bimbe di Conte* (which as of May 2021 counted more than 313,000 followers), the only other Instagram page devoted to Conte with over 10,000 followers is *Daddy Conte*, which displays the same tropes and style observed for Conte's babes. Almost all the other collected pages between 10,000 and 1,000 followers are copycats of these two accounts.

Figure 1. Image map of the Instagram memes on Conte (realized with PixPlot)

From the PixPlot analysis of all the images from the Instagram corpus, two significant clusters emerge, both related to the memetic cult (see Figure 1). The first is a cluster of official photos of Conte, taken from institutional contexts, unaltered or rendered in black-and-white: they are employed in posts whose captions celebrate Conte as a sex symbol, as a politician or as a combination of both. The second cluster includes memes strictly following the style that became the trademark of the memetic production of Conte's cult: an overtly and parodic kitsch style characterised by hearts, love emojis and text in gaudy colours superimposed on photos (see Figure 2). The text in the memes do not include actual quotes by Conte, but fictional – often cheesy – phrases of the memetic doppelganger to his 'babes'.

Figure 2. Meme on Conte displaying the typical aesthetics of the cult (Source: Instagram)

On Facebook, the situation is more nuanced. Among the pages with over 10,000 followers, the most followed page is *Giuseppi Conte*, a satirical page created before the pandemic that posts memes of other politicians besides Conte. However, by analysing its timeline, the influence of the sex symbol doppelganger is clear. Until March 2021 the memetic production was generic and followed the logics of the political trending topics. Starting from 13th March, the page introduced memes based on *Le bimbe di Conte* style, and from then on, Conte's doppelganger became one of the dominant themes of the page, particularly in March and April. This also influenced the overall production, which started to be more oriented to the exaltation of Conte. These themes also predominate in the metrics of the most liked and shared posts. Apart from *Giuseppi Conte*, Facebook pages on Conte with more than 10,000 followers can be divided into two categories. The first is composed of pages plainly supporting Conte through memes. Directly or indirectly attributable to the Five Star movement, they exalt Conte and his party strictly on their political agenda, producing memes that lack any irony or double layer of meaning. The second is composed by pages on 'Conte Sex Symbol': *Le bimbe di Conte* (the Facebook counterpart of the Instagram page), *Conte Sex Symbol*, *Le Contesse di*

Giuseppe Conte ('Conte's Countesses') and *Le Principesse di Giuseppe Conte* ('Conte's Princesses'). Interestingly, these last two pages show a mix between the two trends: their concept derives from Conte's memetic doppelganger, but they exploit it to share pure exaltative content.

On YouTube, the most watched clip is not a memetic video, but rather a viral video (Shifman, 2012) reposted from TikTok, in which a young girl gets a fake tattoo of 'Conte as Sex Symbol' and shows it to her parents. Although not directly part of our dataset, this clip is relevant as a further indicator of transmediality. With a few exceptions, the other videos are composed of musical parodies and videos that reproduce the memetic doppelganger, using deepfake to make Conte impersonate classic cinematographic sex symbols, like Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing* and *Ghost* or Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*, where Conte-Gladiator faces Commodus-Salvini.

The memetic cult features

It is now possible to advance an overall analysis of Conte's memetic cult of personality. The memetic cult of 'Conte Sex Symbol' developed quite independently from Conte's normal political figure, constituting what we defined as a 'memetic doppelganger'. Indeed, the memetic cult does not seem to originate from Conte formal political narrative: rather, it formed around Conte's physical appearance of a good-looking middle-aged man, his tone and gestures, combined with his role as a reassuring reference point for the nation during the pandemic. From this basis, it immediately assumed an overtly exaggerated and caricatural dimension, highlighted by the voluntarily kitsch graphics. The memetic doppelganger of Conte scarcely interacted with the politician's speeches or actions. The only exception seems to be a phrase uttered by Conte during an official speech against political opponents – 'This government does not work under the cover of darkness' – that became the object of some memes. Nevertheless, as time passed, the memetic cult of personality oscillated between a pure ironic representation of Conte as sex symbol and memetic political support, often against other politicians like Matteo Salvini. On Facebook, the memetic cult was able to monopolise the production of broader satirical pages and to hybridise with more canonical supporting pages.

