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Covid-19 and political communication through media: the influence of interpersonal attraction and perceived propinquity towards the Prime Minister on Italians' opinions and perceptions

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Abstract

During the first phase of Italy's lockdown, imposed after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's press conferences and live streams have been pervasive and constant. They have been, specifically, the main mean through which the Prime Minister informed Italians about the ever-changing decree-laws and guidelines concerning Italy's lockdown. Drawing upon literature regarding communication through media, the study was aimed to understand how interpersonal attraction towards the Prime Minister could influence propinquity perceived during his press conferences/live streams, and how this dimension could, in turn, influence Italians' opinions about the Prime Minister himself, the government in office, and the effectiveness of containment measures. Results showed that perceived propinquity was fostered by both task attraction and social attraction towards the Prime Minister. Higher perceived propinquity resulted in a positive change of opinion about the Prime Minister himself which, in turn, fostered both a positive change of opinion about the Government in office and the perceived effectiveness of imposed rules and guidelines. Implications of the present work are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19; perceived propinquity; interpersonal attraction; mediated communication.

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Introduction

In December 2019 a novel form of coronavirus, labeled SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) was identified, after the Chinese city of Wuhan was interested, in November 2019, by a rising number of people affected by a then-unknown pneumonia. On January 30, 2020, the severity of the newfound coronavirus brought the World Health Organization (WHO) to classify its outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern (World Health Organization, 2020a, 2020b). Less than two months later, on the 11th of March, due to its rapid escalation, the outbreak was declared to be a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020c).

After the coronavirus outbreak in China, Italy has been the first country to be severely affected by the spreading of the virus. The gravity of the situation has led Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to impose, between March 9 and March 11 (DPCM 09/03/2020; DPCM 11/03/2020), a national quarantine, making Italy officially enter the first phase of its lockdown. This phase lasted until the 4th of May, when the country entered the second phase, characterized by new rules and their decreased restrictiveness (DPCM 26/04/2020).

Since the first ascertained cases in February, media coverage on COVID-19 in Italy has been ubiquitous and pervasive. Moreover, especially during the first phase of Italy's lockdown, Prime Minister Conte's decree-laws have frequently been accompanied by – and promulgated through – the Prime Minister's press conferences and live-streams, that people could primarily follow through one of the main Italian TV broadcasting channels. In this phase, in spite of the restrictiveness of the imposed rules, the Prime Minister – and, by extension, the Government in office – seemed to have benefited from an increasing consensus among the general population (e.g., Nicolson, 2020; Statista Research Department, 2020a, 2020b).

The Prime Minister's press conferences and live-streams broadcasted on TV surely have played a role in shaping – or, at least, in having an impact on – the increase of these favorable attitudes and opinions, considering that the symmetric, reciprocal relations between the media-system and the political system are a key aspect in “mass influence”. The media-system and the information resources it controls are, in fact, the primary link between individuals and the political/economic system (Ball-Rokeach, 1985, 1988; Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), causing mass communication to have extensive effects on both the public discourse and single individuals. With regard to this very aspect, the importance of messages and information disseminated through media can be truly understood. In fact, as Ball-Rokeach (1985) suggested referring to Bell's theorizations (1973), in postindustrial societies information – and control over its dissemination means – is power. Moreover, since the media discourse has become a fundamental part of individuals' construction of meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), this becomes particularly true when some salient aspects of individual environs become ambiguous or are felt as threatening – such as, for example, during crises, conflicts, natural disasters or other prominent changes such as, in this specific period, a global pandemic. In these cases, mass media information becomes

more dependent on the political system and, in turn, individual dependencies upon media and media communication become particularly prominent (Ball-Rokeach, 1985; Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Hindman, 2004; Loges, 1994; Lowrey, 2004). This means that the relations among individuals, media and the social systems media closely interact with (like the political system) increase in their intensity and dependencies. This aspect is also related to one of the central features of the Agenda-setting Theory of mass communication, which is people's need for orientation: this aspect is defined by the relevance that a topic/information holds to an individual, and by the uncertainty surrounding the topic or piece of information itself. It is, therefore, a motivational force that makes people recur to media in order to make sense of their environs (McCombs et al., 2014; McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1991).

