

Affect and its role in the formation of Italian political fandoms on social media*

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This article explores the phenomenon of political fandom in Italy through an analysis of Instagram posts related to Giorgia Meloni, Prime Minister and leader of Fratelli d'Italia. Positioned within the discourse on the celebritization of politics, the study examines the integration of fan-like behaviours into political engagement, particularly within the algorithmically governed and fragmented spaces of contemporary social media. Drawing on Jonathan Dean's (2017) framework, the authors assess how these elements are articulated in digital interactions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative analysis of 383 Instagram posts under the hashtag #GiorgiaMeloni with qualitative visual and multimodal analysis. The findings show that the majority of fan-like content supporting Meloni is strategically created by political actors to build a sense of community and align followers with the leader's political agenda. Conversely, anti-fandom content by ordinary users predominantly critiques Meloni in a personal or political capacity, often lacking the communal aspects typical of fandom. The study introduces the concept of *fandomesque*, a genre of fan-like content generated primarily by political actors rather than ordinary users. Unlike spontaneous fandom, *fandomesque* practices blend affective expressions with strategic political objectives, challenging traditional assumptions about the nature of fan-like behaviours. The analysis reveals that while anti-fandom content dominates among ordinary users, reflecting personal and political disapproval of Meloni, *fandomesque* content is largely produced by political actors seeking to shape a supportive digital discourse around the leader. The authors argue that Dean's framework requires adaptation to capture the nuances of digital political fandoms in the social media age. Specifically, the interplay of parasocial relationships and strategic motives necessitates an expanded theoretical lens that incorporates insights from celebrity politics, social media studies, and affect theory. This integrative approach enables a deeper understanding of digital political fandoms as dynamic phenomena shaped by individual affective attachments and collective strategic efforts within fragmented online spaces. This research contributes to the broader literature on political communication by highlighting the interplay between celebrity-like performances by politicians and the fan-like behaviours of their supporters. It also underscores the importance of distinguishing between spontaneous fandom and *fandomesque* practices to better understand how political actors leverage fan culture to achieve strategic goals. The findings provide a foundation for future empirical and theoretical studies on the role of affective publics and parasocial dynamics in political engagement on social media.

Keywords: political fandom, visual analysis, social media affect, affective engagement, celebrity politics

* Article submitted on 20/11/2024. Article accepted on 15/06/2025.

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Introduction

The topic of the celebritization of politics has been a pivotal part of the scholarly debates on the evolution of political communication since television became a key part of media ecosystems in Western democracies. The celebritization of politics can be understood as a multifaceted process entailing the entering of celebrities into politics, and the cultivation of “celebritized” styles of self-presentation by politicians (Street, 2003), but also the engagement in fan-like behaviours by constituents in their interaction with politicians (Dean & Andrews, 2021; Van Zoonen, 2004). Connectedly, John Street’s (2004) identification of the archetype of the celebrity politician, a figure whose fame and behaviour resemble that of traditional celebrities, but are employed in the political field, became essential to scholars in the field. Furthermore, such studies have acquired further significance since the widespread adoption of social media has brought new forms of celebrity into politics (Ott & Dickinson, 2019). This article focuses on another aspect of the celebritization of politics that is relatively understudied when compared to the vast literature on celebrity politics: political fandoms. Specifically, we are interested in digital articulations of political fandoms.

Political fandoms can be understood as collective social phenomena characterised by supporters (or detractors, for anti-fandom) of a politician articulating their attitudes towards them with behaviours that are normally relegated to the relationship established by admirers with their preferred celebrities. This study seeks to further current understandings of political fandoms by looking at the Italian political landscape, to set the ground for the development of a cohesive body of literature focusing on fan-like practices employed by supporters of high-visibility politicians.

To achieve this aim, this article is structured as follows. First, we introduce Jonathan Dean’s (2017) framing of political fandoms, the theoretical ground upon which this research is developed. Specifically, we focus on his identification of four essential characteristics of political fandoms: presumption, affect, community, and contestation. Second, we focus on affect, reading Dean’s reflections in conjunction with what social media scholars have said about the role of affect in social media interactions. Specifically, we stress the relevancy of this concept, which is employed to better understand political fandoms, social media phenomena at large, and how fame is constructed and maintained on digital platforms. Third, we focus on how recent findings on the latest transformations of social media platforms have criticised current understandings of digital communities, the ways they form and the very forms they take online. In few words, the hierarchical, formal communities such as Facebook groups or the horizontal entities that were Twitter’s networks in the early days of Web 2.0 show characteristics that cannot be traced in the highly fragmented, informally constituted and volatile communities that form spontaneously on contemporary social media platforms. We argue that the integration of these concepts in research designs focused on collective entities such as political fandoms is much needed, especially for our aim of furthering current understandings of digital political fandoms. Based on these reasonings,

we propose two research questions to tackle the study of digital political fandoms in empirical terms:

RQ1. Considering the liminality of digital spaces, does Jonathan Dean's understanding of political fandom fit their study in the context of contemporary social media?

RQ2. If not, what theoretical and methodological tools can help us bridge the gap between Dean's framework and digital articulations of political fandom?

