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The COVID-19 Crisis and Its Challenges on Social Issues

COVID-19: crisi e sfide nella società

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A Corpus-Based CDA
of Populist Politicians' Strategies
and Public Response on Twitter
during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In this paper we analyse how populist leaders in UK and Italy – namely Nigel Farage, Nicola Sturgeon, Giorgia Meloni, and Matteo Salvini – reacted to the first and second lockdowns on their Twitter accounts, communicating directly to their people. The analysis was carried out following a combined qualitative and quantitative approach to discourse. The qualitative analysis focused on comparing populist leaders' rhetorical and semiotic choices, while the quantitative analysis observed the response by the community of common Twitter users. This work aims on the one hand at unveiling the strategic use of social media by populist leaders and on the other at investigating conflictual interactional dynamics, especially in times of crisis.

Keywords: CADS; CDA; CL; communication; conflict; COVID-19; discourse; language; populism; Twitter.

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1. Introduction

When dealing with the concept of populism, difficulties in finding a common definition of such phenomenon arise. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser argued that populism is "an essentially contested concept" (2017, 2), Hidalgo-Tenorio, Benítez-Castro and De Cesare considered it "a notoriously slippery phenomenon to examine" (2019, 7): these

two statements alone clearly show the halo of uncertainty, and the lively debate concerning the notion of populism. The complex nature of populism poses major challenges to academia, which struggles to reach an understanding that encompasses the nuances of this multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon (Stavrakasis 2017): scholars defined populism as a political strategy (Weyland 2001), a discursive style (Kazin 1998), some prefer to talk about populist policies (Acemoglu *et al.* 2013), some even question its very existence (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Probably one of the most convincing and popular definitions is that proposed by Mudde (2004), who described populism as a thin-centred ideology, whose peculiarity is to be found in its porosity and adaptability (Ruzza and Fella 2009), as it absorbs elements from other ideologies such as socialism, nationalism or communism, depending on the context in which it emerges (Taggart 2000). As suggested by Hidalgo-Tenorio and Benitez-Castro, "there is little doubt that discourse is key to this phenomenon" (2021, 1), as the focal point of all populist movements is the (discursively created) tension between two factions represented by 'the pure people' and 'the corrupted élite'. Within this dynamic, the populist leader sides with the first group and proposes him/herself as the representative of the *volonté générale* (Mudde 2004; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Populism can be further subcategorised in left and right populism, also referred to as inclusionary and exclusionary populism respectively. The major difference between these two labels lies in the identification of 'the people': while the latter is more concerned on the ethnonational characteristics of such group, the first one sees it from a socio-economic perspective, thus representing members of the working class exploited by the élite (Abt and Rummens 2007).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has been one of the most critical crises of the contemporary world, with serious health, economic, and social consequences (Lasco 2020; Giardiello 2021). This shocking and unexpected event has brought about a new relationship between governments and citizens especially within an individual freedom-collective health divide. The new needs imposed by the pandemic crisis led to the establishment of lockdowns (Faulkner 2021) that were legitimised according to different rhetorical strategies at different points in time and in different countries (Wodak 2021). Within this scenario populist leaders throughout the world exploited the health crisis in various ways (Bobba and Hubé 2021), either to legitimise their authoritarian rule (Arienzo *et al.* 2021) or to criticise existing restrictions as a threat to the Nation's economy and autonomy.

The concept of crisis has often been associated with populism because it is commonly considered as an external trigger of this phenomenon (Lorenzetti 2022); however, the connection between crisis and populism is much more complex. Populist leaders usually exploit pre-existing crises, but they also create a sense of crisis in order to represent themselves as the saviours, as the only ones capable of solving the problem (Brubaker 2021, 79). Consequently, populism and crisis are strictly intertwined since populist discourse is a consequence of a pre-existing crisis and, at the same time, it contributes performatively to the creation of a crisis (Moffitt 2015, 2016; Bobba and Hubé 2021, 6; Brubaker 2021, 79; Lorenzetti 2022, 20; Ringe and Rennó 2022, 3). In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic represents an interesting case-study because it is an external crisis that all populist leaders throughout the world had to face. The pandemic offered populists both challenges and opportunities (Ringe and Rennó 2022, 1-4); indeed, the employment of common populist strategies – such as attacks on experts and expertise (Brubaker 2021), simplified representations of the pandemic or the proposal of simple solutions (Lasco 2020) – could be risky and apparently paradoxical and counter-productive (Ringe and Rennó 2022), since the behaviour of populist leaders was strongly influenced by their institutional role at the time; some were in government others at the opposition (Ringe, Rennó, and Kaltwasser 2022, 274).

It is well known that populism thrives in periods of crisis (Laclau 2005); and this crisis has been no exception. The impact of the virus seemed to help populist leaders, since the pandemic contributed to the general distrust towards the elite from an economic, social, and political perspective, and helped to increase all those negative emotions – such as fear, anxiety and uncertainty – that these leaders exploit successfully in their discourses (Ringe and Rennó 2022, 1). The common populist dichotomy *people vs. elite* (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) can flourish in times of crisis because the opposition between these groups can be amplified by the state of emergency. Moreover, some populist leaders – especially far-right ones – worsen the broader *us vs. them* dichotomy, where *them* often identifies anyone who, in the context of the pandemic, is a potential coronavirus carrier, putting people's health at risk.