The tight relation between politics and media is well established in Italy, where the dynamics between these two systems have always shown patterns proper to the so-called “*collateralismo mediatico*” (literally: *collateralism of media*), which refers to media polarization, media subordination to political groups and partisanship and collusion in media-politics relationships (Esmark, 2004; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Mazzoleni, 2004). This aspect is closely related to the concept of “*giornalista dimezzato*” (literally: *halved journalist*), introduced for the first time by the Italian journalist Pansa (1977), as well as with Bennett's indexing theory (Bennett, 1990). Processes of personalization, however, seem to be the major factors that, nowadays, delineate the relationships among politics, media and individuals, now more than ever characterized by reciprocal influences (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017). Since individuals tend to base their political views and decisions on personal factors (e.g., perceptions, needs, aspirations), politicians recognize their need of conveying impressions and narratives aligned with those very factors.

In trying to understand how the Prime Minister's live-streams and press conferences primarily broadcasted on TV could impact different aspects of individual attitudes during this historical event, we have firstly considered one of the most prominent aspects of mediated communication, which is perceived propinquity. Moreover, regarding the attention put on the Prime Minister through his press conferences and live-streams and their pervasive media coverage, we have also focused on the role that individuals' perceptions about a political leader's personality and attitudes – in terms of individual attraction – could hold in influencing said perceived propinquity and in framing current issues and events (Bean & Mughan, 1989; McAllister, 2007).

Propinquity, nearness and immediacy through media

Korzenny (1978) delineated a general theory of mediated communication and defined propinquity as one of the basic conditions for communication. In particular, electronic propinquity can be conceived as a form of perceived nearness, proximity or presence reached through a medium – as a form, as the author specifies referring to Collins & Raven's definition (1969), of functional propinquity, which pertains to perceived presence or nearness across long distances (that

is, through means such as telephones, radio or television). Therefore, the concept of propinquity is somewhat similar to concepts such as immediacy or social presence. Immediacy refers to perceptions of nearness and closeness in communication settings, and has mostly been studied in educational environs (e.g., Andersen, 1979; Frymier, 1994; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; McCroskey et al., 1995; Rocca & McCroskey, 1999). Early theorizations (Mehrabian, 1966, 1971) viewed perceived immediacy as a consequence of liking a person (i.e. interpersonal attraction), while other researchers conceptualized this relation the other way around (e.g., Rocca & McCroskey, 1999). It has then been suggested that the relationship between these dimensions could be seen as reciprocal (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000) and that “both principles which have been advanced appear to be correct and not contradictory” (Richmond et al., 2003, p. 505).

Propinquity has also been conceptualized as an important aspect related to social presence (Lee, 2013), and this assumption becomes particularly evident in studies regarding communication that happens through media such as the TV. Pfau and Kang (1991) stressed how television emphasizes the visual component of communication (Druckman, 2003), which redefines its verbal dimension and not only increases the receiver’s perception of intimacy and closeness with the source, but also makes the viewer empathize more with the source’s ideas and goals (McAllister, 2007). With regard to political issues in particular, TV and its information dissemination have shown their importance in influencing the way people view political leaders and personalities, fostering processes of personalization and the development of relationships with those very personalities (Kaase, 1994; McAllister, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012; see Schill, 2012, for a review on the roles and the functions of visuals in politics). This means that the way TV – as well as, by extension, the other media that emphasize the visual dimension of communication – conveys information and exerts influence is very similar to what happens during face-to-face communication exchanges and through interpersonal modalities (Keating & Latané, 1976; Pfau, 1990; Robinson, 1977). That is why, as Pfau (1990) stressed referring to Perse and Rubin’s work as well (1989), the effects of this kind of mediated communication can be more adequately understood recurring to interpersonal frameworks and approaches.

Interpersonal attraction

Studies on interpersonal attraction and its determinants have arisen with the aim of finding out why people may feel attracted to others (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969). Interpersonal attraction has been defined as the array of judgments referred to individuals’ liking for – and their attitudes towards – other persons (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). This dimension has shown its importance in the development of relationships (e.g., Huston & Levinger, 1978) and, on a more general level, in communication exchanges. It has shown to have a role in facilitating communication between partners and in determining the degree to which partners influence one another (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969) – or how one partner influences the other in one-sided communications as the ones

that happen through certain types of media, as investigated, for example, in studies regarding parasocial experiences, interactions and relationships (e.g., Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Rubin & McHugh, 1987). Burgoon and Hale (1984) stressed how interpersonal attraction has emerged as one of the most relevant aspects in developing evaluations of people we are communicating with (an aspect on which receivers-oriented studies have focused on), as well as enhancing favorable self-evaluations (the main focus of source-oriented studies).

