Fandom and Politics-pop. A research on *Le Bimbe di Giuseppe Conte* with small data approaches[*]

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This contribution aims to illustrate how, in several cultural productions, Giuseppe Conte has become a mainstream character. The popularisation of politics, the celebrity politics and the media exposure the Prime Minister was subject to in the months of the first wave of the pandemic have certainly contributed placing him at the centre of fandom phenomena, which has been converted into the various platforms under the name of "Le bimbe di Conte" (Conte's Little girls). The empirical research on small data we want to present relates to the Italian community of writers on the Wattpad platform who, during the lockdown, wrote and shared 'stories' featuring Giuseppe Conte

Introduction

In the last 20 years, involvement in political life from citizens was subjected to an evolution related to the digital communication, and since the '40s it is also known that public opinion, democratic processes and political participation are strictly connected to media (Castells 2014; Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2021). We can assert, without being tempted by solutions prompted by a technological determinism, that digital sector developed a sense of active presence regarding the debate about some topics considered more relevant than others: it means that affective and emotive nature of digital platforms supported a more important polarization and the advent of a new political age defined as "disintermediation". Generally with this word we refer to the gradual decline of the intermediary role played by political parties and the other traditional systems; in this new age leaders speak directly to their constituency, even through marketing tools. In this age the belief that web is able to

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allow models of direct democracy gets stronger (Mosca 2017; Bracciale and Mazzoleni 2019; Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2021). In the disintermediation age we are witnesses of a segmentation of the audience based on personal trends, preferences, habits, putting the desire of the "audiences" in the middle of the political discourse by a leader who wants to focus the attention on vital topics. Manin defines this as "Audience Democracy", it could not survive without a target operation supported by the growing *Platform Society* (Van Dijck et al. 2019). This last phrase, alongside a permanent connectivity and fostered by mobile network, causes acts of connective nature more than collective (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), in which political discourse and participatory action feed themselves and they increase because of the own existence of the web with its network structures (Castells 2014). Personal motivation, which encourages individuals to organize themselves, is the main bond strength to the collective acts as well as the outcome of an increasing dissolution between public/private. The self-narration in the context of social movements matches perfectly with the logic of social communication (Bennet and Segerberg 2013; Boccia Artieri 2012). There is not a line with the private, as the possibility to disengagement (Bennet and Segerberg 2013; Van Dijck, de Wall, Poell 2019). Thanks to the self-motivation, engagement spaces are displayed, to which different values and relevance are bestowed according to the individual interests.

Citizen participation led by political leaders through a massive use of social media and the influence of emotions (Campus 2016; Davies 2019) in the public debate, the transition to a disintermediate political dimension produced also phenomena defined as *"Politicising Fandom"* (Dean 2017). Affection, the central position of the leader and relations among all the passionate users that produce contents in time and space may be analysed through the lens of the so-called *fan studies,* keeping an eye on the celebrity politics (cfr Turner 2004; Street 2012).

According to a digital ethnographic perspective, it is analysed the case of *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte* (Conte's Little Girl), the fandom phenomenon that allows us to examine the role played by broadcasting systems, especially television, in the development of the online community.

Fan, Fandom and Politics. Literature review

Fandom is «regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text» (Sandvoss 2005) along with the emotional investment made for the "fandomized" object (Jenkins 2006; Grossberg 1992). The fandom practice to rework texts, so as to produce new, original works is the skilled fan's main activity. This remix culture (Lessig 2008) is also a main aspect of the digital pop-culture, based on the constant transformation and sharing of derivative works, so «acting, producing and sharing are the three activities which lead to a cultural phenomenon representing fandom» (Lacasa 2020; chapter I). A fan activity, his/her practice, it is nothing more than the manifestation of their own *habitus* (Bourdieu 1979 : 1983; cfr. Lacasa 2020): these activities are needed to create a system of useful

meanings to participate in a social environment (also a digital one), in order to become customs that can not be distinguished from culture. Besides, their consumption is characterized by a high, indiscriminate use of digital technologies, in which – as a work of "distinction" (Bourdieu, 1979 : 1983) – there is a tendency to use products of the popular culture (Fiske 1989), as well as low and high culture (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019; Davis et al 2018). In this digital world the virtual border between public and private sphere tends to fall apart, outlines disappear and also for the digital fandom world «fans are agents who use the Internet and specifically social networks to transform the world in which they live, whilst at the same time they change themselves moving between physical and virtual reality, with very little awareness of its differences» (Lacasa 2020, "chapter I").

In fans' practices, which are community activities with people sharing values and goals (Van Zoonen 2005), we are able to find political communities as well. Besides, there is no denying that fandom activities are developing standard consumption patterns, by gaining the approval of a sub-culture that was stigmatized before (Kozinets 2016). Fandom, as a social practice, seems to acquire the double task of a means for political commitment on the one hand, like the political fandom, and on the other hand it is a methodological instrument to observe social phenomena. In fact, as pointed by Dean (2017) «fandom itself, not the politics of individual fans, may impact on democracy».

confirming wha John Langer (1981) said, following the case of *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte*, broadcasting media still have a main role in the polarization of politics (Mascio 2018). Television creates personalities and shows its leading power, it manages to connect strictly with digital media which politics needs in a fundamental way: in fact «politics still needs TV spotlight. What completely changed is the relation between politicians and their audiences, also between publics and leaders» (my transl., Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019; chapter I).