The relationship between populism and the media is equally complex. Media can be – and are usually represented in this way by populists – opposed to populist parties, but media are actually able to use populist strategies (e.g., appeal to moral sentiments) at their own advantage (Krämer 2014, 42-48). More precisely, the relationship between pop-

ulism and the media is influenced by the popularisation and populism of politics. This means that politicians tend to employ a more popular language and to appeal to the people more frequently; while the media tend to become populist in the attempt to popularise politics blending information, entertainment, personalisation and spectacularisation (Bracciale and Martella 2017). On the one hand, populists can easily represent mainstream media as part of the elite. On the other, media can be used by populists as a vehicle (Krämer 2018) that nowadays seems to be essential in political communication. Specifically, social media play a crucial role in the communication strategies of all politicians (Ernst *et al.* 2017) in ordinary circumstances and even more so in times of social distancing. The strategic employment of social media is not a prerogative of populism; however, populists and social media seem to have an "elective affinity" (Gerbaudo 2018). Populism and social media have a peculiar relationship because these platforms allow populists to have a direct contact with the people, to create a close connection (or at least giving the illusion of it) with them without the intermediation of traditional media, and to have the opportunity to personalise their messages (Ernst *et al.* 2017). These aspects are crucial because in this way populist leaders are able to employ their strategies (e.g., appeal to the people) and to perform their role as man/woman of the people by directly conveying their self-representation (e.g., sharing pictures or saying something that portrays them while engaging in common everyday life activities) without any kind of traditional intermediation. Another crucial aspect in the relationship between populism and social media is the employment of these platforms as a "tool of opposition" (van Kessel and Castelein 2016). For instance, social media represent a platform through which the people can express their opposition against the traditional media (Gerbaudo 2018, 749). At the same time, for populist leaders social media, such as Twitter, represent a tool of opposition against the elites (van Kessel and Castelein 2016) and a platform that perfectly suits both institutional and informal discourses – characterised by a personalised and emotionalised style of communication (Blassnig *et al.* 2020) – in an unmediated way.

Starting from these premises, this work aims at: (a) unveiling the strategic use of social media by populist leaders in times of crisis, comparing the semiotic choices employed by these four populist leaders to investigate and highlight the existence of possible similarities and differences, and (b) exploring the way Twitter users respond to the different communicative styles and strategies adopted by each leader. For this reason, we decided to complement the qualitative analysis of the tweets produced

by the four politicians, presented in section 3, with a corpus assisted analysis of a much larger data set, presented in section 4 and consisting of Twitter users' responses to the analysed populists' tweets. The choice of two different data sets was made to provide an evidential base to support the theoretical proposal that there is a direct connection between the attitudes of populist politicians and Twitter users' responses. Section 5 is dedicated discussing the results of the two approaches and using them to provide some concluding remarks and introducing further research steps.

2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data were collected during the first week of the first lockdown and the first week of the second lockdown in Italy and in the United Kingdom[1]. Concerning the qualitative analysis, we selected the tweets through the Twitter Advanced Search tool. *Table 1* shows that the UK leaders are less prolific than the Italian ones. For reasons of comparability, we collected all the tweets by Sturgeon and Farage, and selected only the 20 most replied to tweets per lockdown by Salvini and Meloni, selecting the ones that exhibited a higher number of comments.

Table 1. – Corpora building.

CORPUS	1ST LOCKDOWN	2ND LOCKDOWN	TOTAL TWEETS
Meloni	(59) 20	13	(72) 33
Salvini	(198) 20	(70) 20	(268) 40
Sturgeon	15	13	28
Farage	21	10	31

The data were qualitatively analysed through the Critical Discourse Analysis approach (Machin and Mayr 2012) paying particular attention to metaphors (Charteris-Black 2011), representational strategies (van Leeuwen 2008) and (de-)legitimation strategies (van Dijk 2008). After a thorough observation of all the retrieved tweets, we established 6 categories and 18 sub-categories (*Tab. 2*), based on the presence of the main analytical features. These interpretative categories helped us to identify similarities and differences among the four populist leaders.

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[1] In Italy data were collected from 9 to 15 March and from 3 to 9 November 2020, in the UK corpora from 23 to 29 March and from 31 October to 6 November 2020.

Table 2. – Categories and sub-categories.

CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES
Lockdown	pro lockdown; against lockdown
Proposals	contribution; guidelines; bringing up
Positive in-group representation	*us* (party); *I* (populist leader); legitimation
Negative out-group representation	immigration; delegitimation; hate speech
Connection with the people	comfort; thanks; solidarity; auto-celebration
Rhetoric and style	hyperbole; sarcasm; emojis

First, we focused on politicians' opinions regarding lockdown. Then we focused on politicians' proposals during the selected timespan. These proposals can be contributions (ideas that the politicians suggested to the government about the management of the crisis), guidelines (rules delivered by politicians in order to contain the pandemic) or 'bringing up' comments (when politicians complain about the rejection of their proposals). We analysed politicians' positive in-group representation, through pronoun use and legitimation strategies, and negative representations of out-group social actors, through delegitimation strategies, negative references to immigration, and the use of hate speech. The fifth category involves the strategies adopted to connect with the people; we looked at comfort (strategies to comfort people during this unexpected crisis), thanks (expressions of gratitude for respecting official guidelines), solidarity (expressing support to people and to some specific categories such as workers, doctors, nurses etc.), and auto-celebration (praising the people). Last, in the category of rhetoric and style we analysed strategic uses of hyperbole, sarcasm, and emojis.

As for the analysis of replies, we used a Python library (twarc) to download all the replies to all the tweets by the four politicians in the selected weeks. Given the high number of tweets published by Matteo Salvini, we downloaded replies to the tweets that had received at least one hundred replies; for the other politicians we downloaded all the replies to the tweets published in the two weeks. All collected replies were checked to delete duplicates and messages produced by bots, written in languages other than the one used by the politicians, and published more than six months after the original tweet. The resulting data set, including available metadata on author, date of publication, and metric, was converted to xml and uploaded to Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014) to make full use of annotation. *Table 3* summarises the size of the four corpora in terms of tweets and words. As it was easily predictable, given the high number of

tweets, Salvini's corpus of users' replies is the largest but we can see that, on average, UK politicians receive more replies: each tweet by Farage receives more than 1000 replies, Sturgeon's nearly 700, Salvini's tweets have slightly more than 400 replies, while Meloni's just a little over 250[2].