Connectedly, we present and employ a methodology that highlights the tensions between Dean's approach and the complex and nuanced context of contemporary social media. Briefly, this method allows us to develop a preliminary, quali-quantitative analysis of the articulations of the political fandom revolving around Italian politician Giorgia Meloni on Instagram. Finally, we propose our key takeaways as we set the ground for the development of a typology to identify and codify expressions of political fandom online distinguishing them from content shared by actors that may have more than an attachment to a politician to justify their engagement in fan-like behaviours. Given the blurriness of the very concept of affectivity that we reflect upon in the dedicated section, we focused on developing a sound theoretical ground that integrates the analysis of affectivity with the identity of those publishing fan-like, political content online. Thanks to this analysis, we identify a new genre, tangent to but not completely fitting within the realm of fandom, that we named *fandomesque*. Thus, our main contention is that even if affect plays a crucial role in political fandom phenomena, its measurement can potentially mislead social media analyses on the topic due to the pervasiveness of affectivity in all social media interactions.

A mix of prosumption practices, communal identity and affective relationships

To properly address the study of political fandoms, we need to consider the shifts that came with the advent of televised politics and impacted how constituents and candidates interact with each other in contemporary mediascapes. It was observed that the affordances of audiovisual media shaped voting preferences, as constituents started to be increasingly interested in the previously inaccessible intimate aspects of the private lives of politicians (Meyrowitz, 1977). What was once inaccessible, such as the everyday life, mannerisms, and personalities of candidates are now on continuous display thanks to camera lenses and continuous media coverage (Meyrowitz, 1986). In a nutshell, voters shifted their preferences to be increasingly based on the individual characteristics of the politicians, and less focused on ideological elements.

As a result, politicians in Western democracies tend to become savvier in employing communication strategies related to marketing principles, than they are at giving a precise

ideological footprint to their political activity and to their parties (Manin, 1997; Needham, 2005).

We interpret political fandom as looking at the other side of the outcome of this process: how constituencies adapted and reacted to celebrity politics. Cornel Sandvoss (2013) first conceptualised political fandoms as communities of politically active citizens engaging in fan-like performances within their political environments, mainly referring to the production and reproduction of texts that is also typical of other fandoms. However, this articulation of political fandom has become an object of interest from media scholars relatively recently, and the works produced often make a case for the need to reconsider the relevance of the phenomenon (e.g.: Antenore, 2020; Cantale, 2022; Campus et al., 2024; Dean & Andrews, 2021). Thus, the development of a cohesive theoretical framework based on a methodologically varied set of empirical observations is still in its early stages. This is especially evident in comparison with studies on the overlaps of politics and celebrity mentioned above, and with those on non-political characters leveraging their fame to advocate for candidates or societal changes (Gray et al., 2007).

This article builds upon current understandings of political fandom phenomena integrating them with insights drawn from the fields of celebrity politics and social media studies. Specifically, we identified Dean's (2017) synthesis of the defining characteristics of political fandom as the theoretical ground providing the necessary tools in the identification of posts expressing a fan-like attitude. Dean identifies four essential characteristics of political fandoms: (1) production and consumption, (2) affect, (3) community, and (4) contestation. As a premise, Dean considers these three dimensions to apply equally to fandom and anti-fandom.

Production and consumption

Members of a fandom are not simply passive consumers of political content: they shape the politician's image as they create and disseminate digital content articulating their parasocial relationship with them and other fans. This participatory culture fosters their sense of ownership and influence, establishing a dynamic relationship where fans and politicians mutually influence each other. This element of "prosumption" is a crucial component of fandoms, that result in a two-way flow within media, generating a "socially produced reciprocity" (Stavrakakis, 2015).

Affect

Affect can be described as the emotionally charged mechanism that pushes people to act and react in relation to others (Tomkins, 2014). Essentially, it can be seen as a change in the body-mind state that pushes those experiencing it to undertake an action or communicate a message. In other words, affect resides in a spectrum that can include

multiple emotional and bodily responses. Thus, as affect resides the single elements composing an affect-based interaction tend to be indeterminable when derived from the messages they push people to put forward (Clough, 2007). For Dean (2017), its role in political fandoms is to be found in the fans' motivating factor being their strong emotional attachment to a politician. This attachment can be driven by positive feelings in the case of supporters of the politician, and it can be driven by negative ones in the case of detractors.

It is important to clarify that the complex epistemological matters related to current conceptualisations of affectivity do not pertain to our study. Rather, we are interested in better identifying and analysing the messages circulating on social media that are relevant to political fandom phenomena. Nonetheless, the affective dimension cannot be overlooked as it has also been identified as a key element of social media interactions. Zizi Papacharissi describes social media as made of affective publics, meaning: “(...) *networked public formations that are mobilised and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment*” (2015, p. 125). Building upon these observations that put affectivity at the centre of digital political fandoms, we considered the identification of the presence or absence of affectivity and its directionality pertaining to a political character or not, a necessary element for our analysis.

Community

The third key element of political fandoms is the awareness of fans of being part of a larger community of fans. This communal element is crucial as it provides a supportive network where fans can exchange ideas, reinforce shared beliefs, and collectivise their supportive action for the politician. In other words, Dean argues that a political fandom is fully constructed only if its members see themselves as members of an imagined community (Anderson, 2006). It is important to note that the very notion of imagined communities has been reframed when it comes to their relation to digital environments, given the increasing disintegration of the materialities that shape communities offline. Specifically, imagined communities have been reconceptualised as entities that can put formal borders and hierarchical, strictly formal structures in tension, as the relative networks are constantly recreated and repurposed (Gruzd et al., 2011). Hence, we see the communities established by political fans as potentially fragmented, liminal spaces, and their members as individuals inhabiting, contaminating and being contaminated as they overlap and interact with multiple virtual spaces.