Vincenzo De Luca: the memetic cult of the sheriff

The memetic production surrounding Governor of Campania Region Vincenzo De Luca exploded around the same time Conte acquired his fandom. Despite not reaching the extent of the latter, as testified by the lower numbers of material collected in our dataset, De Luca's cult presents several interesting features and a strong consistency of topics and formal traits. The memetic production plays upon De Luca's rigid and inflexible demeanour and the strict measures he deemed necessary to contain the Coronavirus. While having a more minor institutional role than Conte, De Luca is perceived as an equally powerful figure, capable of opposing official decrees. Some Facebook and Instagram pages seem to go in this direction, having evocative names like *Vincenzo De Luca lo sceriffo* ('Sheriff Vincenzo De Luca'). Along this line, the caption of the page *Vincenzo De Luca che chiude cose* ('Vincenzo De Luca closing things') describes De Luca using majestic epithets, partially resembling those ascribed to *Game of Thrones* character Daenerys Targaryen,² whereas the quasi-homonymous page *Vincenzo De Luca chiude cose* compares De Luca's opposition to Conte to the clash between good and evil. In the following, we explore in detail this memetic cult, discussing its tropes and formal properties.

The origins of the memetic cult

² "De Luca Primo Ministro, Comandante in carica, Primo del suo nome, Erede della casa Targaryen, Figlio dei Draghi, Re degli Andali e dei Primi Uomini di Salerno" (from the description of the page *Vincenzo De Luca chiude cose* on Facebook).

As in the case of PM Conte, the memetic cult of De Luca originated during the initial period of the pandemic and national lockdown. The emergence of social media fan pages dedicated to the politician can be further traced to some specific events. During March 2020, De Luca stressed the necessity of strict anti-Covid measures and surveillance, addressing the transgressors with colourful language and peculiar threats, such as when he threatened to use flamethrowers against whoever dared to organize a graduation party (Ruccia, 2020). Over the following months, De Luca's attacks spared no one, including political opponents (like Salvini) and the Italian Civil Defence Department, guilty of having sent useless protection masks, suitable only during carnival. Yet the main target of the governor's bitter remarks was people evading the restrictions: during one memorable conference, he complained about overweight middle-aged men (referred to as *cinghialoni*, 'wild boars'), who improbably disguised themselves as runners to violate the lockdown. On other occasions, he exhorted Campania's residents to stay home and prepare *pastiera*, a typical Neapolitan pastry speciality, and advised younger people against going out to buy cheap vodka, suggesting that it was prepared with sewage water (Paciello, 2020).

Prompted and constantly fuelled by De Luca's statements, several pages and groups flourished across different social media platforms. At the same time, several articles were published by Italian and international newspapers, including *Il Corriere*, *TGCom24*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Independent*, reporting and humorously commenting on his claims. The combination of user-generated objects like memes and official media outlets contributed to frame and spread the memetic cult around De Luca, consolidating the image of an uncompromising politician, who does not hesitate to adopt any measure (and punishment) necessary to stop the pandemic.

De Luca's memetic cult on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube

As noted above, De Luca's cult and memetic production revolves around the governor's salty words and rigid attitude. This is reflected in the names of some of the most influential Facebook pages, such as the aforementioned *Vincenzo De Luca che chiude cose*, created on 13th March 2020 and counting around 70,000 followers (May 2021), as well as *Vincenzo De Luca lo sceriffo* and *Vincenzo De Luca chiude cose*, opened right after the first and counting around 52,000 and 13,000 followers, respectively. On Instagram we also find *Le bimbe di Vincenzo De Luca* and *Le bimbe di De Luca official*, homonymous of the page dedicated to Conte.