As a second part of the debate, politics learnt for a long time to communicate through digital media and it embraced especially the communicative mechanisms of social networks that became «a civic resource capable of reconciling the spectator-consumer-citizen with politics, reaching more and more targets of citizens that are distant from politics» (my transl., Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009). In this way the creation of relations are eased and improved, because political leaders have the possibility to speak directly to their audience, without the mediation of their editorial board or their press office. As an example, during the pandemic Conte used his social profiles to announce live broadcast, to share public statements and post his selfies and photos with the marks left by the constant use of the face mask.

Moreover, In the political communication discourse,the conception of celebrity politics (Corner, Pels 2003; Street 2004; Van Zoonen, 2005) comes into light, meaning the talent of some skilled politician to use marketing and advertising tricks, or also by assuming several speech and behavioral styles considered suitable to nurture their own fanbase.

Eventually, pandemic allowed Conte to have an incredible media exposure, in which he enjoyed the opportunity to become the charismatic leader (Bull 2021) in the first period of national lockdown, the "carrier group" chief (Alexander 2003) leading his people out of the

crisis. His manner of speaking, conduct, rhetoric and use of slogans allowed him to create and cuddle his own fanbase (Street 2004; Dean 2017), letting him personify the celebrity status. Furthermore, audiences aim to start a system of meanings and values dealing with the rise of a celebrity (Marshall 1997); cfr Rojek 2001).

However, cult of political leaders may have replaced the ideological commitment to the party's belief. According to Manin (2014), in the audience democracy, male and female citizens adapt their political conduct on the basis of temporary circumstances. In this type of democracy a political leader embodies the same ideal of politics. In order to keep their status, the celebrity-leader needs a perpetual, direct contact with their voters, so as to create an empathetic sense of affinity allowing him to perceive their general sentiment. As a result, in the contemporary political communication, media's logic and pop-politics strive to use the essential energies so that citizens might accept other measures and decisions (Strömbäck 2008, Landerer 2013, Splendore 2014). That is what happened in 2020 at the beginning of the first pandemic wave, with all the measures taken for Covid-19 virus. A fundamental contribution was given by media that strengthen the strategic position to some social agents – the so-called wise people – like politicians and "experts" (Alexander 2003). The growth of information about Covid-19 emergency caused in Italy what was defined «the bubble effect» (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2021): a kind of addiction on communication and information for a topic that is defined more important than others, making them less relevant. In the narration of the battle against the pandemic, Conte tried to lay the foundations of a constituency that could recognize him in a line management: «that is a political and social identity in which part of the constituency could identify and recognize itself» (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2021, Chapter 1).

Le Bimbe di Conte. Giuseppe Conte's fandom

A strong use of broadcasting and socialcasting systems by Conte during the first pandemic wave soon produced the birth of groups composed especially by young, teen femalesupporters. They started to follow the former Prime Minister and his political rise with an ironic spirit and a determinate level of awareness, with the result of the production of texts that glorified or mocked him. In the first phase of the pandemic (in Italy March-May 2020) we saw the production of memes, playlists on Spotify, merchandising and even a LOFI song with a mix of his most famous phrases. Also, "Giuseppe Conte" keyword on PornHub was in the most popular section, with the use of a shortcut to audiovisual products with the former Prime Minister's speeches.

All of this caused the creation of numberless sharing spaces like Facebook pages and groups (Actually, they were made between March and April of the same year), but also Instagram profiles that reached a large amount of followers, supported by micro-influencers or celebrities.

Le bimbe di Conte is a bottom-up phenomenon that grew progressively in the so-called first wave of the pandemic. This contribution-deals with the analysis to understand how this affective component converted into a real support for his political career, reaching the status of politicized fandom (Dean 2017; Sandvoss 2013; van Zoonen 2005) or combining engaging operations that could fit their cult person (Jenkins 2006; Boccia Artieri 2012). Therefore, this research aims to understand if the emotive and affective investments made by supporters are pointed to a change of the future society or if it is only a consumption model. In addition, the case of *Le Bimbe di Conte* wants to inspect the conduct and attitude of these fan communities that convey in different socio-technical environments.

Research design

This analysis aims to the observation of the fandom phenomenon in two different social networks: Facebook and Wattpad.

It was considered useful to describe the phenomenon of *Le Bimbe di Giuseppe Conte* through Facebook's social formation because this SNS represents conveniently mainstream cultures. The purpose was not the collection of statistical data, but to proceed with an exploratory research so as to gather useful information to explain conducts and manners of Giuseppe Conte's fanbase. The selection of the Facebook communities' contents has just been possible by following in a first phase 10 fan pages and by joining 15 groups, declaring our conformity to the guidelines for the rules and ideals of these different communities. Making reference to Everett Rogers' model (1995) about the diffusion of ideas and innovations, the key elements to define a representative selection were: the opening date of these fan pages and groups; the number of followers until May 2021; the quality of engagement until May 2021. In the end it was chosen the private group *LE BIMBE DI CONTE <3* and the fan page *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte (@lebimbedigiuseppeconte).* Practices and aesthetic manners of speaking of these 2 digital spaces have been brought to attention, so as to identify the recurring *leitmotives* and the political engagement of these two communities.