Contestation

The fourth dimension inherent to political fandoms according to Dean, is the element of contestation. Specifically, he argues that political communities, fandoms included, can be seen as collectives compacted around a series of shared representative claims. As much as the substantiation of the contestation element can be a rather chaotic and blurry process,

according to Dean it is important to state its inherent presence in any fandom to be able to define it as political. That is, because even whenever no precise claim is consistently being presented by fans, their preferred politician must stake claims throughout their political activity. Thus, fans of a politician are inherently endorsing the claims that this politician is making. Given the inherent nature of this element in any political attack or endorsement to a politician, we consider it present in any message showing an affectively charged attitude towards the leader. In other words, following Dean's interpretation we considered those showing a fan or anti-fan behaviour to be respectively supporting or opposing their agendas. Moreover, given the importance of contestation in Dean's framework, we deemed it necessary to distinguish in our analysis between fan-like statements centred around political themes and messages whose political aspect was implicitly transmitted.

In the following sections, we read the dimensions described by Dean in conjunction with the latest findings on how social media affordances impacted how constituents interact with the political dimension in the digital sphere. We mainly focus on the need to extend current understandings of the ways affect is expressed, and communities take form in the context of digital political fandoms.

The pervasive affectivity of social media fame

The pervasiveness of affect in social media spaces was apparent even in the early stages of the spread of social media usage, when high-visibility personalities started reaching fame status online constructing and maintaining public personae that differed greatly from those typical of Hollywood actors or rockstars (Senft, 2008). This difference resides in the exploitation of the disintermediated communication allowed by Social Networking Sites (also SNS) performed by internet celebrities. Differently from legacy media celebrities, they scarcely tap into the extraordinariness of their fame. Preferably, internet celebrities present themselves as ordinary people to foster their followers' feelings of mutual trust and personal connection towards them (Abidin, 2017a; Khamis et al., 2017). The outcome of this strategy, when employed successfully, is the establishment of a parasocial relationship, where followers feel that they can trust their preferred celebrity just like they can trust their loved ones.

These shifts in fame mechanics have influenced political communication as well, as leaders turned to social media to increase their reach and gain more control over the construction of their public persona. An example of this transition is Matteo Salvini, party leader of the League, a far-right, nativist political organisation. Salvini has been defined as an example of an "influencer politician", due to his adoption of social media vernaculars and heavy use of social media (Starita & Trillò, 2022). Most importantly, Salvini is an example of a political leader that brings elements characteristic of his communication on social media and integrates them in his public appearances both on other media and during live events (Diamanti & Pregliasco, 2019; Mazzoni & Mincigrucci, 2021). This results in an extremely

informal style of communication, the use of simplified and emotionally charged tropes, and a continuous coverage of his offline activities to fuel his digital presence (Carone & Cavallaro, 2019).

Displays of political fandom mirrors these shifts impacting celebrity politics. As politicians increasingly adopt celebrity vernaculars, constituents relate to high-visibility politicians in ways akin to those normally used to interact with non-political celebrities. Thus, to better understand political fandoms we now move to reflect on affectivity, and on the role of emotionality in shaping social media communication.

The study of digital political fandom through the lenses of affect and parasociality

We have already mentioned Zizi Papacharissi's conceptualisation of digital platforms as sets of affective publics, where people engage and disengage with each other through emotionally charged expressions. Building upon this notion, Crystal Abidin (2021) expanded on Papacharissi's work to integrate key trends that have started to characterise social media after Papacharissi's work. To summarise, Abidin argues that to better identify, understand and describe the forms taken by affective publics on contemporary social media, researchers need to fully and explicitly integrate in their works some elements that became central to the governance of social media. In other words, she states that the fake and bite news, the perpetual content saturation, and the hyper-competitive attention economies that are established and reinforced by algorithmic governance on social media have shaped them to become sets of "social silos": blocks of information inaccessible and unknown to users not specifically interested in and looking for a specific type of content (Tiidenberg et al., 2021).

In such virtual spaces formed by arrays of sub-spaces and sub-amcommunities, users adapted to develop a "silosociality", repurposing their content and practices to be effective despite the ephemerality and the reduced discoverability that comes with this infrastructure. The result of this collective effort is the establishment of what Abidin defines as refracted publics: *"(1) the space constructed out of the desire for refracted perceptions and (2) the collection of subversive or circumvention practices as a result of analogue and algorithmic manipulations of vision and access"* (2021, p. 1).

We argue that this notion of refracted publics can be a great fit for the study of political fandoms. With parasociality, we refer to a concept first defined by media scholars as a form of psychological displacement: the friend-like relationships that are constructed by fans with their preferred celebrities serve as a substitute for interactions in the real world that may be unsatisfactory or absent in the fans' lives (Evans & Wilson, 1999; Marshall, 2014).

Most importantly, despite the identification of parasociality in these terms being consolidated in media psychology, there have been studies showing that parasociality encompasses other affect-based mechanisms, beyond the mere psychological

displacement that was originally considered its key motivator. In a nutshell, the parasocial element in fan-celebrity relationships implies that we should look at the fans and their practices as responding to affect-based mechanisms, rather than being a mere adherence to social and economic constructs. Fans should be conceived as wannabe friends (or enemies, in the case of anti-fandom) of their preferred (or despised) celebrity, with all the complex, multi-layered sociality that comes with affect-based relationships (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011). In other words the fan turns from being part of a plethora of consumers and takes an active role in the processes of cultural production that characterise their object of adoration or abhorrence (Hills, 2016). The lens of social media as affective publics allows us to look at such parasocialities addressing the affect-based mechanisms that characterise them.

