

Visual Political Communication of Competing Leadership: Italy's 2024 European Election Campaign on Social Media

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Abstract

The article presents an interdisciplinary analytical framework contributing to the growing research field of visual political communication, focusing on the case of the social media images published by Italian politicians during the 2024 European elections campaign (May–June 2024). In the first part, the article outlines the context of the analytical framework at the intersection of three main research fields: political communication, in particular the study of electoral campaigns via social media; visual culture and communication, precisely the analysis of the visual representation, self-representation, and counter-representation of political leaders; and computer science, in particular the application of machine learning techniques for computer vision to recognize and categorize visual political content. In the second part, the article offers an application of the analytical framework by sharing some empirical results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the visual content published by 21 Italian political actors on Facebook and Instagram during the campaign, focusing on their main visual formats, themes, and strategies of representation of political leadership. In the analysis, deep learning models are also employed to detect specific image characteristics by cross-referencing their outputs with manual cataloguing performed on the same images and for the same attributes. In the end, on the basis of the research carried out, the article suggests possible paths for future interdisciplinary analysis of online visual political communication.

Keywords

AI images; computer vision; digital campaigns; electoral campaigns; political communication; political leadership; visual political communication

1. Introduction

This article offers a contribution to the increasing research field of visual politics, particularly visual political communication (Lilleker & Veneti, 2023; Veneti et al., 2019). It focuses on the 2024 European Parliament elections, which offered a fertile opportunity to study how political actors produce and disseminate visual content to shape political communication, frame key issues, and performatively construct leader identities. In particular, the article investigates these dynamics through a mixed-method analysis of social media images circulated by Italian political parties and candidates during the campaign period with the aim of analyzing their political meanings and strategic uses aimed at self-promotion and distinctive positioning.

Theoretically, the article is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that combines various research strands from three key domains: political-electoral communication, visual culture and communication, and computer science. The research questions deal with the ways in which political images—photographs, graphics, and hybrid visual webcards—are crafted and deployed across digital platforms to assert leadership, mobilize public sentiment, and polarize debate. The empirical analysis thus aims to identify recurring patterns, stylistic repertoires, and thematic frames, while also assessing the extent to which different visual formats contribute to shifting representations of political leadership and power. Methodologically, it integrates quantitative and qualitative visual content analysis with computer vision and computational analysis.

The relevance of this inquiry lies in several converging trends. First, the increasing personalization of politics has led to the transformation of traditional codes of representation, offering new opportunities and requiring new visual strategies for self-representation and political branding of leadership. Second, social media platforms have introduced affordances and constraints that influence content production and circulation, fostering visual formats tailored to mobile devices and algorithmic visibility. Third, the hybridization of online visual practices and genres has blurred the symbolic boundaries between formal and informal political discourse, complicating established notions of institutional legitimacy and political participation, within an increasing trend towards “pop politics.”

The empirical component of this research is based on a systematic collection and analysis of visual content from a selected set of official social media accounts of political actors active in the Italian campaign for the 2024 European elections. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including computational techniques for visual analysis, the study maps the diversity of visual practices across parties and candidates, with a focus also on the adoption of generative AI for image making. Recurring themes include national and European identity, migration, climate crisis, and Italy’s role in the European Union—each visually framed to either reinforce alignment or accentuate symbolic conflict.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, it outlines the theoretical background on visual political communication on social media during electoral campaigns, drawing on recent scholarly literature. Second, it presents the interdisciplinary methodological framework that was developed for the research project, including content analysis and computational tools for image recognition. Third, it presents and discusses the empirical findings derived from both quantitative and qualitative analyses of image typologies, visual formats, and political communication strategies, focusing mainly on the visual representation of political leaders and opponents. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the results and reflects on some implications of platform-driven visual political communication as well as on the methodological opportunities and challenges of analyzing visual data in an evolving and hybrid media ecosystem.

By critically examining how images function as meaningful tools of political leadership's image-making, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on visual politics and visual political communication and it offers methodological insights for future research in political communication. It underscores the need to consider both the content and infrastructure of visual campaigning to understand the evolving dynamics of political representation and potential voter engagement in the platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018).

2. Visual Politics and Electoral Campaigns on Social Media Platforms: A Literature Review

Since the article is positioned at the intersection of three major research fields, the literature review follows a similar tripartition. The first area is the study of political communication and electoral campaigns in the platform society. Contemporary electoral campaigns are carried out through a balance of traditional and innovative strategies. Within hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013) the coexistence of “old” and “new” media concerns the practices through which political communication is produced during campaigns (Novelli et al., 2022), the digital contexts and affordances enabling the participation of a plurality of social and political actors (Gerbaudo, 2019), and the visibility strategies that aim to shape political campaigns also according to platform logics (Bossetta, 2018; Lilleker & Veneti, 2023; Stier et al., 2018).