A different layer was adopted for the analysis of the Wattpad fanwriter's works, in which the textual productivity is the tangible result of the fandom through the creation of new written works that are *fanzine*, *fanfiction*, *fan art.* Fiske (1992) claims that textual productivity is a fundamental element of the contemporary pop-culture, now reinforced and established by the structures of social medias. Stories dedicated to Giuseppe Conte are part of RPF (Real Person Fiction) genre, they are based on his media's appearances, his activities on online platforms (canon), mixed to imaginary elements (fanon). In these written works made by fans we can find information about their point of view on Conte as a PM, but over all related to their imagination and the typology of their support (Winter 2020).

The massive presence of fanfiction about Conte was an unexpected serendipity because it took place in another research that aspired to describe the cultural trauma of the pandemic through a narration format in its countless forms on Wattpad (Cantale 2021; Cantale 2022).

In order to map the basic typologies of Giuseppe Conte's fans, Wattpad research attempted to answer to some demands: to identify the main genres through the semantic network analysis or topic analysis; to record the development of the stories as a sign of affection towards the characters. The mining of data was made by a proprietary software, DataMiner. Due to its status of proprietary software that dialogues with a platform, it was not always possible to keep the control of all the questions and some operation were allowed only by subscription. The scraping operation gave us the data for a qualitative-quantitative analysis with a post-demographic perspective through the usage of small data. According to Turner (2010) «we can only learn so much by using media representations as the raw material for outlining the many ways through which celebrity - in our case political celebrity - has permeated the assumptions and discourses which inform the construction of cultural identity» (p. 19). He proposes to use and develop more and other types of material for this task, approaching celebrity through a more diverse range of methodological strategies, some of which are drawn from more empirical modes of enquiry. My approach is based on digital methods inspired by Rogers. This typology of research permits to overstep temporarily the dichotomous contraposition between quantitative and qualitative research. Working on small data means focusing on few of them that describe socio-cultural phenomena, starting from the productions or a quality indication of the user relations. In summary, we can say that research using small data is similar to zoom on a context of the analysis made on big data, because we focus on more detailed portions of the digital environments to obtain a deeper description. Moreover, prioritising a social network may turn out to beuseful for several reasons. Firstly, SNS are part of internet, to be more precise of social web, that we need to consider as a source and as a cultural content to examine (Rogers 2016 [2013]). It is a small part of the world: there are different ways to join a social community (Bakardjieva 2003). This interest in digital natives and matters is related to their birth environment: users of digital platforms join freely, creating contents and information (data) that are valuable for a researcher. In fact, we can evaluate these data as free from possible corruptions caused by direct studies, investigations and observations of the participants (Lupton 2015; Corbetta 2014 [1999]). From an epistemological point of view, it is obvious that the research made through digital systems might turn out to be lacking in terms of reliability, because digital data as a cultural artifact derive from the participative production and access, so it might be potentially influenced by environmental factors of political, economic and cultural nature (Lupton 2015). Following the sociomaterial approach, researches carried out with digital methods need to take into account that softwares and algorithms, along with platforms, take their shape from the social sphere and from the same digital devices, and they can condition and/or outdo our research: Rogers (2016 [2013]), for example, defines the algorithmic authority as the ability of search engines, which are considered the source, to exert power over the public agenda, but especially over the researcher.

A separate mention deserves the ethical debate related to the use of digital, fanmade materials for research purposes. As we said, Researchers resorting to digital methods draw on available online data defined as "public" (Lupton 2015; Marres 2017; Bennato 2015; Zimmer 2010), though often users are not aware of the uses and research purposes to which

their data are intended for. In the case of fan studies, relatively a young study field, the difficulty increases because of the social stigma that fans suffered as sub-culture of the consumption of a specific cultural product (Kozinets, p 7), especially by fanwriters who saw the fanfic writing process tagged as an exclusive practice for lonely and alienated women (Nielsen 2016).

Determining the risks and benefits of using public data is a complex process, especially when those data may incorporate vulnerable communities or privacy-sensitive issues. Fandom falls into these categories, not only because of the large number of LGBTQ participants, but also different stigmas are associated with fandom. Fan data also have a history of negatively affecting their owners when unearthed to the broader world (Dym, Fiesler 2020)

This study was made by keeping data anonymous, without quoting texts that could be associated to users, when it was possible.

Le bimbe di Conte on Facebook

In order to create a "phenonomological study" of Giuseppe Conte's fandom, it was decided to select two Facebook spaces with a high number of followers and degree of interactions. To highlight a "phenomenology" of Giuseppe Conte's fandom, two Facebook spaces with a high number of followers and interactions have been chosen. Focus is based mainly on the content performance (Carlo, 2017) of a fanpage and a private group as relevant spaces of interaction and individual representation in public space and private (for the group) (Boccia Artieri et al 2017)

We can discover some common and constant elements in the social spaces dedicated to the former Prime Minister:
• Use of the colloquial/vernacular name: the fanbase has been recognized with the nickname "bimbe di", likewise happened with the use of the suffix "-ers"[1]. It probably comes from the italian hip hop subculture, then it moved to the mainstream phenomena and tv fandom. It probably means that Conte's fandom presents similar traits with *standom*, by assimilating obsessive tones and attitudes, displaying the excessive fondness towards the PM who assumed the celebrity status.
• Number of followers and the quality of interactions: after 9th March, 2020 many FB and IG accounts dedicated to the former PM were opened, gaining a high number of followers. In some cases the engagement created by the admins and the intentionally ironic style allowed to the page to keep an adequate daily interactions' standard even after his resignation on 26th January, 2021.