Figure 3. Image map of the Instagram memes on De Luca (realized with PixPlot)

Analysing the image map produced with PixPlot (Figure 3), two predominant clusters are found: the first one contains memes using screenshots from press conferences, upon which text is inserted, parodying the original statement. We hypothesized that this kind of meme proliferated due to the easily reproducible layout, with new material provided by the frequent press conferences held by De Luca. In this context, the focus of the memes is not on the images, which depict De Luca's same dramatic facial expressions, but rather on the words. Linked to this, a second group of memes relies on pop-cultural references to movies, comics, and TV series to edit pictures of the politicians: in this sense, De Luca is photoshopped on the body of Achilles (as depicted in the poster of 1962's *The Fury of Achilles*), the fit body of a *Baywatch* character, Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*, Cordell Walker from *Walker Texas Ranger*, Popeye, Kim Jong-Un, or James Bond (Figure 4). These examples show that De Luca is mostly associated with strong and/or powerful actors, regardless of whether they are real or fictional personalities. Similarly, their good or evil alignment seems to be of little relevance, as long as the character is respected and feared. It is important to note that the power exerted by such figures can also be expressed by their physical appearance, in which case we find De Luca's face edited onto athletic, well-built, and good-looking bodies. Thus, the politician is often depicted as a figure capable of intimidating enemies, both physically and psychologically. Despite the differences, the described memetic types are anchored to current

events, insofar as they reference De Luca's comments, either in the text or through visual elements like flamethrowers, vodka bottles, or *pastiera* cakes.

Figure 4. Meme of De Luca as James Bond

Looking at the 85 videos collected from YouTube, many fall under the category of "best of" compilations, i.e. mashups of video excerpts containing De Luca's famous quotes. Another group of memetic videos contains parodies and remixes. Among them are music videos parodying famous songs or creating brand new ones using the politician's statements (e.g. the video 'Vincenzo De Luca – Allauin (Metal remix)'). Furthermore, deepfake techniques are employed to remix De Luca's face onto some of the most charismatic and fearsome movie characters, such as Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) from *Iron Man* or Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) from the first *Blade Runner* movie, or Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood) from *Gran Torino*. In addition, our dataset includes several gameplay videos dedicated to the online game *DeLucaRun*, in which the politician, disguised as Super Mario, must collect masks and defy his enemies, among which are fake runners *cinghialoni* and other political figures, like Giuseppe Conte (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Clip from the DeLucaRun video game (source: YouTube)

To complete our analysis, we considered a selection of newspaper articles from both local and national outlets, which addressed De Luca's memetic phenomenon. While most of them report selected moments from various press conferences, others offer encompassing accounts of the politician's quotes and resultant memes (e.g. from *Salerno notizie* "Un anno di Covid: la scalata 'col lanciafiamme' del governatore De Luca alla conquista dei social"³ published 9th March 2021). Furthermore, as in the case of Conte, we found articles on the social media fan pages dedicated to the leader or echoing different memetic epithets in their titles (e.g. "Coronavirus, lo sceriffo De Luca scatena l'ironia dei social: è il supereroe del web"⁴ published on *Il Mattino*, 15th March 2020).

The memetic cult features

After exploring the different datasets, we can attempt some general considerations of De Luca's memetic cult of personality. Overall, the examined memes exaggerate the governor's qualities and attitude. Thus, De Luca's memetic doppelganger is a hyperbolically enhanced version of the actual politician, a powerful figure with a prominent role, who shows an exceptional physical and moral strength. While in most cases the politician is metaphorically compared to a military commander or a political leader (typically a king or an emperor), we also found cases in which he was elevated to superhero or supervillain status. It should also be noted that this exasperation produces a double effect of exaltation and mockery, since the comparison to strong kings or superheroes clashes with the actual role and appearance of De Luca. At the same time, however, the politician's moral strength and bravery seem to be genuinely commended by some (apparently) authentic statements: e.g. the description of the Facebook page *Sheriff Vincenzo De Luca* reads "[a] satirical page on our great governor, the absolute best". This unresolved duality is in line with the inherent logics fuelling the memetic production in general and already noted for political memes, in which support and mockery often blend seamlessly (cfr. Milner, 2013).

³ Lit. "One year of Covid: Governor De Luca's escalation 'with the flamethrower' conquering social media".