Despite being conceived by many authors as a one-dimensional construct, in which attraction is thought to vary from extreme attraction to extreme aversion (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969), some authors have instead theorized that it could actually be composed of different dimensions (e.g., Kiesler & Goldberg, 1968; Segal, 1979; Triandis, 1964) and have therefore focused on finding its “multidimensionality”. In particular, McCroskey & McCain (1974) argued that interpersonal attraction seems to be composed of three major dimensions, which are task, social and physical attraction. Task attraction refers to the perception that another person could be committed and involved in task-related situations and could therefore be a desirable person to work with; social attraction refers to judging a person as friendly and socially-appealing, which fosters the desire to socialize with them; physical attraction, instead, refers to finding another person’s aspect, physicality and appearance appealing and pleasant.

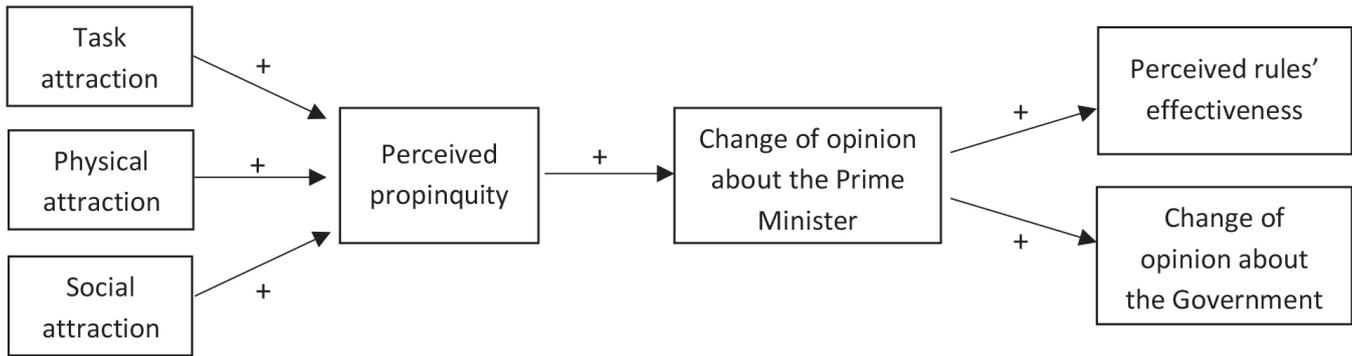
Despite uncertainty surrounding the relationship occurring among these three components, McCroskey et al. (2006) concluded that, despite not being orthogonal, they surely delineate distinct dimensions of interpersonal attraction. For what concerns these dimensions’ relationships with other aspects relevant in communication settings and for communication-related goals, greater attraction in its different aspects has been found to be related to dimensions such as, for example, greater source credibility (e.g., McCroskey et al., 1974), perceptions of parasocial interactions and experiences (e.g., Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Rubin & McHugh, 1987) and, as already explained before, immediacy (e.g., Baringer & McCroskey, 2000; Rocca & McCroskey, 1999).

Study aims and hypotheses

In line with what explained above, the present investigation has focused on understanding how specific dimensions of both interpersonal and mediated communication could impact other important aspects relevant to the political and social discourse happening during the first phase of Italy’s lockdown.