The second area focuses on visual culture and visual communication. This field of research deals with the production, circulation, social uses, and symbolic meanings of images, particularly in the process of visual representation, self-representation, and counter-representation of political leaders (Cheles & Giacone, 2022; Hall et al., 2024). As a vast literature has shown, the image of the political leader is the result of a process of social construction merging the traits of the “superleader” and those of the “everyman” within a media environment in which the symbolic boundaries between politics, news, and popular culture become increasingly hybrid (Farkas et al., 2022; Novelli, 2019; Wood et al., 2016). In this process, a central role is played by the practices of visual self-representation via social media aimed at constructing a trustworthy relationship based on intimacy, emotionality, and a seemingly ordinary and realistic quality. These practices are also expressed through selfie opportunities with electoral constituencies increasingly managed and nurtured as communities of fans of the politician-celebrity. These communicative practices are part of broader disintermediation strategies that circumvent the traditional media while attracting their attention, especially during newsworthy political events (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Karadimitriou & Veneti, 2016). In this context, visual narratives and counter-narratives of political power—as well as strategies of self-representation and representation of political opponents—are equally relevant, and they both depend on the platformization of visual cultural production and online visibility regimes (Archetti, 2014; Magaudda & Solaroli, 2020). Indeed, these processes can facilitate the diffusion of specific visual formats or individual images at the expense of others. Their comprehension requires the development of new theoretical and methodological frameworks to investigate the processes of online circulation of images (Faulkner et al., 2018; Rogers, 2021) and their functions in visual political communication (Farkas, 2024; Schill, 2012). A recent line of research has focused on the patterns and effects of politicians' image-based political communication strategies on social media (Bracciale & Martella, 2023; Farkas & Bene, 2021) and the social media strategies of candidates and officeholders using computer graphics (Peng, 2021). More recently, the impact of generative AI software of visual content making during political campaigns has also emerged as a worthy area of empirical research (Atar, 2025).

The third and final disciplinary area is computer science, in particular the integration of tools offered by computer vision and the application of machine learning techniques for the analytical categorization of the symbolic and visual dimensions of political narratives (Joo & Steinert-Threlkeld, 2018; Peng & Lu, 2023). Considering the image classification task, the convolutional neural network (CNN) offers an ideal set of models. CNNs (LeCun et al., 1998) combine one of the most used operations in image processing and computer vision, namely, convolution, with a neural network having many “depth” levels (hence the concept of deep learning). Their strength lies in hierarchical feature extraction using convolutional filters which excel at capturing local patterns and textures. However, CNNs possess inherent limitations, primarily their restricted receptive fields, which can make it challenging to effectively model long-range dependencies and overall context within an image. To overcome this limitation, we chose to use a model based on vision transformers (Diko et al., 2024; Vaswani et al., 2017), a neural network adapted from the highly successful transformer architecture used in natural language processing. Vision transformers treat an image as a sequence of patches (tokens) and employ self-attention mechanisms to weigh the importance of different patches relative to each other. This approach presents advantages. First of all, the self-attention mechanism allows vision transformers to model dependencies between any two patches in the image, regardless of their spatial distance. This enables a more holistic understanding of the image content compared to the localized view of CNNs. Secondly, transformers have demonstrated exceptional capabilities in transfer learning. Models pre-trained on massive, diverse datasets such as ImageNet learn rich, general-purpose visual representations. These representations can be effectively transferred and fine-tuned for specific downstream tasks, even those with smaller, specialized datasets, often leading to superior performance compared to training from scratch or using CNNs pre-trained on the same data. The applications of visual transformers range from image classification to object detection, semantic segmentation, and more, thus showing competitive performance compared to CNN-based methods, especially in tasks that benefit from a more global understanding of the visual context.