Throughout the months of observation in the private group LE BIMBE DI CONTE <3[2], which took place from May 2020 to May 2021, it was proven a progressive growth in follower numbers until reaching 30K in May 2021, but also a contents' development in the discussion sessions. Watching directly the growth of the group allows us to deduce some thoughts about how this digital spaces can support acts of political activism, also thanks to the structural affordances (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2019, p34-38):

> because social networks impact the relationships between participants, for example, content exchanged may be redirected and retransmitted and even transformed, whether or not its visibility is increased. In this way, it can be sought and found on the net, help to mould the environment and even guide certain forms of commitment. In sum, the audiences which are present on social networks are active audiences who reconstruct and redistribute contents, within the framework of a shared culture (Lacasa 2020)

Therefore, the architectural structure of the group, along with the Admins' choices, let a more individual dimension stand out in the publication on the Facebook wall post. *LE BIMBE DI CONTE <3* group's contents raised together with the user numbers in the pandemic year, developing an ever more politicized tone, thanks also to the presence of *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement) activists. Posts still kept an apparently witty, ironic tone of voice, in accordance with the editorial guidelines of the group, even though the presence of political engagement nuances.

Actions exerted by the group members have been classified into three main categories: meme transmission; update; call to action.

Meme transmission, commonly glittered cards [3], has the purpose to turn on communication between the group members. Glittered cards function is memetic (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019), that is a cultural artifact from the pop-culture that embodies the viral reproduction of an idea, concept or idiom, allowing that singularity to become mainstream and to fit into the narration and collective imagination (Knobel and Lankshear 2007). Taking hit tv series that provided famous, memetic settings (Blackmore 2002; Mazzoleni Bracciale 2019; Tanni 2020) is a common practice between Conte's fans, like in (figure1) with references to *Fifty Shades of Greys* and *El Secreto by Puente Viejo* (The Secret of Puente Viejo, making a pun with the Spanish word *Secreto* and the Italian *Decreto*, meaning decree).

Another important operation is the mutual update on public and semi-public activities of the former Prime Minister. They are brief reports and re-posting of news about his speeches in tv shows or conferences, similar to mild, hybrid citizen journalism models. In fact, fans follow Giuseppe Conte in public events, taking photos, talking about his outfit and his partner's conduct, Olivia Paladino. The main goal of these *Bimbe* is always to take a selfie with Conte: we do not have to underestimate this activity regarding the analysis of the politician. The desire of a selfie, according to Karadimitriou and Veneti (2016), intensifies the confidence between him and their supporters, it lowers the boundaries caused by censorship because of its auto-promotional meaning, with a very high mediatic value. Furthermore, they are considered performative, usual manners required for the establishment of the same community (Cfr. Couldry 2003; cfr. Brilli 2018).

Figure 2 Collection of screenshoots from *LE BIMBE DI CONTE <3* private group

Last but not least, there is a "call to action" activity (figure 2): these are actual exhortations to gain digital support, by encouraging the other group members to get more likes or writing positive feedbacks in Giuseppe Conte's posts about delicate topics. In this occasion operations develop outside the group: it is common to find requests to join Conte's lives so as to cause a "flood" of affective feedbacks and positive comments. The purpose is to gain new and positive *threads*. This last aspect can be seen as a public will to recruit new people in *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) movement that supports Conte. These are relevant issues inside the M5S community to accomplish what is called as "participatory propaganda", namely a deliberate attempt to affect perceptions and involve normal people in the circulation of news according to proposer's demands (Wanless and Berk 2017).

Inside these private groups we can prove a certain leeway of people that describes a genuine political activism, but it ends up being polarised. The first step for the subscription and the following permanence following the guidelines establish two elements that are created to the construction of an ideal place in which a person can feel fully comforted by theirown opinions. As a consequence, there is a base of Conte's supporters in the group with a growing interest in political matters, but if we analyse only these spaces we tendto get stuck in an *echo chamber*. For this reason it seems essential to us a comparison with a fanpage.

Le Bimbe di Giuseppe Conte (@lebimbedigiuseppeconte) fanpage[4] has 122K followers and it opened in March 2020. Female admins run a private group called *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte*[5] as well, with 1,5K followers despite their poor time in regard to engagement. The founder and content editor has her own editorial policy, whilst accepting contents made by fans. Because of its structure, as we know, users can not publish freely their posts in a fanpage, their ideas can be expressed mainly in the comments section. Unlike a group, a fanpage is a public space for writing, it means that everyone who has a FB account can contribute through a direct interaction. Updating posts in a fanpage follows the same rules of the private group, even though it implies a closer attention to the meme transmission and glitter cards, rarely the call of action. The jokingly main purpose has never been neglected by the page, actually *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte* fanpage since its creation has been characterised by a more refined aesthetic style. Since the beginning it aimed at being a space to share memes, as it was declared on the profile picture (figure 3), in fact political humour:

1) it plays a relevant role in the political communication through social media, 2) It is a channel for a serious political discourse and for an effective political engagement, 3) it is widely used to break up and divide, nevertheless it has huge pro-active values and 4) it does not show any specific difference in style

– and sensitivty – among supportes of a political party and the opposite one. (my transl. Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019; "Chapter II")

It remains to see whether there is a tension «between participatory potentials, on one hand, and the dissolution of silliness into cynicism and exclusion, on the other» (Davis et al 2018)

Eventually the page activity introduced a fandom typical solution, that is the production and sale of merchandise branded as *le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte,* matching the aesthetic canon with slogans of Conte's *stan* (figure 3).