The two criterion variables we focused on were change of opinion about the Government in charge on one hand and, on the other hand, people’s perceived effectiveness of the rules/guidelines promulgated by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. In particular, we expected that the three dimensions of interpersonal attraction delineated by McCroskey and McCain (1974) would have had an impact on these two variables through perceived propinquity to the Prime Minister during his live-streams/press conferences and change of opinion about the Prime Minister himself, considered in a sequential path. These expectations can be summarized in the following model:

Fig. 1. Research design



In particular, we expected that the more people felt a task attraction (H1a), a social attraction (H1b) and a physical attraction (H1c) towards the Prime Minister, the more they would have experienced a feeling of propinquity with him during his live-streams; we also expected that perceived propinquity, in turn, would have positively affected people's change of opinion about the Prime Minister himself (H2). We hypothesized that a positive change of opinion about the Prime Minister would have implied a better opinion about the whole Government in charge (H3). Several studies (e.g., Lanoue & Headrick, 1994; McAllister, 2003) have in fact stressed that the role of Prime Ministers' popularity is central to assessments about political parties and to government support. We hypothesized that change of opinion about the Prime Minister would have also influenced people's perceived effectiveness of the rules/guidelines promulgated: in particular, we hypothesized that a change of opinion for the better would have made people perceive the rules as more efficient (H4). Finally, we hypothesized that electronic propinquity and change of opinion about the Prime Minister would have sequentially mediated the relationships between interpersonal attraction dimensions and change of opinion about the Government in charge on one hand (respectively H5a for task attraction; H5b for social attraction; H5c for physical attraction) and, on the other hand, people's perceived effectiveness of the norms/rules promulgated by the Prime Minister (respectively H6a for task attraction; H6b for social attraction; H6c for physical attraction).

Method

Data collection and sample features

For the present investigation, data were collected between the 13th of April and the 3rd of May, before Italy officially entered the "phase two" of its COVID-19 lockdown, which started on the 4th of May. Since both the topic of the study and the procedure applied were not invasive, ethical committee approval was not requested. Qualtrics software was used to create the questionnaire through which the data were collected and we resorted to snowball sampling to collect the data. Since the questionnaire administration happened online, the questionnaire firstly provided participants with information about the investigation, anonymity and data treatment.

Participants had then to give their consent in order to proceed with the questions. If a participant did not consent to proceed, the questionnaire was set to skip to the end page. Moreover, amidst other demographic questions, participants were asked to indicate their age and if a participant was not 18 years old at least, the questionnaire was set to directly show the end page.

The questionnaire reached 374 individuals, but 154 of them could not be considered in the final sample mainly because of missing data. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 220 individuals, ranging from 19-year-olds to people in their 70s ($M_{age} = 38.14$; $SD = 15.26$). The majority of participants (63.6%) were females, while the 36.4% of participants were males. Most participants (41.4%) indicated that the higher level of education they had attained was either the high-school diploma or a Masters' degree (25.5%). The participants that indicated their occupational status as "employed" accounted for the 48.6% of the sample, while the 30% of the sample was made up of students. For what concerns political orientation, most participants defined themselves as moderate leftists (37.7%).

Measures

Demographics. After giving their consent, participants were shown a series of questions about their demographics. They had to specify their age, their gender, their political/ideological orientation, that ranged from "far-right" (1) to "far-left" (7), and their occupational status. No other personal information was required.

Interpersonal attraction. Items referred to the three types of attraction considered in the study were identified and chosen from McCroskey and colleagues' scales (McCroskey & McCain, 1974; McCroskey et al., 2006). The items chosen were those that better suited the translation without being repetitive or difficult to understand. Following McCroskey et al.'s recommendation (2006) on the need of having about 10 items related to each attraction dimension for the scales to be reliable, 10 items were selected for both the task attraction scale (e.g., "The Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte takes his job seriously") and the social attraction scale (e.g., "I think that getting along with the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte would be easy"), while 9 items were selected for the physical attraction one (e.g., "I think that the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's appearance is neat"). For each scale, at least two items were negatively worded. All scales showed high reliability ($\alpha = .93$; $\alpha = .89$; $\alpha = .94$). For each scale, the answers had to be given on a 5-point Likert scale, according to one's agreement or disagreement with each item.

Perceived propinquity during live-streams/press conferences. The measure of perceived propinquity was created anew through an adaptation of Walther and Bazarova’s scale of electronic propinquity (2008; Bowman & Clark-Gordon, 2020). The original five-item semantic differential scale was declined in 10 different items rated on a one-to-five Likert scale, through which the participants could indicate the degree to which they felt feelings of connectedness, familiarity, closeness, proximity and commonality (or, for the reverse coded items, disconnectedness, strangeness, distance, remoteness and separateness) with Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte during his live-streams/press conferences. The scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

Perceived rules’ effectiveness. Six items were specifically created in order to notice the degree to which people perceived that following and adhering to the Prime Minister’s guidelines and rules could effectively help in contrasting the spreading of the virus and in not being a risk for the self and others (e.g., “Adhering to the guidelines promoted by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte will positively impact the resolution of the emergency”). For each item, participants had to show their agreement or disagreement through a 5-point Likert scale. Overall, the scale’s reliability was high ($\alpha = .95$).