3. Methodology

The analytical corpus consists of images produced and disseminated on social media by a selection of official accounts belonging to political parties and individual politicians during the Italian electoral campaign for the European Parliament elections held in June 2024. A total of 21 accounts were monitored, with 11 belonging to political parties: +Europa (+E), Alleanza Verdi Sinistra (AVS), Azione (AZ), Europa Verde (EV), Forza Italia (FI), Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi), Italia Viva (IV), Lega (LN), Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), Partito Democratico (PD), and Sinistra Italiana (SI). Ten accounts belonged to prominent candidates/leaders from those parties: Angelo Bonelli (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà), Antonio Tajani (FI), Carlo Calenda (AZ), Elly Schlein (PD), Emma Bonino (+E), Giorgia Meloni (Fdi), Giuseppe Conte (M5S), Matteo Renzi (IV), Matteo Salvini (LN), and Nicola Fratoianni (SI).

Data collection, conducted on Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram), was carried out over the four weeks preceding the vote, from May 12 to June 9, 2024. It covered the entire production of social content published during this period by those accounts, including both materials directly related to the electoral campaign and more generic content. An automated acquisition platform (web scraping) was developed in collaboration with a web agency, which collected and archived posts shared by the monitored accounts on Facebook and Instagram during the analysis period. A total of 3,635 posts and 6,786 individual images were collected. The platform allowed for an initial systematization of the corpus through a manual tagging system.

A mixed-method (quantitative-qualitative) content analysis approach was then adopted. Once the relevant properties were identified, they were operationalized into variables and corresponding values. A dedicated back-end platform was also developed for content analysis where researchers uploaded individual images and filled out an analysis codebook consisting of 42 variables for each one. The analysis sheet, designed by the research team, was developed based on a review of tools and methods already used internationally for analyzing social media content in electoral campaigns (Novelli et al., 2022) and by observing previous classification efforts of electoral materials conducted during national and European campaign monitoring by research centers in Europe.

Although primarily aimed at analyzing visual content, variables were also included to explore the interplay between visual and textual elements of the content and posts. These variables sought to identify aspects such as the emotional/rational component of the message, the overall tone of the post, the presence of negative elements or calls to action, and platform-specific dynamics like production and resharing practices, sponsorships, and cross-platform integration (Schrieck et al., 2023).

The validation of the codebook's operational soundness and the adherence to reliability criteria—such as stability, reproducibility, and accuracy—took place during a testing phase involving a selection of corpus units. This was followed by the drafting of classification guidelines and a training period attended by all analysts involved.

Each of the 6,786 coded images was assigned a unique ID containing information on author, platform, format, and whether it belonged to a carousel. Using Python scripts, these IDs were employed to filter and automatically organize the images along various analytical dimensions: authorship, thematic, formal, and content-based. A shared ID was adopted for images belonging to the same carousel, differentiated by an alphabetical suffix, facilitating the aggregation and analysis of multiple contents from the same post. This enabled the extraction of the second corpus of posts ($n = 3,635$), the comparison between the two corpora (images and posts), and the quantitative analysis of visual overproduction. Once the quantitative processing—aimed at identifying patterns, themes, and formats—was completed, the qualitative analysis of visual content led to the construction of a matrix of the most recurring visual formats, which helped highlight how images were used across the main thematic categories that emerged.

A computer vision approach was applied in parallel. The standard vision transformer architecture represents a significant shift in computer vision, yet it is not without challenges. A notable issue, particularly in deeper network layers, is feature collapsing. This phenomenon occurs as information passes through the sequence of transformer blocks. The powerful self-attention mechanism, designed to capture global relationships, can excessively aggregate features from different image patches. Consequently, the resulting feature representations become increasingly similar, losing their distinctiveness and fine-grained details such as edges, textures, and local patterns, which are effectively captured in the earlier layers. These low-level features are often vital for accurate image classification and other vision tasks, especially in scenarios like ours where the data corpus is very limited. Motivated by this, we shift our focus to the use of the residual vision transformer (ReViT; Diko et al., 2024), which specifically addresses this feature collapse problem. It retains the fundamental structure of the vision transformer but incorporates a crucial modification known as the Residual Attention mechanism to enhance feature diversity.

4. Visual Formats

4.1. The Classification of Visual Formats

The analysis of 3,635 posts published by 21 accounts identified 6,786 images, divided into two main categories: photographs (43%, $n = 2,927$) and webcards (57%, $n = 3,859$), each characterized by different types and production practices. Webcards are defined as visual content that can combine images (photographic or graphic), texts, symbols, logos, and slogans. Original content is largely predominant ($n = 5,927$) compared to content derived from other sources, either through direct reposting ($n = 279$)—i.e., sharing a post produced by another account in its original form—or in the form of hybrid content ($n = 580$), meaning shared content in which textual (copy, captions) and/or visual elements are modified or graphically reworked. The vast majority of photographs (86.7%) are specific ($n = 2,539$), meaning they are situated images referring to particular contexts, events, or subjects. These are followed by generic or stock images (12.6%, $n = 371$), considered as archival material, not linked to a specific event, without an associated place and/or date, and where the identity of subjects and/or objects is not explicitly stated.