⁴ Lit. "Coronavirus, sheriff De Luca triggers the irony on the Internet: he's the superhero of the web".

5. Discussion: The memetic cult of personality

In this section, we summarise and discuss the results to systemize the notion of ‘memetic cult of personality’, connect it with existing research on memes and political communication, and argue its relevance for future research.

From the analysis emerges the centrality of the pandemic in the growth of memes devoted to both political figures. Conte was already PM, but the state of emergency induced by the pandemic grew his mediatic presence with official addresses to the nation, enacting a ‘rally round the flag’ effect (Bordignon et al., 2020). De Luca was already a nationally relevant figure too (and the object of satirical portraits for his peculiar character and way of speaking), but the pandemic brought him more coverage in national newscasts and newspapers, due to the power attributed to the leaders of the regions in the pandemic management. Thus, the pandemic acted as a trigger and a condenser, enhancing the mediatisation of Conte’s and De Luca’s public images and reinforcing their status as ‘celebrity politicians’ (Campus, 2020; Street, 2004). However, the pandemic does not seem to be a necessary element per se. Rather, it is the status of ‘celebrity politician’ – a highly mediatised and debated political figure – that emerges as a necessary requisite for the development of a memetic cult of personality, with the pandemic being only one possible event triggering this status. Connected to this is the necessity, for the memetic cult to develop, of some distinctive features apt to be easily employed as a base or material for memes, like Conte’s appearance and aesthetic, or De Luca’s colourful expressions.

The notion of ‘memetic cult of personality’ builds upon the more established, pre-digital phenomenon of cults of personality. Here, we take inspiration from the key characteristics identified by Pisch’s (2016) analysis to define the features of memetic cults (as summarised in Table 3), focusing on the significant innovations deriving from both the digital context and the logics of memetic production. First, memetic cults of personality depend upon mass media, but in the new context of convergence culture (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008). As observed in both cases, this marks two substantial innovative features: the participatory development of the memetic cult by a crowd of digital users and its consequent acephalous nature, with no predetermined political goals decided by a control room. In the case of De Luca, a multiplicity of pages originated the cult, while in the case of Conte one page was mainly responsible, followed by copycats, but the result was the same. Coherently with the nature of memes that deny the value of authorship (Davison, 2012), the memetic cult constitutes the outcome emerging from the efforts of a chaotic ensemble of connected or independent actors guided by political aims, a pure ‘logic of the lulz’ (Milner, 2013), or a combination of them (Fang, 2018). Notably, mass media (digital) newspapers and magazines remain relevant actors, as in both cases their coverage of the emerging cults helped their diffusion, knowledge and transmediality. Another recurring element of memetic cults – intrinsic to the term itself – is the glorification of the political figure. Conte and De Luca were both worshipped by their political fandoms through the memes, but the contamination from the memetic culture makes it impossible to distinguish between candour and deceitfulness, between exaltation and mockery. With all probability, actors guided by all these aims feed the memetic cult with new memes, and their interpretation too will vary according to the audience. However, the results show that the memetic cults also prompt genuine support for the politicians. Particularly in the case of Conte, there is a weaponization of the memetic doppelganger by some pages for overtly propagandistic goals.

The third feature of memetic cults of personality is the artefact and managed nature of the images and representations. The logic of memetic production, fuelling the continuous reinterpretation of existing memes (Laineste and Voolaid, 2019), contributes to the creation of reusable templates and tropes, which become the trademark of the cult, boosting its spreadability and the consolidation of its features. The PixPlot maps show how both cults develop around a limited number of successful features and templates that make them easily recognizable. Tightly connected to this aspect is a fourth identifiable feature of a set of recognizable rituals and symbolisms. The creation of the meme by visually manipulating the image through templates and tropes also adds symbolic meanings to it, as seen in different forms for both Conte's and De Luca's memetic cults (see below). The symbolic meaning transmitted by the meme is functional to the glorification – genuine or ironic – of the politician. In line with what Fang (2018) evidenced studying the 'toad worship' memetic phenomenon, the rituals and symbolisms seem to constitute the shared connective tissue tying together the fandom community, rather than common political aims.