Change of opinion about Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. This dimension was noticed through a single item: participants were asked to indicate how their opinion about the Prime Minister had changed compared to the opinion they had before the beginning of the state of emergency. Participants had to answer through a 5-point Likert scale, where the lowest score (1) indicated that their opinion of the Prime Minister had worsened significantly and the higher one (5) indicated that it had significantly improved.

Change of opinion about the Government in office. Similarly to the dimension described above, change of opinion about the current Government was noticed through a single item, in which the lowest score (1) referred to a change for worse in the participant’s opinion of the Government and the higher score (5) referred to a change for the better.

Data analysis

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS Statistics – 25 (IBM, 2017). Before proceeding with analyses to test our hypotheses, the variables considered in the study were

standardized and correlations among them were analyzed. Hayes’s PROCESS macro was then used to test the hypotheses and, in particular, PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2013), which assesses sequential mediation, was used.

For both dependent variables, three different models were assessed: in every model, one dimension of interpersonal attraction was considered as the focal predictor while controlling for the other two dimensions. Moreover, in each model, the effects of the predictor considered each time were also controlled for age, political orientation and gender.

Results

Correlations. Correlations among variables were estimated and they are shown in Table 1.

All the variables considered were positively related and showed correlation coefficients that generally ranged from moderate to strong. As expected, perceived propinquity was strongly and positively correlated with the three dimensions of interpersonal attraction and, in particular, it showed the strongest correlations with task attraction ($r = .74$; $p < .001$) and social attraction ($r = .70$; $p < .001$). Change of opinion about Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte showed the strongest correlations with task attraction ($r = .71$; $p < .001$) and electronic propinquity ($r = .72$; $p < .001$). For what concerns change of opinion about the Government as a whole, this variable showed the strongest correlation with change of opinion about Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte ($r = .73$; $p < .001$), and the same went for the relation between perceived rules’ effectiveness, which showed the strongest relation with change of opinion about the Prime Minister ($r = .59$; $p < .001$).

Sequential mediation: interpersonal attraction dimensions impacting change of opinion about the Government through perceived propinquity and change of opinion about Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte

As said before, the dimensions of interpersonal attraction were introduced in the model one by one as focal predictors, while the other two dimensions were introduced as covariates.

Tab. 1. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Task attraction	3.80	.80	-						
2. Social attraction	3.46	.66	.60**	-					
3. Physical attraction	3.72	.69	.51**	.58**	-				
4. Perceived propinquity	3.34	.84	.74**	.70**	.46**	-			
5. Change of opinion about Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte	3.96	1.13	.71**	.56**	.51**	.72**	-		
6. Change of opinion about the Government	3.30	1.10	.66**	.44**	.43**	.60**	.73**	-	
7. Perceived rules’ effectiveness	4.33	.81	.53**	.29**	.32**	.51**	.59**	.46**	-

Note. **p < .001

Gender, age and political orientation were entered in the model as covariates as well.

Among all of the dimensions considered, the only two dimensions that had an effect on electronic propinquity net of the others were task attraction ($B = .48$; $SE = .05$; $t = 8.98$; $p < .001$) and social attraction ($B = .42$; $SE = .06$; $t = 7.52$; $p < .001$). Net of the other variables' effects, physical attraction's effect on electronic propinquity was not significant. Therefore, our hypothesis H1c was not confirmed. Since task and social attraction's effects were significant and positive, our hypotheses H1a and H1b were confirmed.