The macro-category of webcards includes the following types: photographic, the most common (52.6%, $n = 2,031$), where the image plays a central role compared to the text; textual (33.2%, $n = 1,282$), where the written component visually dominates and the graphic component plays a marginal or merely background role; graphic (9.9%, $n = 381$), characterized by data visualizations or concise informational elements such as infographics or stylized components; posters (2%, $n = 77$); iconic photographs (1.7%, $n = 65$); and memes (0.6%, $n = 23$) are residual categories.

Although, overall, webcards are more widely used than photographs, the analysis by actors—i.e., the account holders—reveals different image usage practices tied to their previous traditions and communication styles. Among the leaders' accounts, photographs prevail over webcards ($n = 1,760$ vs. $n = 727$): Elly Schlein ($n = 410$), Carlo Calenda ($n = 316$), and Matteo Renzi ($n = 256$) top the production list. The proportion of photographs within posted images is very high in some leaders' accounts: Matteo Renzi (92.4%), Giorgia Meloni (87.7%), Antonio Tajani (85.8%), and Elly Schlein (85.2%). In party accounts, however, webcards prevail over photographs ($n = 3,132$ vs. $n = 1,167$). Webcards are especially prevalent in the image content of certain parties: FdI (96.1%), PD (89.7%), +E (83.1%), and AVS (82%). The most prolific producer of this macro-category is LN, which alone generated 863 webcards (22.4% of the total), followed by FdI (10.2%, $n = 394$).

The analysis of the functions that photographs and webcards serve within posts identified seven distinct types: agenda/calendar, as a reminder for appointments, events, and campaign initiatives; program, to present one or more program points; thematic, focused on a specific theme; news, based on current events and news stories; fundraising, to promote donations in support of the party; campaign activity, images of various electoral events and initiatives; and biographical/leader, related to the candidate/leader's personal and/or professional history. Among party accounts, the program function is particularly relevant, representing 14.6% ($n = 626$) of the images, compared to just 3.5% ($n = 86$) in leaders' accounts. Conversely, the news function ranks third for leader accounts at 10.5% ($n = 260$), but drops to 5.2% ($n = 224$) in party accounts. The biographical/leader (6.45% for party aggregate, 4.7% for leaders) and fundraising (2.5%, seen only in party aggregate) uses are marginal.

The two macro-categories correspond to clearly defined and differentiated communication practices and purposes. Webcards are far more frequently used than photographs for the agenda/calendar ($n = 735$ vs. $n = 99$), program ($n = 628$ vs. $n = 84$), and news ($n = 434$ vs. $n = 50$) functions. Conversely, for the campaign activity function, aimed at showcasing and documenting organized initiatives, photographs predominate ($n = 1,922$ vs. $n = 161$).

Table 1. Distribution of visual content functions across party and leader account aggregates, classified by main content category (photo and webcard).

Functions	Leader Accounts	Party Accounts	Total
Photo	1,760	1,167	2,927
News	30	20	50
Agenda/Calendar	47	52	99
Biographical/Leader	108	81	189
Campaign	1,172	750	1,922
Program	26	58	84
Thematic	352	190	542
Other	25	16	41
Webcard	727	3,132	3,859
News	230	204	434
Agenda/Calendar	157	578	735
Biographical/Leader	8	194	202
Campaign	23	138	161
Fundraising	—	106	106
Program	60	568	628
Thematic	226	1188	1,414
Other	23	156	179
Total	2,487	4,299	6,786

Filtering the two macro-categories according to thematic classification, webcards are used more frequently for policy issues ($n = 1,911$) compared to photographs ($n = 577$), whereas photographs are more commonly used for campaign issues ($n = 2,098$) than webcards ($n = 1,585$). There is no significant dominance of either macro-category for personal issues ($n = 180$ webcards and $n = 130$ photos) or political issues ($n = 144$ webcards and $n = 122$ photos). No substantial quantitative differences emerge between the two aggregates of party and leader accounts.

Finally, particularly significant in terms of format and use is the spread of carousels, which include multiple images in a single post. With carousels, the post becomes something to scroll through horizontally, without switching accounts. Across the 21 monitored accounts, 684 carousels were posted, containing 3,823 images. This means that over half (56%) of the total 6,786 images were published in a multi-image format: 2,552 photographs and 1,271 webcards. This mode is very widespread and, especially for webcards, many accounts have adopted graphic solutions—such as arrows and swipe indicators—to highlight it.