In the fanbase content production, two meaningful moments were recorded in terms of interactions, describing conveniently Giuseppe Conte's political rise and fall and assessing the incentive that broadcasting media are endowed with the creation of *acute event.*

Figure 3 @*lebimbedigiuseppeconte* Facebook fanpage's profile picture;

Figure 4 - Giuseppe Conte merchandise made by @*lebimbedigiuseppeconte* fanpage

These are 1) 2020 Good Friday live on Easter; 2) the beginning of the political crisis started by Matteo Renzi.

After 2020 Good Friday, it followed the production and publication of memes (figure 4). Conte's speech was related to new measures for a lockdown extension and some preview on the ESM-European Stability Mechanism deals. In this live the former PM attacked in a

harsh and public way Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, by accusing them of instigating the Parliament's internal divisions in a difficult period for Italy and Europe, as well as disinformation. Conte said some sentences that quickly rose the *social trend topics: «questo governo non lavora con il favore delle tenebre»; «questa volta lo devo dire, devo fare i nomi e i cognomi»*.

Another phase accompanied by a big creativity was related to the escalation in tension after Matteo Renzi's attack that undermined Conte Cabinet, starting from December 2020 and more impetuously in January 2021. The political crisis peaks with Conte's resignation on 26th January 2021, despite the no confidence motion by the Senate of the Republic. This period of political instability has been experienced with a lot of affection by the fanbase, and exactly in this phase we can perceive the authentic support to the political person, other than the administrative man.

So far it was found that the fanpage and the private group are different for their level of political engagement: in fact the former presents frequent interactions but weak connections, while the latter behaves like a real online community (Jones 1997; Bakardjieva 2003)
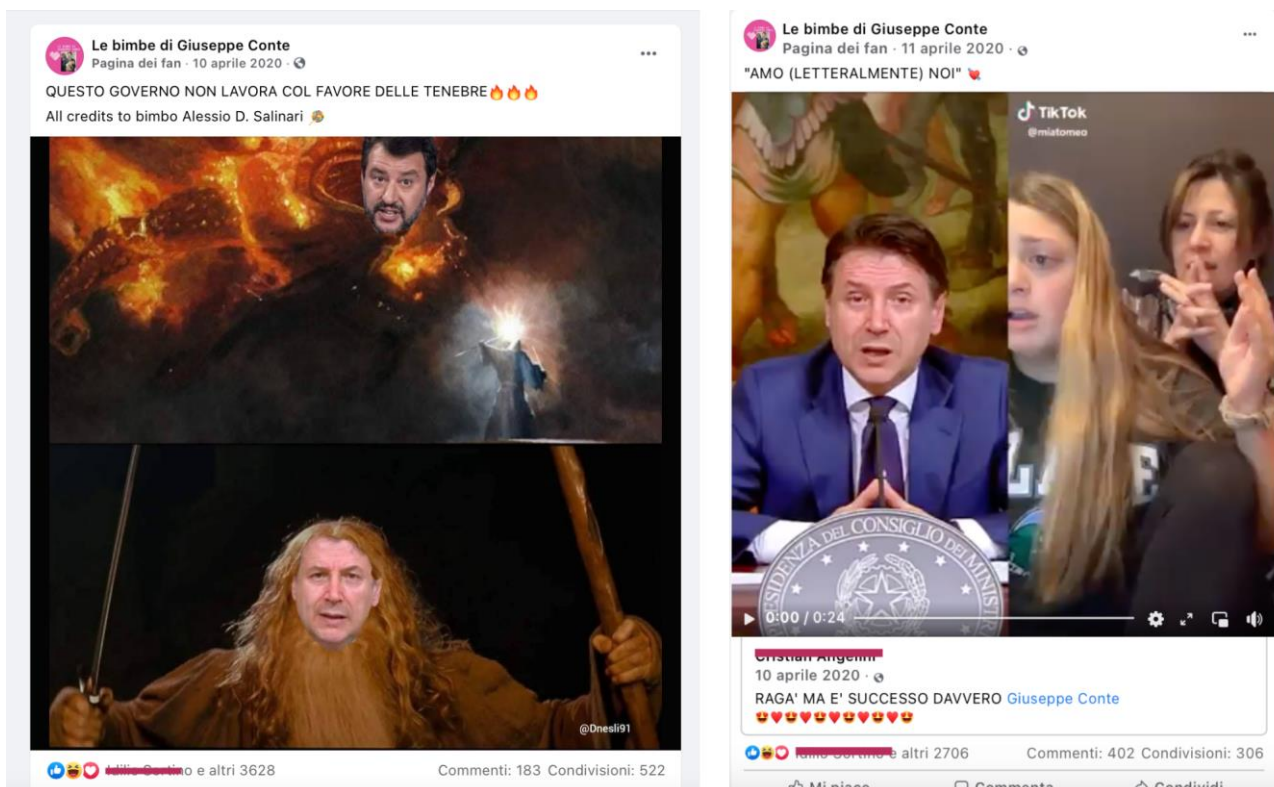