Table 3. – Corpus of replies.

Politician	1st lockdown			2nd lockdown			Total			
	Tweets	Replies	Words	Tweets	Replies	Words	Tweets	Replies	Words	Replies per tweet
Meloni	59	14892	322281	13	4238	96821	72	19130	419102	266
Salvini	98	45495	909423	48	17254	374456	146	62749	1283879	430
Farage	21	18727	454286	10	14498	306839	31	33225	761125	1072
Sturgeon	15	9230	220444	13	9614	233486	28	18844	453930	673

The purpose of the quantitative analysis of the replies is to identify how Twitter users evaluate, interact with, and respond to the politicians' strategic communicative style adopted to address the problems arising from the two lockdowns. We aim to provide empirical evidence to support our hypothesis that there is a direct connection between the attitudes expressed by populist politicians and Twitter users' responses.

To this aim, we compared the eight corpora, the four of the first lockdown and those from the second one, with the TenTen corpora (Jakubíček *et al.* 2013) available on Sketch Engine for Italian and English. The comparison helped us identify keywords (Kilgarriff 2009) that characterised each corpus, highlighting major differences in frequency with the selected TenTen reference corpora. The comparison among the identified keywords, in turn, allowed us to identify differences in the way people responded to the tweets by the four politicians. The criteria for keyword selection[3] resulted in lists ranging from 100 lemmas

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[2] Differences in users' engagement between the two countries may be related to the overall number of Twitter users. According to an Italian AGCOM report of February 2021 Italy as 11.2 million Twitter users, while the UK has more than 16 million users according to a guide on Social Media Platforms and Demographics by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

[3] For the keyword identification, we selected the .it and the .uk domains in the reference corpora, we computed keywords based on lemmas, due to the rich Italian grammatical

for the smallest subcorpus (Meloni - 2nd lockdown) to more than 500 lemmas for the 1st lockdown Salvini subcorpus, the largest one. Bearing in mind the categories adopted for the qualitative analysis of the politicians' tweets (*Tab. 2*), keywords were grouped in references to the pandemic, topics and references to national politics and policies, references to foreign affairs, expressions of praise/encouragement, expressions of (both aggressive and derisive) disagreement, and derogatory comments (swearing, insults, and slurs). The way the identified keywords were used in users' responses was investigated through manual reading of concordances, which helped the attribution to a keyword to one of the categories as well as identifying the loaded value of seemingly 'neutral' terms, as we will show with example in section 4.

3. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

For reasons of space, out of all the analysed tweets, we will present the analysis of just four tweets per politician, two tweets delivered during the first and two during the second week of lockdown, so that they can serve as illustrative and representative samples of the most common communicative strategies that emerged from the qualitative analysis.

3.1. *The Italian case*

During the first lockdown, Meloni and Salvini were extremely favourable to restrictions to contain the pandemic. For this reason, they were also critical towards the government that was cautious about the establishment of strict lockdown measures. In addition to their criticism towards the government and their proposal of a strict lockdown, both *Figures 1* and *2* show how Meloni and Salvini tried to give their contribution suggesting some healthcare and economic measures concerning the management of the emergency, somehow implying a lack of Government's commitment. The references to economic aids exhibit how these politicians

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inflection, selected lemmas occurring at least 50 times in the focus corpora, added a value of k = 10 not to enhance keywords absent from the reference corpora, focused on keywords with a score of at least 2, meaning they occur at least twice as frequently in the focus corpus, and that were present in at least three threads.

express their solidarity with the people. This contributes to reinforcing their connection with the people, since they represent themselves as the only ones who care about people's needs, especially in this time of crisis.

Figure 1. – Meloni, G. (2020, March 10)[4].

Figure 2. – Salvini, M. (2020, March 11a)[5].

By comparison, Meloni's tweet is textually and visually more professional: her proposals are schematic and framed in blue and accompanied by the colours of the Italian flag, which are references to Italy and her party, with a direct reference to the colours of the party symbol, visible in the bottom left corner. During the analysis we noticed that blue is often employed by these Italian politicians to convey a more institutional tone

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[4] I will shortly meet Prime Minister Conte to discuss the #coronavirus emergency. Here are the main proposals I will make.

[5] We will spend the night reading line by line the government decree. The right to life, health, work and compensation must be guaranteed immediately to ALL Italians, no one excluded. Clear answers are needed. Until tomorrow morning my Friends, I love you.

to messages through the association with their parties; while the red and black colours are often associated to their opponents (e.g., the government).

Although we found similar attitudes in Salvini's tweets (e.g., the employment of the blue colour, the Italian flag, and the logo of *Lega*), *Figure 2* shows the more common non-institutional, personal style adopted by this politician. He represents himself and his party on the frontline to protect all the Italian people monitoring the government's work, whose decree needs to be read very carefully (*leggendo riga per riga il decreto*), implying that the government does not provide clear answers. The tweet ends with a greeting *A domani mattina Amici miei, vi voglio bene* that underlines proximity and an emotional tie with his followers.

During the analysis we also noticed that Salvini often tries to connect with the people describing himself as an *Italian*, *leader of the opposition* and as a *father* (Salvini, M. 2020, March 11b). He represents himself as the only politician who can oppose the wrong choices of the government to preserve and fight for the interest of the people. At the same time, the reference to his family role highlights his closeness to common people. We should also mention that the combination of these roles helps him to represent himself as a reliable and trustworthy politician. On the other hand, the results of the analysis revealed that in Meloni's corpus the sub-category *bringing up* is particularly pervasive. Especially during the first lockdown, Meloni tends to bring up that her suggestions and proposals were rejected by the government, leading to catastrophic consequences such as the Italian stock market crash[6] (Meloni, G. 2020, March 9).