4.2. The Automatic Recognition of Visual Formats and Categories

The core task of the computer science work in this research project has been to develop an automated system to enable large-scale analysis of visual campaign materials across different candidates and platforms, which could be capable of accurately categorizing visual content from political campaigns distinguishing particularly between the two main categories of webcard and image. This initial classification can serve as a foundational step for more complex analyses, such as identifying specific themes within webcards.

A vision transformer approach was selected for this project. Specifically, we utilized the ReViT architecture (Diko et al., 2024) pre-trained on large-scale image data (Russakovsky et al., 2015) to benefit from its robust feature representations before fine-tuning our specific political campaign dataset. The ReViT architecture begins, like a standard vision transformer, with a sample input (web card or image) and proceeds with patch embedding (Dosovitskiy et al., 2020; Vaswani et al., 2017). The input sample is first divided into a grid of non-overlapping, fixed-size patches. Each patch is then flattened into a vector and linearly projected into a higher-dimensional embedding space. Crucially, learnable positional embeddings are added to these patch embeddings. Since the self-attention mechanism itself is permutation-invariant (doesn't inherently know the order or position of patches), these positional embeddings provide the model with essential information about the original spatial arrangement of the patches within the image. An additional learnable “class token” embedding is often prepended to the sequence of patch embeddings, serving as an aggregate representation of the entire image for the final classification task (Figure 1).

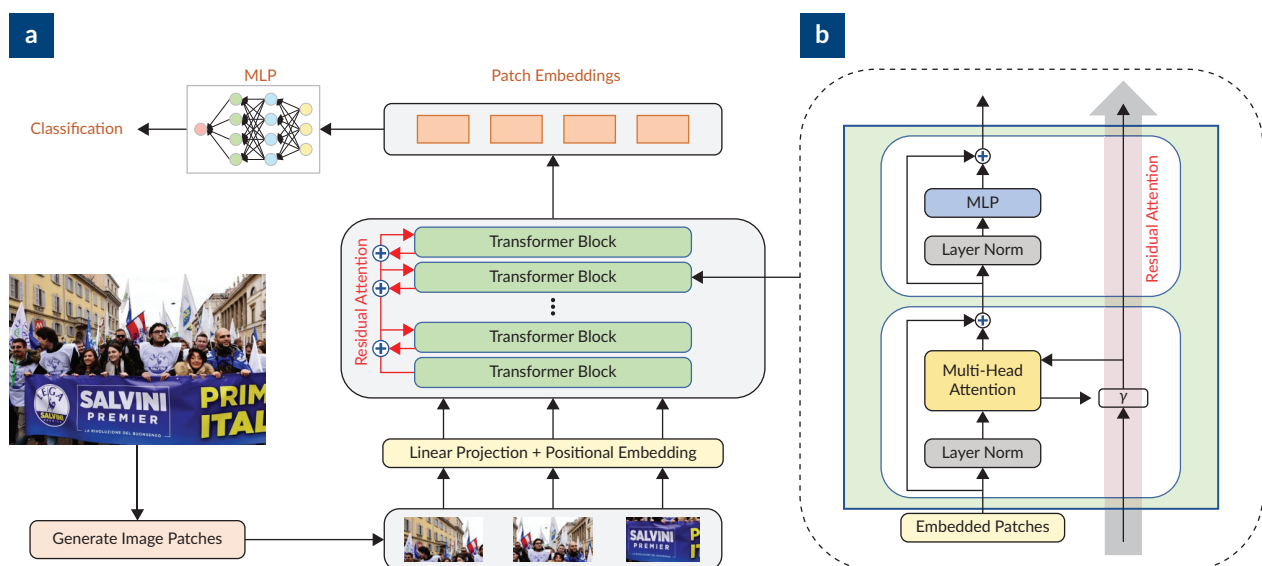


Figure 1. ReViT Architecture in (a) and ReViT's transformer block composition in (b).