Figure 4 Collection of screenshots from *@lebimbedigiuseppeConte* Facebook fanpage

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Figure 5 - *Semantic Network Analysis* on #Giuseppe Conte hashtag. Retrieved from Gephi;

Wattpad: digital platform as a search tool

At the time of the research Wattpad counted about 80 million users and – according to the business reports – the 90% of them is part of the 20-40 years old range. Strategies to represent themselves are implemented by the creation of a public or semi-public profile asking the publication of a profile picture, presence of a name or AKA and a short biography with a geotag. Sharing interests, in this case lists of narrative, musical and gaming genres, is necessary to make new friends, based also on the reading and feedback exchanges. Among other platforms, Wattpad has a metric system to measure stories and authors' performances. The so-called wattpaders are Landow "*wreaders*" (1998) because they are digital writers, readers and they are able to recognize the hypertext. In other words we can say that Wattpad is a sort of digital container of stories feeded by the same users, by shaping them with myths and plot patterns currently existing (Cantale 2019), and its structure makes it a Social Network (boyd and Ellison 2008) and a platform (Caliandro and Gandini 2019). During the pandemic and especially in the first lockdown it was proven a renewed interest in Wattpad stories (Cantale 2021; Cantale 2022).

Figure 6 - Cloud word of Conte's stories hashtag made with wordclouds.com and redesigned by the author.

Fanfictions dedicated to Giuseppe Conte are widely esteemed in this first phase and most of the time they are classified in the young-adult genre (Cantale 2021; Cantale 2022). So as to understand if *Le bimbe di Conte* phenomenon on Wattpad can be associated to politicatal activism, like happened in Facebook groups, or if it was used by wattpadders for other topics such as climate crisis or sexuality, it was chosen to "follow" the hashtag #GiuseppeConte. This scraping phase covered a one-year timeframe around (April 2020 – May 2021). Unlike the first pandemic wave that characterized the production of stories, Since fall 2020 there were some events that surely affected wattpadders' creative expressions. There are two factors that determined Giuseppe Conte's political consensu on the one hand, a gradual reduction of time to spend on social networks on the other hand. Second scraping gave 113 stories dedicated to Giuseppe Conte, then they were submitted to a *semantic network analysis* and *topic analysis*.

These two techniques are extremely useful because they produced clusters in which we can find a cultural style and consumption patterns (figure 5-6)

To be more specific, we can highlight three productive clusters:
- *Politics*: in the middle of the label there is Conte with other themes like *#coronavirus* or *#PalazzoChigi*.
- *Lovers*: the main word is *#amore* (love)*,* Giuseppe Conte is a *#professore* (professor), a *#avvocato* (lawyer) or a *#supereroe* (superhero).
- *Italiantrash*: around the words *#Italia* and *#politica* we find the so-called *#Salvimaio* ship, references to *#Barbaradurso* (a renowned tv host often bound to trash tv shows) and some keywords pronounced by Conte as *#poderoso* (mighty) *#vigoroso* (vigorous).

In a second phase, *closed reading* of the abstracts led to the stories tags in few categories.
Romantic theme reveals to be the most relevant of the production, but we can consider the young-adult topic as an "expansion" of the Romantic genre, because its clearly erotic-sexual sphere is included in the generic love story narrative structure. In *Romance* and *Young Adult* genres the plot is always the same: the young lady meets Conte at Palazzo Chigi, a hospital or an university classroom, and they are overwhelmed by passion. Using a typical metaphor of fandom: a Mary (or Gary) Sue falls in love with a naughty guy, Giuseppe Conte. She loses her identity in front of the Alpha male, she is forced to compose herself again and she is punished with an attempt of redemption through the herotic passion, as written by Radway (1984). In these stories, Conte's public and political role represents only a narrative context that makes their love story start in a romantic background. Conte represents the powerful man like Christian Grey or Hardin Scott.

In order to confirm what *topic analysis* put into light, "trash" style became a pop category: there is an overturning of the canonic romantic story, paradoxical events and *love ménages* often occur between other well-known, Italian politicians or show business stars. The most

recurring and representative "*ships*" are Salvini-Di Maio, Meloni-Renzi or Conte-Harry Styles. Also in these cases, style is bound to a dismal and *cringe* atmosphere.