Arguably, these are aspects that ongoing studies on social media cannot ignore, as they are shifting the principles according to which content is created and circulated in digital settings. A clear example of this is provided by silosociality, which can prevent the scalability of social media interactions. As a result, the potential virality of content published on social media is reduced, as it is increasingly published only to be seen by some, specific eyes (Abidin, 2021). In other words, the objective of social media users in the context of refracted publics is that of surviving by pushing their content to be seen only by those that already want to see it. Finally, as much as Abidin's observations were rooted in her analysis of fringes on digital platforms, we deem them employable for the study of any phenomenon on contemporary social media. That is, due to the increasing influence that the algorithmic governance and partiality of access have on all virtual spaces established on social media since the spread of use of TikTok and the adaptation of other platforms to its affordances (Reviglio & Agosti, 2020; Zurovac et al., 2023).

Wrapping up, we observed that the celebritization of politics entails an increasing adoption of celebrity-like performances undertaken by politicians, but also brought significant shifts in the behaviours of some constituents, as they borrow the vernaculars of fandoms to support their preferred politicians. Underpinning both these processes is what can be reduced to a shift in the communicative repertoires of both constituents and candidates. In other words, the celebritization of politics turned leaders into celebrities and supporters into fans. To address these matters in empirical terms, we propose to consider the following as our operational definition of digital political fandoms: *spontaneously emerged, virtual spaces constructed by social media users undertaking fan-like performances to relate with political characters*. These spaces share the key dimensions of all virtual spaces established on contemporary SNSs: fragmentation, volatility and adaptation to algorithmic governances and affordances shaping the vernaculars of digital platforms.

In practical terms, we hypothesise that these virtual spaces can be individuated in the communities constructed by the content published on social media under the same hashtag (Dawson, 2020). As much as said hashtag may contain also (and most likely mainly) not fan-like content, we argue that the fans' decision to employ certain hashtags is a sign of their awareness that their content will construct and fuel said space together with that

published by other, like-minded users, to participate to a larger debate that ultimately contributes to construct a certain public image of the candidate the employed hashtag refers to. It is true that to tackle the topic in this way we will find the challenges posed by the lack of clearly identifiable fandoms that are defined and conceptualised by the very fans composing them. However, we also sustain that these non-hierarchical, fragmented spaces are where most fans engage in public discourses and express their fan-like attitudes with appropriate behaviours. This perspective aligns with Abidin's (2021) conceptualisation of refracted publics (and our repurposing of such notion) that social media often force their own users to adapt to. Hence, to focus on such spaces would pave the way for new and original research pathways, as it takes into full consideration the specific affordances of the currently most widespread social media platforms.

Analysing Meloni's fandom on Instagram

Wrapping up, Dean (2017) conceptualises political fandoms as composed by the prosumption practices of the members of the fandom that are underpinned by their feeling a sense of community with fellow members and due to their affective attachment to the object of their fandom. As we have described above, the reading of Dean's theoretical framework through the lenses of the latest findings on the impact of social media affordances on fame mechanics and political communication phenomena shows some tensions. Hence, we deem it necessary to employ Dean's framework to build upon it developing analytical tools and theoretical conceptualisations that allow us to read the phenomenon of digital political fandoms coherently with the ways content is produced and disseminated on digital platforms.

Before moving on to the empirical section of this article, a brief background information about the leader this study focuses on seems necessary. In this article, we analyse the fandom practices related to Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, or FdI) and Prime Minister at the time of writing this article. We selected this leader for a twofold reason: on one hand she is the leader of the party that obtained the highest percentages of seats in the latest general elections of 2022; on the other hand, even before becoming Prime Minister, Meloni's public persona has increasingly been related to her social media presence. Considering this, it should not come as a surprise that Meloni has already been a highly interesting case study for political communication scholars, especially those focusing on social media (i.e.: Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Martella & Roncarolo, 2022).

In a nutshell, given her visibility as Prime Minister and party leader, and how relevant her social media presence is to understand her electoral endeavours, we deemed the fandom related to Giorgia Meloni a fitting unit of analysis to test the validity of our classification. In the remainder of this article, we test the validity of our deductions on the essential characteristics of political fandom content circulating on social media. As we show in the

discussion, there are some elements that could only be discerned thanks to the empirical observations that follow, that should be considered for future attempts to conceptualise political fandoms on a theoretical level.

Method

To select our sample, we retrieved metadata (date of publication, URL) through the Python-based package Instaloader (instaloader.github.io) for the posts published by public accounts on Instagram using the hashtag: #GiorgiaMeloni in March 2024. Subsequently, we manually extracted all still images published by the politician using the URLs, resulting in an initial dataset of 1,703 images. Based on Dean’s (2017) framework, we deductively devised a classification of political fandom content, as shown in Table 1. In a nutshell, we hypothesise that each post will show predominantly one of the three key aspects that we identified above as pivotal to digital articulations of political fandom. Additionally, this classification follows Dean’s argument that supportive fandom and anti-fandom share the same working mechanisms. Thereafter, we excluded images that did not contain any of the features included in our classification. In other words, we excluded all posts whose photos and captions did not contain a reference to the leader, their personal or political character, or alternatively did not refer to the community of supporters of the leader. As a result, we identified 383 posts for our analysis.