This embedded patch sequence then flows through a series of identical transformer blocks. Each block performs complex computations to refine the patch representations by considering their relationships. These blocks are stacked sequentially, allowing the model to build increasingly complex and abstract representations. The fine-tuning of the pre-trained ReViT model on the in-house political campaign dataset was performed using specific optimization and loss function choices. The training process employs a workflow centered on the ReViT model. Input samples consist of images paired with their corresponding labels (0 for web card, 1 for image). These images are fed into the ReViT model in batches. The model

transforms each image into a feature vector designed to capture class-specific information (0 or 1). These feature vectors are then passed to a loss function which assigns a continuous prediction score (from 0.0 to 1.0) to each vector. A threshold of 0.5 is used for classification: Scores below 0.5 indicate class 0 and scores 0.5 or above indicate class 1. The loss function quantifies the prediction error, specifically cross-entropy, by comparing the predicted scores with the true labels. Finally, this error is used by the optimizer, guided by hyperparameters, to adjust the ReViT model's parameters, improving its classification accuracy. To evaluate the performance of the ReViT model on our specific task of differentiating webcards from images within the political campaign dataset, we employed *k*-fold cross-validation (Kohavi, 1995). We utilized a cross-validation strategy with an 80%–20% ratio between training and testing data for each fold (corresponding to 5-fold cross-validation, where $k = 5$).

As the final result of this experimental approach, across these folds, the fine-tuned ReViT model achieved a strong average accuracy of 97.7% in distinguishing between webcards and standard images from the political campaign dataset—thus representing a potentially productive model for future research on social media and visual politics.

5. The Visual Performance of Leadership in the Online Political Arena

5.1. Visual Dichotomies

Among the most recurrent visual formats being used across different actors, a stark dichotomous opposition stands out of “us vs. them.” This dichotomy is especially emphasized in the cases of Salvini and the LN, Renzi and Stati Uniti d'Europa, AZ, and the M5S. In a clearly planned and consistently pursued strategy, Salvini and the LN construct their positioning on various thematic categories around an explicit opposition between “(+) Italy” and “(–) Europe,” producing and publishing highly homogeneous and graphically coordinated images (though these employ a variety of tones and discursive registers, ranging from realistic to paradoxical, from aggressive to humorous). The images used are often generic: For example, a Margherita pizza contrasted with a pizza topped with pineapple (deemed “European” and not “Italian”).

This dichotomous format also includes an image posted by Salvini's profile and reshared with critical commentary by various other profiles (+E, Nicola Fratoianni). The image shows part of a man's face as he drinks from the same plastic bottle, with and without eco-caps (introduced by a European regulation in 2019 to reduce plastic pollution in the environment). Already the subject of a brief ironic video by Calenda that circulated widely online—featured by various news sites and re-performed by other internet users—the image content, which is socially interpretable as “idiotic” (Goriunova, 2013) in online sharing practices, is also reshared and recontextualized with re-framing attempts by multiple political profiles. An example is +E, which transforms the slogan initially used by LN and Salvini, “less Europe, more Italy,” into “less Europe, more Salvini = more plastic in our seas.” (Figure 2).

As is evident in the strategies of +E and Renzi, and to a lesser extent in several posts by the M5S, this dichotomous opposition is often articulated in explicitly visual terms: for instance, through color use (with a dominant blue/light blue, typical of Italian institutions, for “us”) contrasted with black and white for “them,” as well as in the selection of smiling, confident faces for “us” versus sad, threatening, or uncertain faces for “them.” The title of the dichotomous format “spot the difference,” frequently used by the M5S, also appears

on other profiles with a personalized twist. In Renzi's case, it is adapted to "spot the differenzi," aligning with the pop style of his political communication, which is also targeted at a younger audience (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A composite pattern of the visual dichotomy format.

As emerges from these examples, the cross-cutting use of the dichotomous format in visual political communication during election campaigns primarily serves an argumentative and identificatory function (Schill, 2012), aimed at defining political positioning and constructing the political and moral image of leaders. This is often based on the delegitimization of opponents in the electoral competition.

5.2. From Electoral Photogeny to Digital Photo-genAI

A final, more limited group of images published on the monitored political profiles during the election campaign instead serves a predominantly "transportative" function (Schill, 2012), by enabling—thanks to the use of image-generating artificial intelligence software—forms of cultural imagination of possible futures. Two cases from the dataset are exemplary. In the first case, published by Angelo Bonelli, the contested project for a bridge over the Strait of Messina, promoted by Minister of Infrastructure and Transport Matteo Salvini, becomes the target of ironic criticism, portrayed as a bridge made of an inflatable children's structure.