Figures 3 and *4* present two tweets to (self-)celebrate the Italian people and comfort them. Both tweets have two embedded videos that retrace Italian history concerning past tragedies (such as floods, earthquakes, and wars). The politicians praise the strength of the Italians and reassure them; since Italians survived past tragedies, they can survive this pandemic too. The self-celebration is particularly evident even from a visual perspective: the use of the Italian flag is pervasive in the text (as an emoji) and in the videos. It is also reinforced through the lexical choices and the source metaphorical source domain war. Meloni describes Italians as *dreamers*, *workers*, and *heroes*; while Salvini represents them as *fighters* who – despite all the difficulties – won.

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[6] Meloni suggested the closure of the Italian stock market to avoid the crash.

Figure 3. – Meloni, G. (2020, March 13)[7].

Figure 4. – Salvini, M. (2020, March 13)[8].

[7] We are not just any Nation. We are a people of dreamers, of workers, of heroes. We are those who, when faced with adversity, have always known how to bring out the best in ourselves. Together we can do it, let's show everyone that WE ARE ITALY #CourageItaly

[8] ITALY DOESN'T GIVE UP! We fought, we fell, we cried, we fought, we stood up and we WON. Together we can ❤️

Figure 5. – Meloni, G. (2020, November 3)[9].

Figure 6. – Salvini, M. (2020, November 7)[10].

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[9] The government's answer to desperate businesses and citizens? The #clickday for the discounted #kick scooter. While we are living in one of the worst crises in recent times, the government is squandering money to fatten up a few Chinese companies. These gentlemen live in another dimension.

[10] Beware, if you say this you are a 'populist'.

During the second lockdown, the delegitimation (very often combined with their's and their parties' self-legitimation) towards the government and the EU is more and more present. *Figures 5* and *6* show how Meloni and Salvini criticise the government and their choices concerning the management of the pandemic, especially from an economic perspective. Both leaders criticise measures adopted by the Government, such as the kick scooter bonus, the school chairs on wheels, and, of course, immigration. Even though immigration is a favourite topic by both politicians, it is particularly pervasive in Salvini's discourse (he is the only one who talked about immigration also during the first lockdown). In addition, we should notice that the government's delegitimation is realised from a visual perspective through the choice of specific pictures of their political opponents rich in sarcasm. In *Figure 5* Meloni mocks the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, the Secretary of the Democratic party Nicola Zingaretti, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio with a photomontage where the politicians are riding kick scooters. In *Figure 6* Danilo Toninelli (a Five Star Movement Senator) is riding a kick scooter; while Conte, Zingaretti and Di Maio seem to smile evilly. On the one hand, this choice is useful to Salvini in order to delegitimise the government and to reinforce the idea that these politicians promoted wrong economic measures willingly disregarding the people's interest and well-being. On the other, using a sarcastic tone, Salvini is able to legitimise himself by playing on the alleged negative connotation of the word populist in inverted commas (*Attenzione, se lo dite siete dei "populisti"*).

Meloni and Salvini changed their opinion concerning restrictive measures during the second lockdown, criticising them for damaging the Italian economy; restrictions were enacted by the Government, regardless of their proposals for a better management of the crisis. *Figures 7* and *8* show how the leaders delegitimise the government and criticise the lockdown contrasting immigrants and Italians. The aim is clearly to trigger anger towards the government's choices. According to these leaders, Italians are obliged to stay home, while immigrants can continuously disembark and move freely with the complicity and consent of the government. This narrative is supported visually (*Figs. 6*, *7*, and *8*) and textually through the representation of immigration as an ongoing invasion. For instance, Meloni explicitly says that the government *spalanca le porte all'immigrazione clandestina* describing metaphorically Italy as a home with wide-open, unguarded doors. She also highlights with the green colour the words *immigrants invade Sicily* that are part of the headline of the newspaper article attached in the picture. Meloni and Salvini also

employ the aggregation strategy (van Leeuwen 2008) – visually (*Fig. 7*) and textually in *Figure 8* (2.000 illegals) – that supports the sub-category *hyperbole*. Lastly, *Figure 8* shows how Salvini use sarcasm. He claims that the government's choices concerning lockdown measures are nonsensical. Salvini talks about *Totodecreto* that recalls *Totocalcio* – an old Italian football betting game – in order to highlight the unpredictable choices of the government.

Figure 7. – Meloni, G. (2020, November 6) [11].
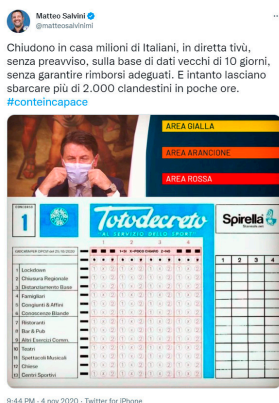
Figure 8. – Salvini, M. (2020, November 4) [12].

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[11] The nonsense of a government that armours the regions and then opens the door wide to illegal immigration continues. But is Sicily an orange zone only for Italians?

[12] They lock millions of Italians in their homes, live on TV, without warning, on the basis of 10-day old data, without guaranteeing adequate refunds. And meanwhile they let more than 2,000 illegal immigrants disembark in a few hours. #conteincapable

The results of the qualitative analysis show that the approaches of Meloni and Salvini are very similar. During the first week they delegitimise the government and self-legitimise themselves through the proposal of strict lockdown measures to depict themselves as the only ones really interested in the well-being of the Italian people. These politicians try to comfort Italian people and reassure them through a patriotic attitude enhanced by self-celebration. We should remember that Italy was the first European country where the COVID-19 spread. In this context, Meloni and Salvini were extremely critical towards the EU and those countries – such as Slovenia (Meloni, G. 2020, March 11; Salvini, M. 2020, March 10) – that isolated Italy. However, Meloni and Salvini seem to differ on some aspects. On the one hand, Meloni is generally more institutional in her style of communication. She focuses on the *bringing up* category that allows her to legitimise herself – as the leader who tried to contribute to the containment of the pandemic through right proposals – and delegitimise the government that rejected her ideas. On the other hand, Salvini is more informal and tries to connect with the people through various strategies; he describes himself as a common man through his family role and religion (Salvini, M. 2020, March 14). During the second week both Meloni and Salvini changed opinion on the lockdown. They started proposing softer restrictions in comparison to the ones established by the government. This implies a strong combination of self-legitimation and other-delegitimation (towards the government and the EU). During the second period we also observed an increase of hate speech, especially concerning immigration. Meloni remains consistent with her intuitional approach, while Salvini has still an informal style and a wide use of sarcasm.