FANDOM OR ANTI-FANDOM	CATEGORY	DEFINITION
Fandom	Personal Admiration	The post showcases the publisher’s positive recognition of the leader based on qualities or features that are not explicitly linked to their political role
	Political Approval	The post expresses the publisher’s approval of the politician due to their political role, statements or actions
	Support to the community of the backers of the leader	The post demonstrates the publisher’s positive recognition of the community of supporters of the leader
Anti-Fandom	Personal Disdain	The post criticises the leader for elements that are unrelated to their job

	Political Disapproval	The post expresses the publisher's disapproval of the politician due to their political role, statements or actions
	Antagonism towards the community of backers of the leader	The post addresses the community of supporters of the leader showing the publisher's negative attitude towards them

Table 1. Categories codifying the attitude of the publisher towards Meloni, and related definitions

Another coding layer was added, to identify what type of accounts were publishing such posts. Hence, the resulting codebook categories with relative definitions are shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below. After a pilot phase, three coders (one internal to the writing of this article, two external) conducted an intercoder reliability test on a sample of 50 images extracted from the corpus, passing Krippendorff's alpha threshold for exploratory studies ($\alpha=0.746$).

CATEGORY	DEFINITION
Ordinary User	The publisher is an individual with no visible relation to the leader or his/her party
Political Actor	The account belongs to an individual or collective political organisation (i.e.: professional politician, political candidate, to a party, or to the local branch of a party)
Non-professional news accounts	The account belongs to someone whose identity is not clear, they share memetic content, or alternatively news events
Political (anti)Fan Communities	The account belongs to someone whose identity is not clear, they share content to support or oppose to certain political parties or politicians or to the political elite in general
Media & Celebrities	The account belongs to journalist, entertainment celebrity, influencer or is the official page of national or local newspapers, news websites, tv channels, radio, televisions or radio programs, magazines regularly registered in the Italian courts

Table 2. Categories codifying the different types of accounts publishing the analysed sample

To better understand and test the validity of our classification, we then moved to develop a qualitative focus, analysing a photo for each category of fandom and anti-fandom content. Specifically, we selected an example for each category shown in Table 1 based on which type of users were most contributing to it according to the categories shown in Table 2. For our qualitative analysis, we employed the well-established framework for visual analysis provided by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in “Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design”. In particular, we looked at their conceptualisations of represented participants, modality, and circumstances related to space and accompaniment, to correctly identify and

analyse the symbolic processes attributed by the publisher to their post. These analytical concepts can be described as follows:

- Represented subjects: all human and non-human objects occupying a pivotal part of the framed space in a photograph. Precisely, key aspects shaping the significance of represented subjects are their collocation in the framed space and their positioning compared to the camera.
- Modality: a photo can be of high modality (meaning it is an accurate representation of whatever it depicts) or low modality¹ (meaning that the representation shown in the photo has been altered).
- Circumstances of accompaniment: for this article, we refer specifically to the relations that represented participants, show in the shot, with the leader but also among each other.
- Spatial circumstances: the setting the subjects are immersed in, and background elements discernible in a shot, that may confer additional meanings to the shot.

Moreover, given the multimodality inherent to the posts published on Instagram, we integrated this approach with the principles of multimodal analysis (Kress, 2013), to analyse the caption attached to the shared photo in each post. It is important to clarify that in line with multimodal analysis principles, the caption was never analysed as something meaningful on its own, but it was only understood and interpreted in relation to the photo it was attached to by its publisher. However, its interpretation is crucial in our understanding of the dominant message codified by a single post. As described by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, pp. 76-78), a visual can codify multiple messages within a single narrative process. In other words, more than one meaning can be conveyed with a single image. However, the analysis of the attached caption brings further elements to interpret the publisher's own interpretation of their post and clarify the pillar upon which their narrative process is constructed. Hence, by looking at the texts attached to these posts, we can infer which meaning is pivotal for the users sharing the post we are analysing.

Quantitative summary

In Tables 3 and 4 below, we summarise the coding results for the 383 posts we identified as showing a parasocial relationship between the publisher and Meloni. These 383 posts are our selected sample. Starting from Table 3, roughly a third (125 posts, 32.64% of the selected sample) of these posts are published by ordinary users. The rest of the sample is mainly composed of posts published by political actors (109 posts, 28.46%), and by accounts covering news in a partisan, subjective or humoristic way (83 posts, 21.67%). The top-down managed fan accounts (re)producing and collecting user content and diffusing it

are at the fringes of the selected sample, as with 34 relevant posts they are accountable only for 8.88% of the selected sample.

Looking at the predominance of anti-fandom in their subsample, these are arguably communities opposing Meloni, either as the result of a personal dislike or due to their support of Meloni's opponents. Moreover, the type of content published by each actor can vary substantially. As shown in Table 3, 84.80% of all posts published by ordinary users is anti-fandom. The balance between fandom and anti-fandom is virtually reversed for political actors, whose posts were critical towards Meloni only in 11.93% of the instances. The other types of actors predominantly publish anti-fandom in varying degrees, but none published predominantly supportive fandom as political actors did.