Humour category includes stories in which *le bimbe di Conte* are ironic about their being in love with the president. These stories are not tagged by their authors as trash, bur rather light-hearted, funny, often *no sense,* but they rarely aspire to become too much rough or with hot tones and words.
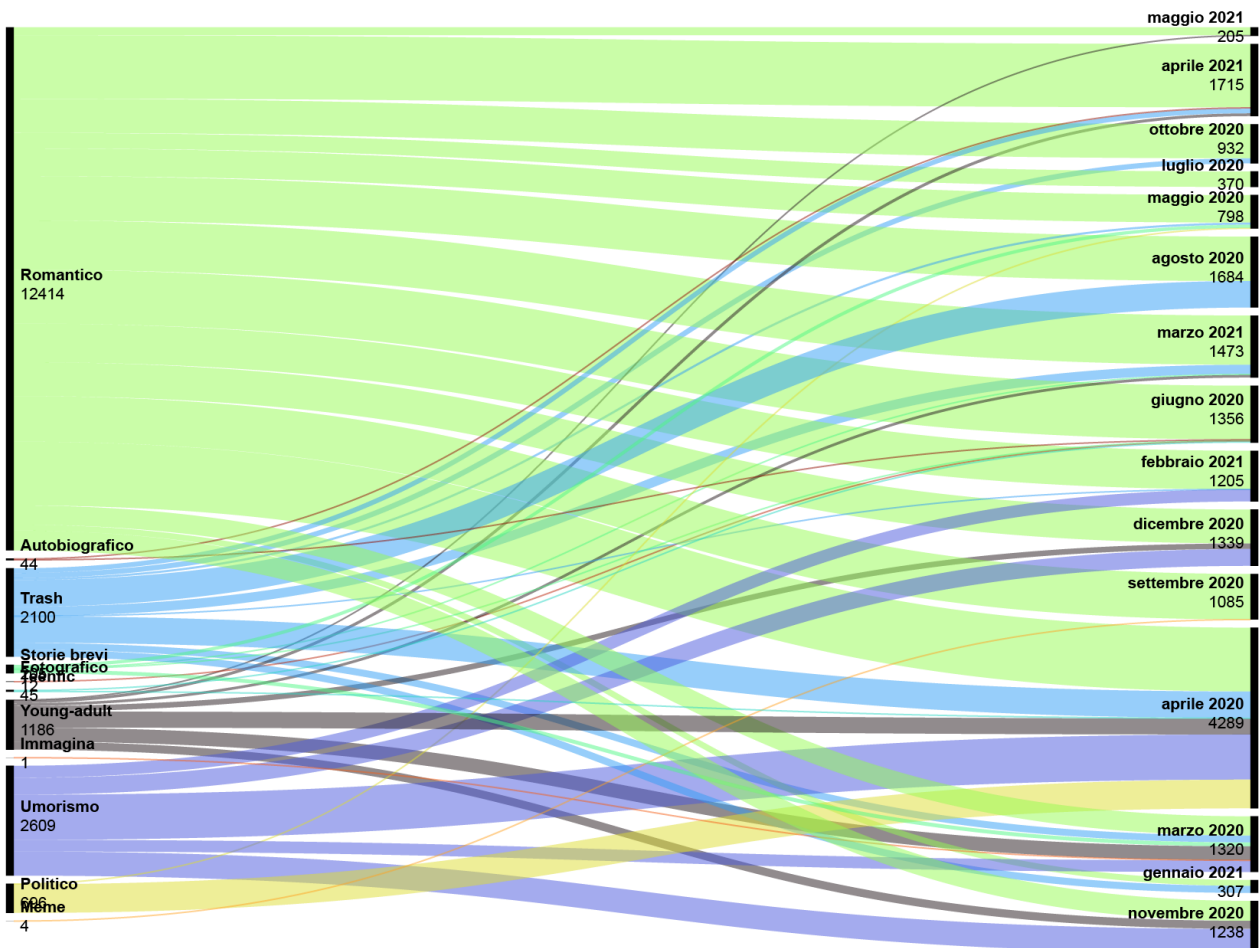

Figura 7 - Alluvial Diagram: Giuseppe Conte's fanfiction categories. Made with *RawGraph*

A last part of the analysis relates to the production time that slowed down from fall 2020 to April 2021. Watching closely at the updated stories, as it is shown by the chart (Figure 8), we can acknowledge that the interruption of the writing process matches approximately with the end of the first lockdown (April/May 2020). We can guess three interpretations to this phenomenon:
• Progressive disaffection towards the political and charismatic leader, as a result of the decline of visibility on broadcasting media and political leadership of the Country;