In the second case, Salvini's profile once again publishes a dichotomously formatted webcard, where the idea of Europe that the LN's political project opposes is depicted through an overtly artificial and deliberately provocative image of a male pregnancy, while the idea of Italy is represented by a family made up of a smiling, apparently well-off white heterosexual couple with a son and a daughter, on a hillside overlooking a small town at sunset. Unrealistic, digitally created images are thus used to suggest possible futures, typically presented as dystopian, against which a political project can position itself as an alternative and conservative response (Figure 3).

This example also illustrates the shift from modern "electoral photogeny" (Barthes, 1957) to what, in the contemporary digital age, could be called "electoral photo-genAI," made possible by generative artificial intelligence.



Figure 3. A double example of AI-generated images diffused by Angelo Bonelli (left) and Matteo Salvini (right).

6. The Visual Representation of Political Leaders in the Electoral Campaign

As is well known (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Karvonen, 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2012), the personalization of politics is one of the hallmarks of modern politics. Parallel to the spread of new communication tools, it has led to the transformation of traditional forms and codes of representation of power (Cheles & Giacone, 2022) and, therefore, to the development of new strategies for the self-representation of leadership. Insofar as a fundamental objective of political communication is to highlight the differences and contrasts between one's own political party and its opponents, strategies for representing political opponents have also been developed. The most effective strategies aim to construct a veritable delegitimizing counter-framing around identity elements, campaign issues, and even personal traits of the opponent.

6.1. Self-Representation of Political Leaders

The analysis of the 6,786 images posted by the 21 accounts examined reveals that in over 61% of cases ($n = 4,190$), a political figure is present. This percentage rises to over 70% in the accounts of political leaders and slightly decreases to 56.9% in those of political parties. In the vast majority of these cases (70%), the politician portrayed is either the account holder or the party secretary. This self-representation is more pronounced in the leaders' accounts, where it exceeds 90% ($n = 1,578$) of the images with political figures ($n = 1,743$), and is present in 59.7% ($n = 1,463$) of the images published by parties ($n = 2,447$).

The use of images on political leaders' social media—who post fewer images than party accounts (2,487 vs. 4,299)—thus serves a predominantly and almost exclusively celebratory function. The percentage of self-portraits hovers around 80% for Nicola Fratoianni (79%), Angelo Bonelli, Matteo Salvini (81%), and Carlo Calenda (84%); it exceeds 90% for Giuseppe Conte (92%), Matteo Renzi (99%), Elly Schlein (98.6%), and reaches 100% in the images of Emma Bonino, Giorgia Meloni, and Antonio Tajani, on whose social media no other political leaders are featured—neither positively nor negatively. The self-celebratory use of social media by some leaders is also evident in the number of their images posted during the four-week observation period: Schlein 365 of 370, Calenda 248 of 294, Salvini 242 of 297, Renzi 250 of 252, Conte 199 of 216, Fratoianni 143 of 180, Bonelli 13 of 16, Tajani 60 of 60, Meloni 41 of 41, and Bonino 17 of 17 (Table 2).

The personalization and management of political leaders' self-image on social media are carried out according to two distinct criteria. The first is percentage-based: the saturation level of the self-image compared to that of other political leaders, which is very high for all. The second is quantitative: the number of self-images, which varies considerably from leader to leader. It is along these two visual variables—saturation and presence—that leaders and parties define and differentiate their strategies of personalization and self-representation.

Table 2. Personalization and self-representation.

Leader Account	Presence of Politician(s)	% of Total	Self-Representation	% of Self-Representation
Angelo Bonelli	16	0.92%	13	81.25%
Antonio Tajani	60	3.44%	60	100%
Carlo Calenda	294	16.87%	248	84.35%
Elly Schlein	370	21.23%	365	98.65%
Emma Bonino	17	0.98%	17	100%
Giorgia Meloni	41	2.35%	41	100%
Giuseppe Conte	216	12.39%	199	92.13%
Matteo Renzi	252	14.46%	250	99.21%
Matteo Salvini	297	17.04%	242	81.48%
Nicola Fratoianni	180	10.33%	143	79.44%
Total	1,743	100%	1,578	

Note: For each leader account, the table shows the total number of images featuring a political figure, and the number and percentage of images portraying the account holder.

The predominant macro-type for leader self-representation is photography, as opposed to webcards (65.6% vs. 34.7%), a figure that rises in the personal accounts of leaders (84% vs. 15%) but is reversed in the accounts of party lists (44.5% vs. 55.5%) where the webcard serves as a more functional tool to connect the leader to various activities and the multiple discursive registers associated with campaign promotion.