For what concerns change of opinion about Prime Minister Conte, as expected electronic propinquity showed the strongest relation to this dimension ($B = .38$; $SE = .07$; $t = 5.31$; $p < .001$), meaning that the more individuals felt a sense of nearness or closeness (that is, propinquity) with the Prime Minister during his live streams, the more their opinion about him changed for the better, supporting and confirming our second hypothesis (H2). Despite electronic propinquity's effect, among the three different aspects of interpersonal attraction, task attraction continued to have a direct impact on change of opinion about the Prime Minister ($B = .31$; $SE = .07$; $t = 4.63$; $p < .001$) and physical attraction – which did not have an impact on electronic propinquity net of the other interpersonal attraction dimensions, gender, age and political orientation – was found to directly impact change of opinion about the Prime Minister ($B = .17$; $SE = .05$; $t = 3.13$; $p = .002$). Political orientation as well was found to directly impact this dimension ($B = .16$; $SE = .05$; $t = 3.42$; $p = .001$), and this effect showed that people whose political ideology was more left-wing tended to report more that their opinion of Prime Minister Conte had changed for the better.

Finally, with regard to change of opinion about the Government, expectedly change of opinion about the Prime Minister significantly and positively impacted it ($B = .47$; $SE = .07$; $t = 6.52$; $p < .001$), showing that for those individuals whose opinion about the Prime Minister got better since the beginning of Italy's lockdown, their opinion of the whole Government in office got better as well. Our third hypothesis (H3) was therefore supported. Task attraction towards the Prime Minister had a direct impact on the criterion as well ($B = .26$; $SE = .07$; $t = 3.62$; $p < .001$), and the same went for political orientation ($B = .10$; $SE = .05$; $t = 2.04$; $p = .043$) meaning that, in this case as well, holding a more left-wing ideology brought people's view of the Government to get more positive. The overall model resulted significant and accounted for the 59% of variance ($R^2 = .59$; $F(8, 211) = 37.41$; $p < .001$).

For what concerns total and indirect effects of each predictor, we first considered task attraction as the focal predictor, controlling for social and physical attraction, as well as for gender, age and political orientation. The total effect of task attraction on the criterion considered was significant and positive ($B = .51$; $SE = .07$; $t = 7.87$; $p < .001$). The total indirect effect resulted significant and positive ($B = .25$; bootstrapped $SE = .05$; 95% CI [.15, .35]); in particular, the indirect effect of task attraction on change of opinion about the Government through electronic propinquity and change of opinion about the Prime Minister was significant and positive ($B = .09$; bootstrapped $SE = .02$; 95% CI [.05, .14]). Hypothesis H5a was, therefore, confirmed.

We then considered social attraction as the focal predictor while controlling for the other dimensions as explained above. Its overall total effect was not significant ($B = .01$; $SE = .07$; $t = .11$; $p = .92$). Its indirect effect on change of opinion about the Government through electronic propinquity and change of opinion about Prime Minister Conte was the only indirect effect to be found significant ($B = .07$; bootstrapped $SE = .02$; 95% CI [.03, .12]). The effect was significant and positive, confirming our hypothesis H5b (Zhao et al.'s approach, 2010, to establishing the presence of mediation effects with no significant total effect).

We finally considered physical attraction as the focal predictor while controlling for the other dimensions. The total effect on the criterion was not significant ($B = .12$; $SE = .06$; $t = 1.92$; $p = .06$). Moreover, since physical attraction's effect on electronic propinquity net of the other variables' effects was not significant, its indirect effect through electronic propinquity and change of opinion about Prime Minister Conte was not significant as well ($B = -.01$; bootstrapped $SE = .01$; 95% CI [-.03, .01]). Therefore, our hypothesis H5c was not confirmed.

Sequential mediation: interpersonal attraction dimensions impacting perceived rules' effectiveness through electronic propinquity and change of opinion about Prime Minister Conte

Results concerning the impact of interpersonal attraction dimensions on electronic propinquity net of gender, age and political orientation, as well as these variables' effects on change of opinion about the Prime Minister are the same as discussed above.