	Ordinary User	Political Actor	Nonprofessional news accounts	Political (anti)Fan Communities	Media & Celebrities	<i>Total</i>
Fandom	15.20%	88.07%	8.43%	14.71%	43.75%	36.81%
Anti-Fandom	84.80%	11.93%	91.57%	85.29%	56.25%	63.19%
<i>Total</i>	100.00% 125	100.00% 109	100.00% 83	100.00% 34	100.00% 32	100.00% 383

Table 3. Fandom/anti-fandom per type of publisher (Column percentage/N)

With the data shown in Table 4, we are able to discern more closely what type of attitude is more commonly shown by each type of publisher. For ordinary users, the most common type of attitude is *personal disdain* towards Meloni, with a total of 66 posts, that are more than half (52.80%) of all the posts these users published. Political actors publish consistently more fandom in relation to other publishers. Specifically, they consistently express support for the political actions of Meloni (35.78% of their subsample) and for the community of backers of the leader (33.94% of the selected sample). Additionally, we can observe that the 96 posts published by political actors in support of Giorgia Meloni compose 88.07% of their subsample, and 68.09% of the fandom posts identified in the sample. This means that the bulk of posts showing a parasocial relationship that is in approval of Meloni is predominantly composed by actors that are actively engaging with the political arena as party employees or as elected officials. Interestingly, the most frequent type of posts in this subsample articulates the publishers' approval of her political actions (39 posts), followed by posts expressing adherence to the community of Meloni's supporters (37 posts).

Coding Category	Ordinary User	Political Actor	Nonprofessional News Accounts	Political (anti)Fan Communities	Media & Celebrities	Total
Personal Admiration	7.20% 9	18.35% 20	1.20% 1	2.94% 1	15.63% 5	9.40% 36
Political Approval	4.00% 5	35.78% 39	6.02% 5	2.94% 1	18.75% 6	14.62% 56
Support to the community of the backers of the leader	4.00% 5	33.94% 37	1.20% 1	8.82% 3	9.38% 3	12.79% 49
Personal Disdain	52.80% 66	1.83% 2	39.76% 33	23.53% 8	9.38% 3	29.24% 112
Political Disapproval	28.00% 35	10.09% 11	46.99% 39	47.06% 16	43.75% 14	30.03% 115
Antagonism towards the community of backers of the leader	4.00% 5	None	4.82% 4	14.71% 5	3.13% 1	3.92% 15
Total	100% 125	100% 109	100% 83	100% 34	100% 32	100% 383

Table 4. Attitude towards the leader per type of publisher (Column percentage/N)

Based on the data summarised in Table 3 and Table 4, we can lay out some basic characteristics of the fandom participating to the liminal space of #giorgiameloni on Instagram. First, top-down managed communities of political fans are merely at the margins of #giorgiameloni, and of the fan-like content circulating in it, as they contribute to less than 10% of the sample, with precisely 32 posts. Second, anti-fandom content in opposition to Meloni is more present than supportive content. Third, it seems that the supportive, fan-like content in this space is scarcely produced and circulated by ordinary users, whose main contribution to the fan-like practices related to the leader belong to the anti-fandom category.

To better understand how the fan-like practices are articulated by ordinary users and by political actors we turn to a qualitative focus based on a few selected examples for each type of attitude shown towards the leader. The examples were selected based on which between these two types of publishers (ordinary people and political actors) shared the most content relevant to each type of attitude. Thus, we are able to better understand the predominant characteristics for the posts present in each category, and to gather insights on the implications of politicians and parties sharing fan-like content online.

Qualitative analysis



Figure 1. Example of a post showing personal support for the leader

Figure 1 is an example of a post sharing appreciation for the leader without referring to her political role in any specific way, thus classified as “personal fandom”. Figure 1 shows a photo of Meloni surrounded and embraced by a group of supporters, publisher included, at what looks like the side stage of a public rally, as suggested by the banner held by one of the supporters. The leader and those surrounding her are smiling,² as they look towards the camera. The picture has a high modality: seemingly unaltered, it depicts the represented moment in a realistic way. The caption states: “Freedom of speech, freedom of mind, freedom of mobility”, followed by blue heart emoji, and it closes with a quote from Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci stating her resilience in standing up against those opposing her freedom of expression. In other words, the caption highlights the user’s appreciation for the value of liberty and there are no specific mentions of Meloni’s actions as Prime Minister or party leader.

The user is associating specific values to Meloni’s image. Hence, the main message codified by the publisher in the post is the association of the value of freedom with Meloni’s character, something that goes beyond her role as a politician and directly attributes these values to her as an individual. Additionally, the publisher displays their attendance at a public gathering alongside the leader, emphasising their value-driven deep connection with her. Thus, as much as Figure 1 is a personal fandom post, we can also observe elements related to the communal and to the political aspects of fandom.