3.2. *The British case*

Beginning our analysis with the first lockdown, the first difference is the position Sturgeon and Farage had on restrictions and how they discussed them. As a supporter to lockdown, Sturgeon encouraged the citizens to follow the rules and to stay at home in many tweets. She also provided guidelines and praised those who were helping to avoid the spread of the virus by complying with the restrictions. She is also clever in the use of pronouns, as the tweet in *Figure 9* proves: by saying that "[...] you are helping to save lives", she is reinforcing the sense of community of the Scottish people, addressing them directly and thus generating a sense of

connection. In general, when discussing the lockdown, she communicated using a civil tone and showed collaboration with the British government.

Figure 9. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, March 25a).

Figure 10. – Farage, N. (2020, March 27).

Conversely, Farage often shared his sceptical views on restrictions, being against the lockdown since the beginning of the pandemic. His tweets were harsh and critical towards the government and questioned how the entire pandemic situation was being managed. This was done with tough and challenging statements: "Who is running the country?" (Farage N., 2020, March 23) and "We will only obey a government that we respect" (Farage N., 2020, March 24a), aim at delegitimising specific figures (like Boris Johnson or Rishi Sunak) or the government in general. In

Figure 10, where a hopeless scenario is suggested, Farage compares the situation in the UK to that in East Germany in 1985, which was characterised by a sense of tension and social distrust (Rainer and Siedler 2009). By sarcastically adding "next thing children will be encouraged to report on their parents", he described an absurd situation in which everyone spied upon each other for the authorities, threatening individual liberties.

Figure 11. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, March 28b).

Figure 12. – Farage, N. (2020, March 29).

Despite their difference, Farage and Sturgeon find common ground in their way to bond with the people. Not only did they both post under the #clapforourcarers hashtag to demonstrate their support to healthcare workers, but they also shared pictures of everyday life to show how they were living the same hardships as every other citizen. Sturgeon, for example, posted a photo portraying herself while cutting her husband's hair (*Fig. 11*), accompanied by the hashtag #AllInThisTogether, underlining that she was part of the collective experience of discomfort everyone was suffering. In this case, Sturgeon bonds over the fact that due to restrictions, people could not enjoy many services, among which going to the barber. In other posts, she suggests "lockdown books" (Sturgeon N., 2020, March 25b), and tries to convey positive vibes by sharing advice to feel closer to others in times of distance (Sturgeon N., 2020, March 28a). Similarly, Farage shared a picture of himself working remotely (*Fig. 12*), just like everyone who was forced to switch to smart working during the lockdown. In his posts, Farage often sided with the people, functioning as the voice of those who were facing economic hardships due to restrictions. In many tweets he showed particular concern about the self-employed (Farage N., 2020, March 26) and those who did not earn regular wages (Farage N., 2020, March 24b), calling for helicopter money. Ultimately, we can state that both politicians highlighted how they were facing the same difficulties as everyone else in the UK, to create a connection with the people and to comfort them.

During the second lockdown, Farage remained consistent with his criticism. Interestingly, he relaunched his Brexit Party, making it anti-lockdown and renaming it Reform UK. Farage presented the lockdown as a political choice (*Fig. 13*) and presented himself as an advocate to those who disagree with the imposed restrictions. In doing so, he challenged the government, accused of "not working" as it had imposed a state of emergency without considering the wants or needs of the UK's citizens.

Sturgeon, on the other hand, switched to a less rigid vision of lockdown, as she started asking for looser restrictions (*Fig. 14*). In her idea, due to the reduced number of covid-related cases in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK, the government should have allowed for softer measures in the area. Unlike Farage, though, she remained formal and collaborative in her communicative style. She presented facts objectively and professionally, maintaining a neutral stance in her tweet, without attacking the government even though she did not agree with its choices.

Figure 13. – Farage, N. (2020, November 1).

Figure 14. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, October 31).

This is further confirmed in other tweets, like the one in *Figure 15*, where she is underlining the government's lack of clarity and concreteness concerning furloughs. Moreover, the use of 'we' in this tweet creates an opposition between the Scottish government (or Scottish people) and that of the UK. Despite her criticism of the government, she was overall diplomatic in asking for more decisive resolutions, avoiding aggressive tones, firmly stating that what the Scottish government had heard thus far were "woolly words".

Farage goes to an opposite direction, being extremely direct in his tweets against the government and not sparing colourful expressions to refer to other politicians. In a tweet where he directly addressed the Prime Minister, he accused him of being responsible for a disaster in the UK, stating that "On November 5th, Boris Johnson is blowing up our economy, our liberty and his own entire legacy" (Farage N., 2020, October 31a), following a press conference in which Johnson established a four-week lockdown. Moreover, in the tweet showed in *Figure 16*, Farage used similar tones to criticise the government in derogatory terms, describing it as a "complete shower" characterised by "incompetence, lack of leadership, dither, delay and no courage whatsoever", following a repeated postponement of a news conference.
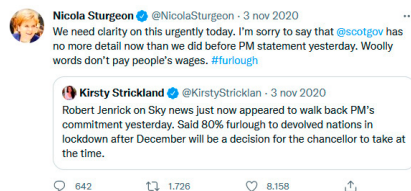
Figure 15. – Sturgeon, N. (2020, November 3).