Change of opinion about the Prime Minister showed the largest effect on perceived rules' effectiveness, and the effects was significant and positive ($B = .39$; $SE = .09$; $t = 4.59$; $p < .001$), which confirmed our fourth hypothesis (H4). This means that, as expected, people who reported that their opinion about the Prime Minister had got better after Italy entering its lockdown tended to view the imposed rules and restrictions as more effective. Perceived rules' effectiveness was also influenced by task attraction ($B = .18$; $SE = .09$; $t = 2.13$; $p = .034$), electronic propinquity ($B = .19$; $SE = .09$; $t = 2.05$; $p = .042$) and social attraction, but in this case the effect was found significant and negative ($B = -.21$; $SE = .08$; $t = -2.62$; $p = .009$). Since, as shown below, the direct effect and indirect mediated effect of this dimension on the criterion have opposite signs, this result suggests that a suppression effect might be present (MacKinnon et al., 2000). Age was found to have a direct impact on the criterion considered as well ($B = -.01$; $SE = .00$; $t = -2.90$; $p = .004$), meaning that younger people tended to perceive the rules as more effective. The overall model resulted significant and accounted for the 43% of the variance ($R^2 = .43$; $F(8, 211) = 20.07$; $p < .001$).

For what concerns total and indirect effects of each predictor, for this criterion as well we first considered task attraction as the focal predictor, controlling for social and physical attraction, as well as for gender, age and political orientation. The total effect of task attraction on perceived rules' effectiveness was significant and positive ($B = .46$; $SE = .07$; $t = 6.23$; $p < .001$). The overall indirect effect resulted

significant and positive ($B = .28$; bootstrapped $SE = .07$; 95% CI [.16, .42]) as well. In particular, the indirect effect through electronic propinquity and change of opinion about the Prime Minister was significant and positive ($B = .07$; bootstrapped $SE = .02$; 95% CI [.03, .12]), confirming our hypothesis H6a.

We then considered social attraction as the focal predictor. Its total effect on the criterion resulted overall not significant ($B = -.08$; $SE = .08$; $t = -1.03$ $p = .30$). As explained above, this dimension's direct effect on the criterion resulted negative, but its indirect effect on perceived rules' effectiveness through electronic propinquity and change of opinion about Prime Minister Conte was found significant and positive as expected ($B = .06$; bootstrapped $SE = .02$; 95% CI [.03, .11]), confirming our hypothesis H6b.

We then considered physical attraction as the focal predictor. Its total effect on perceived rules' effectiveness was not significant ($B = .08$; $SE = .07$; $t = 1.10$; $p = .27$). Moreover, since its effect on electronic propinquity was not significant, its indirect effect on perceived rules' effectiveness through electronic propinquity and change of opinion about Prime Minister Conte was not significant as well ($B = -.01$; bootstrapped $SE = .01$; 95% CI [-.02, .01]). Therefore, hypothesis H6c was not confirmed.

Discussion

The present investigation was conducted with the purpose of understanding how certain attributes of one-sided forms of mass communication happening during Italy's lockdown could impact individual attitudes towards specific aspects related to the current political and social discourse. Our interest towards this topic has arisen due to the pervasive media coverage on COVID-19 related issues and, more specifically, due to the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's press conferences/live-streams that, being primarily broadcasted on one of the Italian main TV channels, have been a major institutional source of information about the ever-changing guidelines, decree-laws and, not ultimately, political, economic and social conditions of the country during its state of emergency.

Firstly, it has emerged that perceived propinquity towards the Prime Minister during his press conferences/live-streams was particularly fostered by both task attraction and social attraction perceived towards the Prime Minister himself, while physical attraction was not significantly related to it when considered together with the other two dimensions. This result might reflect the fact that, because of the uncertain and precarious situation Italy was going through, the nature and the contents of the Prime Minister's live streams/press conferences were more relevant to assessments regarding the task dimension of interpersonal attraction. Furthermore, social attraction might have had a relevant weight because of the emphasis placed by the Prime Minister on the importance of acting as a cohesive community while facing an adverse situation that was affecting each and every Italian. These aspects might explain why physical attraction did not hold a primary role in influencing perceived propinquity. However, these findings generally support the idea that dynamics usually implied in interpersonal communication may come into play

in mediated communication – and, in particular, in television-mediated communication – as well (Keating & Latané, 1976; Perse & Rubin, 1989; Pfau, 1990). We also found that higher perceived propinquity during the Prime Minister's live-streams/press conferences was associated, in turn, with a positive change of opinion about the Prime Minister himself. This finding is particularly interesting, since it stresses how perceived closeness or propinquity fostered by mediated communication (and television-mediated communication in particular) might result in the development of positive attitudes towards the mediated communicator. Interestingly, perceived propinquity's effect on the opinion people had about the Prime Minister resulted stronger than the direct effects of physical attraction and political orientation. This means that, even if these two dimensions hold an important role in evaluations concerning political personae (e.g., Efrain & Patterson, 1974; Riggle et al., 1992; Surawski & Ossoff, 2006), perceived closeness – even when fostered by mediated forms of one-sided communication – might actually be more salient in individuals' opinion formation and development.