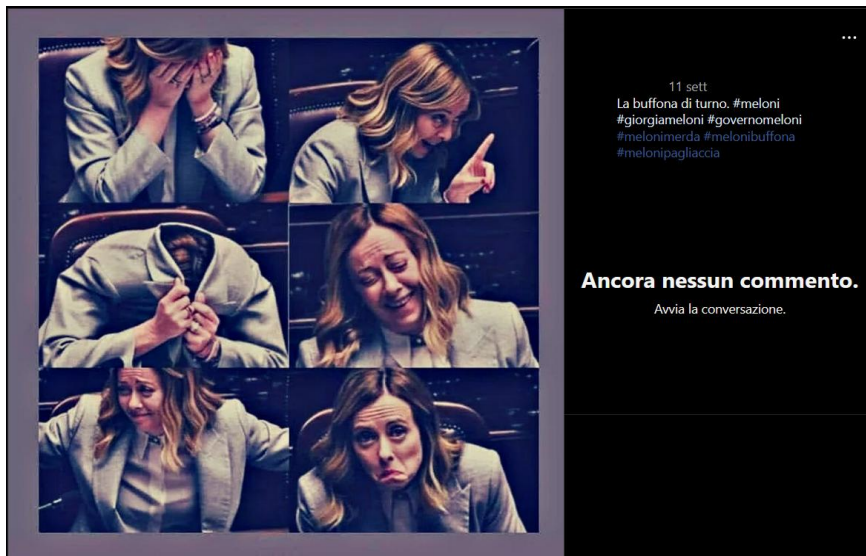


Figure 2. Example of a post showing personal disapproval of the leader

Figure 2 is an example of personal anti-fandom content. Specifically, the post shown in Figure 2 contains a collage of portraits of Giorgia Meloni, depicting some peculiar facial expressions she made during a parliamentary session. Additionally, the photo has been modified with seemingly the addition of an Instagram filter. The final effect of this edit is that the contrast is enhanced, lowering the modality of the shot and fostering an emotional layer that stresses the drama conveyed by Meloni's expressions. The attached caption says: "Clown on duty", stating the strong, negative connotation attributed by the user to Meloni's behaviour. Crucially for our analysis, this post does not connect the inappropriateness of Meloni's facial expressions to her role as a Prime Minister, or to the venue where she engaged in this behaviour (i.e.: the Italian Parliament). Similarly to the post shown in Figure 1, its framing as personal is related to the lack of direct references of the publisher to political or communal aspects of Meloni's public persona.



Figure 3. Example of a post showing support for the political endeavours of the leader

Figure 3 shows that even elected officials can engage in fan-like behaviours. Carlo Fidanza, the publisher of the post shown in Figure 3, is a member of the European Parliament elected with the party led by Meloni. The photo displays Meloni happily posing with the Italian flag and her party's emblem to highlight her accomplishments, stated in a superimposed text. The meaning of the post specifically focuses on the poverty index dropping from 20.00% to 18.80% under Meloni's presidency, despite her government's decision to repeal a welfare measure that was supported by previous governments named "citizens' income". Specifically, the politician turned fan stresses his support for the right-wing leader in the attached caption by stating: "(...) now, with Giorgia Meloni, we managed to turn the tide".



Figure 4. Example of a post showing political disapproval towards the leader

In Figure 4 we present a post displaying the same photo as Figure 2. However, the message channelled in Figure 4 is explicitly related to the political dimension. Hence, its classification in our analysis varies from that of Figure 2. That is, because the post shown in Figure 4 focuses on the Prime Minister and the socio-political significance of the setting Meloni was immersed in as she was being photographed. Specifically, the caption says: "These pictures portray the Prime Minister when someone criticises her. Really serious politics!". Moreover, the modality is lowered by a filter. However, here the filter lowers the contrast and enhances the brightness of the image. The result is that the setting where these photos were taken, and the expressions that they depict are much more quickly discerned by the viewer.

The posts shown in Figure 2 and Figure 4 are examples of how significant the captions attached to an Instagram post can be in reframing the overall meaning of the shared visual messages. While the two collages convey different messages, the element of presumption, through which the publisher expresses hostility towards the leader, is evident in both cases.



Figure 5. Example of a fandom post showing support towards the community of Meloni's supporters

The photo in Figure 5 does not involve Meloni directly, as it shows a group of activists engaging in campaigning activities for the 2024 European elections, as they advocate for the party led by Meloni in public. More precisely, it shows a practice common to many Italian activists: campaigning in public spaces with gazebos.³ The main subjects of the photograph are assembled in a public area outdoors, in front of the gazebo. The photo⁴ remains untouched, conveying the normalcy and genuineness of the moment with no alterations or filters, except for the addition in the bottom right corner of a symbol of FdI. The attached caption underlines the communal aspect of the picture, stating that the represented participants were: “Ready and united for #equalopportunities, #equalfreedoms and as an info-point on the #premiership”.⁵

Crucially for our analysis, the caption is closed with: “For a tangible and strong Italy even in Europe, we always stand next to our President @giorgiameloni”. Hence, what should be strictly a party activity, as campaigning to provide information on the agenda of FdI, becomes an opportunity for party members to reiterate their support to Meloni. Support that is framed by the publisher as a key motivator for their campaigning activities. The significance of this stance is furthered by the nature of account sharing the post, belonging to the local committee of Fratelli d'Italia of Venetia. Hence, as much as the post promotes fan-like attitudes and behaviours, its publisher cannot be merely considered a fan with a parasocial relationship with Meloni just as any individual, ordinary user.



Figure 6. Example of a post showing antagonism towards the community of backers of the leader

This is the clearest example we found within this category of the blurriness of fan-like practices addressing communities at large. Its publisher, the EuropaViva fanpage, often posts content showing support for Renzi. The post contains a photo with a superimposed text with seemingly a quote from Renzi: “Europe must make a move. It is time to be daring, we are ready”. The publisher’s caption states: “If you support incompetence and inefficiency, avoid selecting Matteo Renzi and go for Meloni or a different leader instead”. Although Giorgia Meloni is not the main politician this post is referring to, this post articulates a confrontational stance towards her supporting base. Figure 6 shows that the support for a politician or their supporters can overlap with anti-fandom stances of hostility towards an adversary of the supported politician, and that such attitude can extend to refer to the community supporting that adversary. In other words, fandom and anti-fandom stances towards different political characters can mix and co-exist within the fan-like attitude of a single user.

Discussion and conclusion

From this analysis, it is evident that at least one of the three dimensions identified by Dean (2017) as constitutive of political fandoms can be traced in the analysed sample. Hence, each relevant post has a dominant theme referring to the personal, political, or communal aspects of political fandom. As we mentioned in our analysis of Figure 1, all three aspects can all be articulated within the same post and reinforce the fan-like aspect of one another when they are represented in conjunction.