Figure 16. – Farage, N. (2020, October 31b).

Ultimately, although some similarities can be found in Sturgeon and Farage's posts, it is also true that the two politicians' communicative strategies differ in some ways. Farage's focus is on giving contribution, also as a form of government delegitimation (the most frequent category in his case), and he distinguishes himself for his hyperbolic, sarcastic style. Sturgeon, on the contrary, has a more institutional approach, uses more emojis and is more concerned in connecting with the people and providing guidelines, especially during the first lockdown. Only during the second lockdown she criticises the government on some occasions, but she rarely does so explicitly.

What emerges from the qualitative analysis of the British data is a less 'visual' approach to social media as opposed to the Italian. Regarding the category of government delegitimation, prominent similarities can be observed between Salvini, Meloni and Farage, while Sturgeon stands out for her collaborative attitude. The reason might lie in the different role they played: while Farage, Salvini and Meloni belonged to the political opposition, Sturgeon was in fact the First Minister of Scotland at the time. This might explain why they had such different tones. Among all, Meloni and Sturgeon appear to have a more institutional style. Moreover, while Salvini and Meloni often cite newspapers to legitimise their opinions, Sturgeon never does so and Farage shares news either to legitimise his ideas or to comment them negatively, thus presenting his perspectives on specific events.

4. Quantitative analysis

Given the criteria for data selection, all sub-corpora contain words referring to the coronavirus and more generally to the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic such as the Italian lemmas *mascherina* (facemask), coronavirus, *quarantena* (quarantine), virus, *amuchina* (disinfectant), *contagio* (transmission), *contagiare* (to transmit), *infettare* (to infect), *pandemia* (pandemic) or the English ones (corona) virus, lockdown, ventilator, vaccine, pandemic, quarantine, herd. Similarly, all sub-corpora contain references to other, mainly European, countries and their political leaders that, particularly in the second lockdown, were used as examples of different strategies adopted at the time to constrain the pandemic. With relative differences in the two countries, all sub-corpora have keywords referring to national politicians, politics and specific policies enacted during the lockdowns. All these words were considered strictly related to the very nature of the topic of the corpus, its aboutness (Scott 2001, 110), and consequently were not investigated further.

Starting the analysis with Salvini's sub-corpora, and filtering keywords further[13], including only those with a keyness of 10 or more, for the first lockdown we are left with eleven keywords that express disagreement and mockery[14]: *zitto* (shut up, 646), *vergognare* (to be ashamed, 526), *tacere* (to shut up, 535), *propaganda* (394), *vergogna* (shame, 222), *bacioni* (big kisses, 111), *mojito* (107), *fregare* ([not] to care, 224), *idiozia* (idiocy, 105), *troll* (101), *Papeete* (81); *mojito* and *Papeete* are caustic remarks to Salvini's flamboyant lifestyle as a regular attendee of the sea resort club Papeete, while *bacioni* is used to mock his disrespectful way of greeting his political opponents.

What characterises Salvini's sub-corpus is the widespread use of swearing (13 keywords)[15], slurs and insults (25 keywords)[16], which com-

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[13] The keywords matching the new keyness threshold are include in *Tables 4* and *5*.

[14] Frequencies of the identifies keywords will be presented in brackets to show the extent of their use.

[15] They include: *cazzo* (fuck, 1327), *cazzata* (bullshit, 496), *merda* (shit, 575), *culo* (arse, 463), *cagare* (fuck off, 305), *stronzata* (bullshit, 174), *schifo* (sucks, 267), *vaffanculo* (fuck off, 119), *sciacallaggio* (profiteering, 113), *minchia* (fuck, 116), *salvinivergognati* (shameonsalvini, 105), *caxxo* (f*ck, 98), *minchiate* (bullshit, 89).

[16] *sciacallo* (jackal, 1237), *coglione* (arsehole, 829), *buffone* (buffoon, 555), *cazzaro* (dumb-ass, 299), *pagliaccio* (clown, 294), *salvinisciacallo* (salvinijackal, 221), *cialtrone* (slacker, 242), *idiota* (idiot, 303), *capitone* (201), *cretino* (dimwit, 252), *ignorante* (ignorant, 264), *imbecille* (moron, 188), *matto* (crazy, 260), *scemo* (dumb, 156), *pirla* (jerk, 118), *ridicolo* (ridiculous, 243), *demente* (stupid, 118), *incompetente* (incompetent, 127), *razzista*

bined represent more than half of the identified keywords. Obviously, not all their occurrences are addressed to Matteo Salvini but his sarcastic tone is frequently the target of insults; one of his tweets of 15 March 2020 asking for a complete lockdown, schools included, has among the following illustrative replies: "Ma vattene a fanculo #salvinisciacallo", "Cazzaro", "Tu il lavoro non lo conosci lurido sciacallo merdoso ladrone leghista infame"[17].

During the second lockdown we identified fewer keywords[18] but the described trend is very similar, displaying a majority of keywords that are expressions of insults, disagreement, and mockery.

Also, the analysis of Meloni's keywords during the first lockdown highlights a relative majority of terms referring to disagreement (8 keywords), swearing (10 keywords), and direct insults (13 keywords). It is in the very limited number of terms identified during the second lockdown that, together with criticism and swearing, we witness a higher number of terms that pick up, without necessarily criticising them, themes used by Giorgia Meloni, as the references to the *monopattino* (kick scooter, 67) discussed in the previous paragraph show.

Moving on to the UK keywords, *Table 5*, we see that the lemmas for the Farage sub-corpora are very similar to those identified for Matteo Salvini. Even apparently innocent keywords, e.g. 'veg' (111), are used to criticise him and his sarcastic remarks; Farage's criticism of a programme to hire workers from European countries to collect fruit and vegetable, instead of offering those jobs to British citizens, is met with replies, such as "veg is rotting while you practice your dangerous populism", "Obviously never done a day fruit/veg picking in your life!!", and "Why don't you go and pick some veg?" that express criticism to the easy solutions he is offering during a very critical time for the country.