Finally, the evidence that a positive opinion change about the Prime Minister was strongly associated with both a positive change of opinion about the whole Government in office and the perceived effectiveness of the Prime Minister's rules and guidelines holds interesting implications as well. These findings provide support to the idea that, especially in parliamentary and democratic political systems (Bean & Mughan, 1989; McAllister, 2007), the evaluations of political leaders/salient political personae is fundamental in shaping individuals' attitudes towards political parties, political issues, governments and so on (e.g., Davies & Mian, 2010; Garzia, 2011; Lanoue & Headrick, 1994; McAllister, 2003). Interestingly, perceived propinquity continued to have a direct effect on perceived rules' effectiveness, showing again the importance that developing a sense of closeness with the Prime Minister through mediated communication held in influencing individuals' outlooks related to the peculiar time Italy was going through.

This investigation presents some limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, in spite of the sample being fairly diversified in terms of age, gender or political orientation, a larger number of participants would have provided a better representation of the general population. With regard to this matter, a consideration has to be made in relation to the sampling procedure used as well: snowball sampling, in fact, presents problems related to representativeness of the sample and is potentially susceptible to sampling bias. Another limitation concerns the cross-sectional nature of the data, which renders the analyses presented above correlational, and does not allow to make causal inferences about the variables' relations. Moreover, the data are referred to a very specific point of time in the Italian coronavirus-related emergency state (i.e. the second half of the first phase of Italy's lockdown), which has been rather particular, mainly because of the soon-to-be transition to phase two. Furthermore, for what concerns the measures used, all of the scales, despite showing high reliability, were not formerly validated. All of these aspects must be taken into account when analyzing the study's results. Finally, one aspect the present study has not taken into account, an aspect that could be considered in future studies, is the particular role that populism can play in

shaping the population's responses to emergencies (Ajzenman et al., 2020; Gugushvili et al., 2020; McKee et al., 2020). It has been shown, with reference to COVID-19 in particular, how important political leaders' speeches and behaviors are in shaping people's beliefs and behaviors, and how the words and the actions of some of the present populist leaders have resulted in an increasing number of COVID-19 cases in their countries (Ajzenman et al., 2020; Kushner et al., 2020; Gugushvili et al., 2020; McKee et al., 2020). Examining this aspect in Italy would be particularly interesting, considering the role that the Five Star Movement (M5S) – a party that, for several aspects, can be considered a populist one (e.g., Cotichia & Vignoli, 2020; Gianfreda & Carlotti, 2018) – has played in appointing the Prime Minister to his current position, and still plays in shaping both his decisions and those of the government in charge at large. The Prime Minister's stance on the pandemic and his communications regarding it have been very different from those of other populist leaders, resulting in a different management of the emergency. Yet, assessing the role of populism with reference to the dimensions studied in the present research would surely result in interesting findings.

Nevertheless, the present study's premises and results might be considered in future research because of their several, important implications. Firstly, the study particularly stressed the importance of considering individuals' perceptions of characters who are salient in political and social discourses.

In particular, it provided evidence to the idea that dimensions implied in interpersonal communication exchanges, such as interpersonal attraction, are important in mediated communication as well. Moreover, it showed the centrality of perceptions of propinquity fostered by those media in which the visual component is particularly salient (e.g., television), and their role in impacting individuals' attitudes towards political personae, governments or promoted laws and guidelines. The measure of propinquity, as conceived and operationalized in this study, might prove itself useful in future research concerning similar topics. Finally, and maybe most importantly, this investigation also contributes to the understanding of those factors that can potentially foster political consensus, and what comes with it, in socio-historical periods that are particularly critical and precarious, making it possible to better understand some relevant aspects that would otherwise be unclear.

Author Contributions

The authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest

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