A first key finding is that ordinary users are only circulating a fraction of the content showing the presence of a parasocial relationship addressing Meloni. Most importantly, the supportive fandom is largely produced and circulated by political actors, whereas ordinary users and other types of publishers prefer to publish fan-like content that express disapproval towards Meloni or her constituency. An example of this is provided with Figure 6, which is published by a local committee of the party Meloni leads. Hence, its production cannot be overlapped with that of an ordinary user, whose fan-like behaviour cannot be considered a somewhat ideological or electorally motivated effort as one could argue is the case for the represented subjects in Figure 6.

Nonetheless, they are clearly showing a fan-like attitude towards Meloni, using the party account to foster the visibility of their passion for and attachment to the leader. In other words, we argue that these posts contain and communicate the elements typical of fandom identified by Dean (2017), just as those published by ordinary users. For this reason, we decided not to exclude them from our analysis. Still, they do not originate from actors that are normally considered fans, as their support for Meloni may be driven more from their personal goals, and not from a disinterested, parasocial relationship they developed with the party leader themselves. Given the evident influence of fan-like content on these posts, and their centrality in the liminal space #giorgiameloni, we identified these posts as part of a genre, which we labelled “*fandomesque*”. *Fandomesque* content resembles articulations of political fandom, whose spread is linked to the activities of political actors, individual and collective.

We deem it necessary to distinguish *fandomesque* posts from fan-like content published by ordinary users due to their potentially different epistemologies, potential attached goals, and impact on the digital infosphere. In other words, even if the messages channelled by *fandomesque* and fandom content may substantially overlap, the spread of *fandomesque* posts may not be underpinned by an affectively charged, parasocial relationship between the politician and the publisher. Rather, it may be underpinned by the personal political interests of the actors involved in the publication of these posts. Moreover, whatever the underlying reason for their publication, *fandomesque* posts may not be consumed by political fans in the same way as they consume ordinary fandom content.

Interestingly, most of the content addressing the community of Meloni’s supporters comes from these actors. Arguably, this overwhelming presence of *fandomesque* content in support of Meloni suggests the presence of an effort to stimulate a supportive discourse revolving around Meloni in relevant digital spaces is developed for electoral purposes. Nonetheless, this argument cannot accurately weigh in the nuances of the phenomenon. In other words, just as political candidates and parties may pretend to be Meloni’s fans to project a large grassroots support for the leader, it is also possible that fans got into politics due to their attachment to the leader.

Consequently, we do not argue that *fandomesque* content cannot be produced based on affective motives, but that it is impossible for spectators to distinguish between *fandomesque* posts published to gather consensus, and those that are a product of a genuine parasocial relationship between the account manager and the leader. Hence, the distinction between

fandom and *fandomesque* is necessary if we are to reach a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the existence and reproduction of political fandoms. The two posts shown in Figure 4 and Figure 6 are fit instances of *fandomesque* content showing potentially different motivations. Both posts were published by two of FdI's local committees.

Finally, to tackle our research questions directly, we can argue that the study of top-down managed communities can provide a partial insight into the reality of political fandoms, which is seemingly adapting to the fragmentation, refraction and liminality that increasingly characterises social media. By selecting thematic hashtags for our sample selection, instead of top-down managed, well known, and clearly defined fandom communities, we were able to observe fan-like patterns and practices that would have remained unexplored otherwise. Most importantly, the possibility of distinguishing the *fandomesque* from the fandom content. To the least, this outcome poses the question of whether we should consider the parasocial relations shown by individuals with personal investment in the electoral game to be automatically excluded from being (political) fans.

Wrapping up, this article proposes a novel approach to the study of political fandom and anti-fandom content published on social media. Specifically, we have integrated Dean's (2017) understanding of political fandoms within a sound, replicable methodology for the analysis of digital content relevant to the phenomenon. Crucially, tackling the topic empirically and measuring the frequency of political fandom content published online about Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, we observed that the binary distinction between fans and ordinary "consumers" may be detrimental to the analysis of phenomena relevant to constituents performing fan-like behaviours. In particular, we integrated Dean's theoretical perspective with the analytical lens of celebrity politics and the latest findings on the impact of social media affordances on user-generated content circulating on those same platforms. We set a call for future research to engage with the blurriness and nuance of current understandings of political fandoms, to put in tension current understandings of fan-like digital practices and verify the validity and scope of the *fandomesque* genre in other democratic regimes and for other Italian party leaders.

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Acknowledgements

This publication is based on research funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU, within the framework of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, PRIN 2022 call (Ministerial Decree No. 104 published on 2 February 2022 by the Ministry of University and Research) – Project title: *Fandom democracy? Celebrity and new forms of citizens' engagement* – CUP F53D2300634006. Roberto Mincigrucci contributed to this publication as an independent researcher during the period from 01/02/2024 to 31/05/2024.

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Notes

¹ A clear example of an element lowering the modality of a photo is the use of aesthetic filters to alter the colours, brightness and contrast of an image.

² For privacy reasons, we blurred the faces of represented subjects that do not have a high-visibility status comparable to that of Meloni.

³ To better understand the importance of Gazebos in Italian political activism, see: Favero & Zulianello, 2023; Pasquino, 2016.

⁴ The faces of the represented human participants were blurred by the authors to protect their privacies.

⁵ A reform of the political system proposed and strongly supported by Meloni.