In line with the results of the analysis of Sturgeon's tweets, also the replies display a different tendency. Insults are very limited, idiot (82), shut (150), fuck (118), while for the first time we find terms that are expressions of solidarity, clap (81), or group belonging, expressed through the use Scottish terms wee (108), yer (58), aye (54).

(racist, 172), *deficiente* (retarded, 108), *incapace* (incompetent, 242), *matta* (crazy, 95), *irresponsabile* (irresponsible, 117), *patetico* (pathetic, 114), *cazzaroverde* (greenfuck, 81).

[17] "Just go fuck off #salvinisciacallo", "Dumb-ass", "you don't know what work is, you filthy jackal, shitty thief, shamefull legista [form the La Lega party]".

[18] The number of keywords that match the selected criteria decreases when we select a smaller sub-corpus; this explains the quantitative differences between the 1st and 2nd lockdown as well as the differences among the four politicians.

Table 4. – Italian keywords.

Salvini 1st lockdown		Meloni 1st lockdown		Salvini 2nd lockdown		Meloni 2nd lockdown	
Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score
sciacallo	125	Giorgia	126	mascherina	83	incapace	27
coglione	72	Meloni	73	cheerleader	66	cazzata	42
Salvini	63	MES	56	Trump	58	cazzo	28
buffone	55	zitto	46	Salvini	54	vergognare	31
cazzo	51	italexit	45	coglione	47	covid	67
zitto	50	sciacalla	39	cazzata	44	pandemia	26
cazzata	42	sciacallo	39	covid	41	sanità	15
merda	40	coronavirus	36	cazzo	37	virus	15
mascherina	34	coglione	35	Biden	34	Meloni	96
cazzaro	33	cazzo	35	merda	33	Giorgia	74
coronavirus	30	Lagarde	32	clandestino	31	monopattino	62
vergognare	30	vergognare	31	vergognare	30	salvini	42
pagliaccio	29	sovranisti	31	pagliaccio	29	stipendio	22
leghista	29	cazzata	29	tweet	29	governare	22
culo	28	Bertolaso	29	zitto	29	opposizione	21
cagare	27	sciacallaggio	29	lockdown	27	governo	16
tacere	27	amuchina	28	Lamorgese	26	tu	14
quarantena	26	giorgiameloni	27	sciacallo	25	Conte	14
salvinisciacallo	25	virus	26	Capezzone	25	nominare	14
cialtrone	25	melone	26	schifo	22	Calabria	14
virus	25	idiota	24	Mattè	22		
Zaia	24	mascherina	24	culo	22		
mattè	23	iorestoacasa	23	idiota	21		
idiota	23	merda	22	incapace	21		
capitone	23	culo	22	salvinibloccami	21		
Bertolaso	22	Salvini	21	Cotticelli	21		
cretino	22	propaganda	21	contagio	21		
iorestoacasa	22	cagare	20	buffone	21		
Matteo	21	quarantena	20	ignorante	20		
propaganda	20	sovranista	19	salvinivergognati	20		
italexit	20	Slovenia	18	incompetente	20		
ignorante	18	ignorante	18	tampone	20		
stronzata	18	tacere	18	Matteo	20		
imbecille	17	chiudere	18	monopattino	19		
Morisi	17	imbecille	18	sbarco	19		
matteosalvinimi	17	Consob	17	virus	19		
schifo	17	tweet	17	cagare	18		
amuchina	17	cretino	17	vergogna	18		

Salvini 1st lockdown		Meloni 1st lockdown		Salvini 2nd lockdown		Meloni 2nd lockdown	
Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score
chiuderetutto	16	giorgina	16	Giletti	18		
contagio	15	schifo	16	assembramento	18		
matto	15	ipocrita	16	matteosalvinimi	18		
Lagarde	15	idiozia	14	cazzaro	17		
contagiare	14	tu	14	pandemia	17		
capitano	14	UE	14	Lombardia	17		
rompere	14	vergogna	14	sfiga	16		
scemo	14	scemo	13	Fontana	16		
vaffanculo	13	pandemia	13	stronzata	16		
sciacallaggio	13	italiani	12	cialtrone	16		
pirla	13	Mattarella	12	matto	15		
ridicolo	13	frontiera	12	DPCM	15		
vergogna	13	Conte	12	imbecille	15		
demente	13	contagio	12	ridicolo	14		
minchia	13	contagiare	11	propaganda	14		
salvinivergognati	13	smettere	11	Maio	14		
bacioni	13	governo	11	leghista	13		
incompetente	12	incapace	11	ondata	13		
mojito	12	confusione	10	governo	13		
razzista	12	rompere	10	selfie	13		
deficiente	12	emergenza	10	governatore	13		
caxxo	11	Europa	10	lega	12		
fregare	11	polemica	10	governare	12		
idiozia	11	fregare	10	Conte	12		
incapace	11	epidemia	10	opposizione	11		
sovranisti	11			contagiare	11		
Conte	11			quarantena	11		
infettare	11			razzista	11		
matta	11			capitano	10		
irresponsabile	11			tacere	10		
troll	11			vaccino	10		
coranavirusitalia	11			fregare	10		
giuseppeconteit	11			arancione	10		
patetico	10						
minchiate	10						
lega	10						
sparisci	10						
Giletti	10						
cazzaroverde	10						

Salvini 1st lockdown		Meloni 1st lockdown		Salvini 2nd lockdown		Meloni 2nd lockdown	
Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score
pandemia	10						
Papeete	10						
Matté	10						

Table 5. – UK keywords.