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- Common practice of wattpadders of *ongoing process* that allows them to add more and more chapters, turning their short stories into serial narrations.
- Silent abandonment of the platform that is used for pretextual aims like the "therapeutic" use or to "socialise" in the first phase of pandemic. Once this demandcame to an end people abandoned their profiles, moving to new digital spaces.
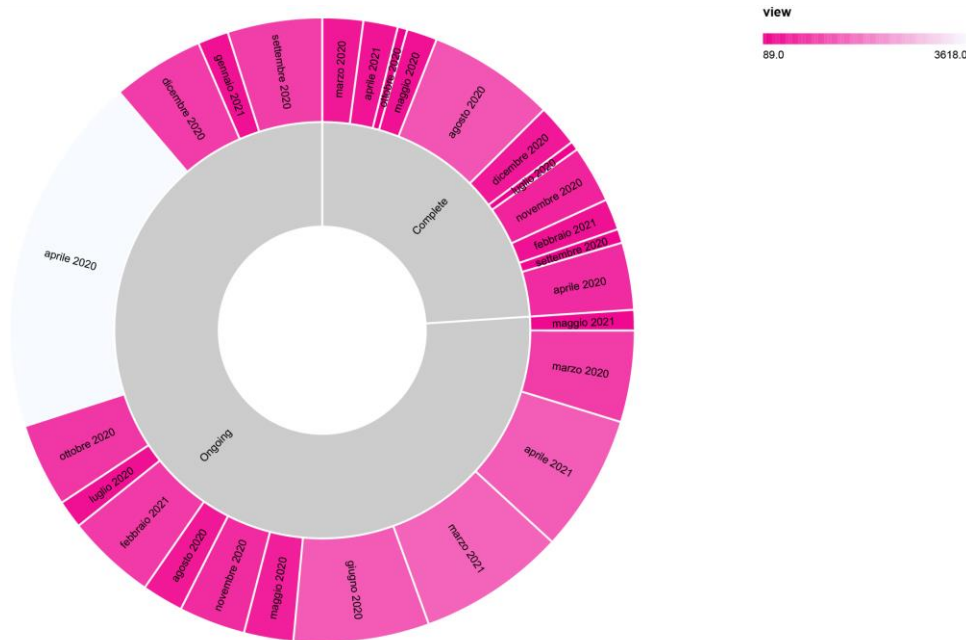

Figura 8 - Diagram showing the "Last Updated" with the intensity of visualisation. Made with *RawGraph*

Conclusion

In conclusion, Conte's fandom revealed itself following different paths according to the social-technical environment in which it showed up. Platforms behaved as participating actors in the web and content creation. Affordances and adaptations made by users for the control of technology tools set the rules and the community codes to join. There is more: they represent the way to the creation of «bubble democracy», meaning a targeted democracy characterised by self-reference and polarisation, in which it does not seem to exhist a substratum of a real political spectrum. Actually, this variety of ideas and media systems encourages the birth of codes and common symbols (Bentivegna, Boccia Artieri 2021)

In fact, as it was proven in Facebook fanpage, the intensity of their interactions is dictated by an editorial policy that, by declaring to not take part on political discourse, allowed the birth of participative models typical of *slacktivism*. Nevertheless, in the private group it was recorded more freedom in terms of publication and in the posts' comment section, to the point that "subversive" or entertaining party people were allowed to talk directly with the

potential voters. It is undoubtedly a disintermediate way to convert the fanbase of LE BIMBE DI CONTE <3 into a politicised one. Inside the group we observe a growing interest in the political and human profile, and at the same time a series of practices that we can identify in the remix culture (Lessig 2008).

If in Facebook, even though to a lesser degree, emotive participation in Conte's life assumes tones of political influence, in Wattpad it seems to prevail only artistic and creative needs, which are essential to bend reality on their own will to worship their object.. To paraphrase Dean (2017) rather than a politicised fandom, it isa matter to channel a huge quantity of "affection" towards a man perceived as famous, renowned and decisive.

Giuseppe Conte's fans in Wattpad still are in their early, genuine stage, with the presence of cheerful, comforting tones and a soft way of speaking. Pandemic was only a mere pretext, a narrative setting for the love affair with the PM. From a media analysis, these manifestations of great interest in Giuseppe Conte represent a symbol of a convergent culture, in which the process of appropriation, revision of aesthetic and *topoi* regarding mass media cultural productions, derived from genre literature and mainstream teen dramas, combined on one hand with the media presence of politicians in the classic broadcasting systems, on the other hand with the social casting (Jenkins 2006). Wattpadders recognize Giuseppe Conte's positive virtues, but community production does not seem politically oriented. In conclusion, to quote Sandvoss (2006) they are fans, and their fandom purpose changes from the main object to their own textual activity like, in our case, fanfiction. Moreover, Wattpad-like sets are characterised by the celebrity cult not involving a true political engagement, like Couldry and Markhman (2007) wrote.Inoltre gli ambienti come Wattpad sono generalmente caratterizzati dalla cultura della celebrità che come sostengono Couldry e Markhman (2007) non favoriscono necessariamente *political engagement*

As it was proven there is a need of personal expression through the sharing of ideas and projects in favor of common interest activities. (Bennet and Segerberg 2013; Boccia Artieri 2012), but it does not result in a real political act. This evolution of the politics' customisation (Corner and Pels 2003) became the expression of a "connective" action, with a leadership absence and a more centralized organization (cfr. Coleman 2016). These different inputs set in a horizontal way may have a specific political influence offline, but it is a lazy activism, just a way to feel itself engaged enough, when we like a page of we share a post (Bennet and Segerberg 2013, Coleman 2016).

Nota biografica

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Note

[1] Well-known examples are *Trekkers*, Star Trek fans, *Directioners* for the One Direction or *Stylers* for Harry Styles.

[2] https://www.facebook.com/groups/914622965665392/about (retrieved on December, 2021) promoting practices of political engagement

[3] These are representations of memes aimed at *normies.* The appearance of glitters and kitsch cards are typical of a typology of social media users: the so-called *boomers.*

[4]https://www.facebook.com/lebimbedigiuseppeconte (retrieved in July 2021). In December 2021, the fanpage turned out to be deleted.

[5]https://www.facebook.com/groups/223547192165638 (retrieved in December 2021)