Table 3 - Overview table of the memetic cults of personality features

While the memetic production is triggered by the politician's viral features or highly mediated events, the effective birth of a memetic cult coincides with the formalization of a memetic doppelganger. With the consolidation of the rituals, symbolisms and tropes collectively created by digital producers, the politician's representation reaches such a caricatural form that it becomes clearly distinct from the original and takes on a life of its own. Similar to satirical portraits mimicking existing individuals, memetic doppelgangers are contemporarily the same person they depict and a separate, distinguished character. Indeed the doppelganger, and not the 'true' politician, is the real object of the memetic cult. This grade of separation between the politician and the memetic doppelganger is the key to understanding the intrinsic ambiguity between mockery, pure fun, and political support in memetic cults of personality. The latter only materialises if the worship of the memetic doppelganger also translates into admiration for the real politician, a possible but unnecessary circumstance.

A comparative account of the two analysed case studies highlights different conformations of memetic doppelgangers, assessing their pivotal influence in shaping memetic cults of personality differently. First, a memetic doppelganger can be represented by a specific stylistic feature or by a more general trope, represented through a wider multiplicity of layers. Conte's doppelganger, for example, was largely represented by a single layer: the juxtaposition of a pink filter, hearts and emojis to the leader's images. De Luca's doppelganger, instead, was based on the broader trope of the powerful man, translated into a set of different memetic templates. Second, a memetic doppelganger can originate from the politician's personal features, as in the case of Conte, or from their actions and speeches, as in the case of De Luca. At a general level, it is thus argued that memetic cults of personality can significantly vary according to the different typology of mediatisation involving the politician. Third, the different forms that memetic doppelgangers can take, such as eroticisation (Conte) or militarisation (De Luca), reflect different typologies of bond connecting the doppelganger and the fandoms.

6. Conclusion

This article analysed the memetic production of the political figures of Italian PM Conte and Governor of Campania region De Luca during the Covid-19 pandemic, observing that an intense mediatization of the politicians can give rise to memetic cults of personality, or more precisely to memetic doppelgangers, built by an acephalous ensemble of producers. A thorough examination and discussion of the results allows us to summarise the contributions of this work to the literature. First, although based on two case studies in a specific context (Italy) and in peculiar circumstances (the pandemic), the notion of memetic cults of personality could prove a productive analytical framework for the analysis of memetic production over politicians on a broader level. Indeed, the concept can be usefully applied to previous influential analyses of memetic productions on highly mediated politicians. The exaltation of Trump as a 'God Emperor' (Hine et al., 2017), of Putin as an action hero (Denisova, 2019) and of Jiang Zemin as 'the toad' (Fang, 2018) all fit well within the proposed framework of memetic cults of personality, insofar as they display the illustrated features, including the creation of a memetic doppelganger with unique and exaggerated characteristics. Second, this research emphasises the need to properly evaluate communities of memetic producers as relevant political actors, capable of influencing political communication, breaking into the news agenda, and enabling the gathering of fandoms that move in an ambiguous space between irony and support. Furthermore, due to the lack of ownership and the collaborative nature of memetic production, once diffused the memetic doppelganger can be appropriated, modified and reused by other actors with different purposes (e.g. political pages explicitly supporting the politicians, as seen for Conte).

Finally, this study provides a relevant contribution to the literature on memetic phenomena concerning politicians. Existing research focused on hyperleaders (Gerbaudo, 2018) promoting right-wing and conservative ideologies (Denisova, 2019; Hine et al., 2017): especially in the case of Trump, great relevance has been given to highly organized communities willingly pursuing a racist, misogynist and reactionary agenda (Lamerichs et al., 2018). However, this article broadens the discussion demonstrating that memetic cults of personality can develop in favour of politicians belonging to all the positions in the political spectrum: in our case, Conte is the political leader of the Five Star Movement, while De Luca is the most prominent political leader of the Democratic Party in Campania region. Furthermore, in line with recent research (Fang, 2018), our work highlights how memetic cults of politicians do not need an organized community worshipping the politician but can originate from the combined agency of an acephalous ensemble of actors.

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