Farage 1st lockdown		Sturgeon 1st lockdown		Farage 2nd lockdown		Sturgeon 2nd lockdown	
Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score
Nigel	150	Nicola	122	Nigel	184	lockdown	163
Macron	138	Boris	55	Farage	141	furlough	162
Farage	136	Sturgeon	43	lockdown	134	Nicola	78
Nige	119	SNP	38	Nige	108	SNP	70
fuck	74	ppe	37	covid	101	covid	64
Boris	61	lockdown	33	Boris	73	Sturgeon	60
Cummings	55	clap	29	fuck	62	tier	47
idiot	54	necessity	29	trump	53	Boris	44
shut	50	Fm	28	idiot	43	devolve	40
twat	44	essential	27	_farage	37	gov	38
moron	40	wee	25	Brexit	37	Westminster	38
border	39	idiot	24	grift	36	independence	36
virus	32	gov	24	virus	35	wm	35
_farage	31	NH	24	twat	30	Scotland	34
stupid	29	Yer	22	grifter	29	indy	29
shit	27	virus	22	shit	26	FM	28
racist	25	shut	22	flu	25	wee	27
EU	24	distancing	22	bandwagon	21	Scot	26
irrelevant	24	tweet	21	arse	21	virus	26
Brexit	23	Aye	21	moron	20	tweet	25
govt	22	fuck	19	gullible	20	idiot	23
thankfully	22	troll	19	immunity	20	aye	22
Dominic	21	worker	18	mask	19	govt	21
Khan	21	Scot	16	tory	18	borrow	19
lockdown	19	clarification	16	vaccine	18	eh	19
prick	18	ya	16	racist	18	fuck	17
brit	18	Scotland	15	govt	18	beg	16
tweet	17	non	15	dolphin	18	twitter	16
oh	17	clarity	15	stupid	17	tory	16
utter	17	self	15	piss	17	restriction	15
cunt	17	vulnerable	14	vote	16	nationalist	15

Farage 1st lockdown		Sturgeon 1st lockdown		Farage 2nd lockdown		Sturgeon 2nd lockdown	
Item	*Score*	*Item*	*Score*	*Item*	*Score*	*Item*	*Score*
veg	17	dont	13	mate	16	lock	15
France	17	stay	12	opportunist	16	stupid	15
arse	16	NHS	12	cunt	15	borrowing	15
ventilator	16	cant	12	Sweden	15	u	14
mate	16	tomorrow	12	pandemic	15	trump	14
Johnson	15	u	11	oh	15	border	14
bot	15	supermarket	11	shut	15	shut	14
clown	15	coronavirus	11	clown	15	resign	13
pandemic	15	tory	11	quarantine	14	Scottish	13
piss	14	thank	10	fool	13	pandemic	13
corona	14			fascist	13	England	13
pathetic	14			politician	13	nation	12
eh	14			irrelevant	13	dont	12
bullshit	14			tweet	12	money	11
ffs	13			Tories	12	unionist	11
hypocrite	13			reset	11	Glasgow	11
sovereignty	13			anti	11	lol	10
blame	13			party	11		
selfish	12			election	10		
immigrant	12			yeah	10		
obey	12			herd	10		
shutdown	12			poll	10		
fascist	12			conspiracy	10		
ppl	11						
immunity	11						
remainer	11						
nonsense	11						
unelected	11						
globalisation	11						
ignorant	11						
fool	11						
gov	10						

5. CONCLUSION

The qualitative part of the analysis revealed that all leaders used Twitter strategically for different purposes – linked to their institutional roles – during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Sturgeon employed Twitter to recommend specific guidelines, represent herself as a reliable institutional figure and to reassure the Scottish people, insisting on the Scottish context and identity. Our findings thus confirm those of previous studies (March, 2017) that highlight how Sturgeon's 'soft' approach to social media communication, an approach that rejects the continuous use of delegitimation strategies and hate speech, can be related to the more inclusionary, socio-economically focused nature of left populism, revolving around the pro-immigration, pro-EU, and institutional stance of the SNP. Moreover, it has been observed (Pappas and Kriesi 2015) that populist leaders tend to mitigate their discourse when they are in charge, which confirms some of the trends that emerged from the qualitative analysis of Sturgeon's tweets.

On the other hand, Farage, Salvini, and Meloni used their accounts primarily to criticise the government's action while representing themselves as the right and reassuring leaders the people should follow. In addition, Farage exploited this time of crisis – more precisely the 2nd lockdown – to relaunch his Brexit party as Reform UK describing it as the political alternative to lockdown.

These leaders share many similarities but they do differ on some aspects. For instance, all of them changed their opinion about restrictions from the 1st to the 2nd lockdown, except for Farage who has always been against all restrictive policies; Sturgeon, diverging from Farage, Salvini, and Meloni, is the only leader whose populist rhetoric is not dominated by delegitimation, hate speech, and references to immigration. Although all leaders employ similar strategies, they have different attitudes. Sturgeon and Meloni represent themselves as reliable and firm politicians, using a more institutional (Sturgeon) or professional (Meloni) communicative approach. On the other hand, Farage and Salvini share a more over-the-top, flamboyant, and hyperbolic communicative style, supported by a widespread use of sarcasm.

These different attitudes and styles seem to have a strong effect on Twitter users' responses. The quantitative analysis has highlighted that Salvini and Farage, the two politicians sharing a more over-the-top attitude, receive the largest share of insults and criticism. Meloni's tweets receive open opposition, which is in turn possibly slightly mitigated by

her blunt yet low-key style. Sturgeon is the only politician who receives more support by Twitter users, possibly due to her institutional role as well as to her 'soft' approach to social media communication.

Even if it is not possible to identify a direct cause and effect relationship between the style of the politician and the reaction it produces in the online users' responses, we argue that there is a strong connection between populists' attitudes and Twitter users' responses, which should be investigated further, and which could shed new light on the interactional dynamics of online polarising discourses.

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