As for the type of photographs, nearly all (89.7%) are specific shots documenting a precise event, a demonstration, or an occurrence, as opposed to 10% being generic or stock photos. The value of these photos lies in their immediacy and documentary capacity, as confirmed by an analysis of the production practice, which shows 73.5% are candid, spontaneous shots (not posed), compared to 24% that are posed or studio photos such as formal campaign portraits. These figures are even higher in leaders' accounts, with 77% spontaneous shots versus 19.7% posed.

The type of images reveals the kind of self-representation the leader aims to project, including the chosen traits and connotations. In the photos posted on their social accounts, leaders predominantly present themselves in their public/professional role (80.1%), in only 4.3% of cases in a private or informal setting (e.g., with family or during leisure time), and in 15% of cases in a context that is not easily classifiable. This public/professional dimension is itself divided into two main modes: the leader “on stage,” performing leadership (48.4%), and the leader “with ordinary people, supporters, or activists” (38.3%).

The “on stage” photos, taken during rallies and public events, are often characterized by an official, solemn tone. The leader is depicted alone on a large stage or shot from above or below, emphasizing their figure and focusing attention on them, or at the margins of the speech, together with other politicians or institutional figures present at the event, highlighting the shared and collective nature of political action (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The leader on stage, alone, and with other leaders: Matteo Salvini during a presentation of his book in Ascoli Piceno on May 15th (left); and Carlo Calenda at TEDxPadova with the candidate Carlo Pasqualetto, on May 25th (right).

The category involving “ordinary people, supporters, and activists” includes spontaneous shots of the leader in the crowd, interacting with supporters, or posed with them in backstage or informal moments, in various forms. These include selfies with supporters—almost always featuring a calm, smiling expression—a style widely used by Renzi, Salvini, and Schlein; or crowd baths, where the leader is portrayed showing strong closeness and empathy with the public, often reaching out from the stage toward the crowd or appearing with children, evoking strong references to the traditional iconography of political and religious power (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The leader off stage, surrounded by ordinary people: Giuseppe Conte in Catania, visiting the traditional “fera o’luni” on May 30th (left); Elly Schlein visits a company investing in innovation and circular sustainability and embraces one of the workers on June 3rd (right).

A common and widespread trait in the photographic self-representation of leaders is a marked, overt closeness and empathy with voters, expressed through physicality and corporeality—via contact, hugs, handshakes, touches, and other gestures of proximity.

The style and use of portraiture shift in webcards, where the aim is no longer to document an event or certify the leader's popularity, but rather to employ their image in a more promotional way to support a thematic-communicative function. A recurring feature in webcards is the repeated use of the same image of the leader—an almost institutional portrait, reused as if it were a symbol or visual trademark. This image is used to link and unify different types and thematic series of webcards: agenda, statements, fundraising, and the political program (Figure 6).



Figure 6. On the left, an example of a webcard using a stock image of Antonio Tajani; on the right, a webcard portraying Giorgia Meloni alone on the stage, in front of a distant crowd.

The importance of typologies, production formats, representational models, and the functions of images in shaping visual communication strategies and leadership styles is evident in the comparison between the visual strategies adopted by the Italian Prime Minister and leader of FdI, Giorgia Meloni, and the secretary of the PD, Elly Schlein. Their personal accounts share extremely high levels of image saturation (98% and 100%, respectively), but they differ quantitatively: Elly Schlein appears in 370 images, while Meloni appears in only 41 (Table 2). This ratio is reversed on the parties' official accounts: Meloni features in 165 images, compared to just 53 for Schlein. For Meloni, it is the party that quantitatively promotes her image and centers communication on her figure, whereas for Schlein, it is her personal accounts—more than the party, which contains various factions and multiple leaders—that drive her visual representation.

With the exception of a single image with Minister Giorgio Crosetto at a military parade, in none of the more than 200 images published on Meloni's personal and party accounts does the prime minister share the stage with other national political leaders, not even those from allied parties. By contrast, there are numerous official photos with foreign leaders and prominent figures from sports and current affairs. Her personal accounts do not publish webcards featuring her image, only photographs of her—most taken during institutional meetings and events, some portraits, two from an election rally, and two selfies, posted simultaneously on both Facebook and Instagram. Meloni is never portrayed in the midst of crowds, in contact with supporters or voters, either in selfie mode or in a "crowd bath" style. In the few cases where the crowd does appear, it is distant, in the background of her rallies (Figure 6).

These modes, by contrast, are very common in the portraiture of Elly Schlein, who is rarely depicted alone, with a clear predominance of spontaneous, candid, and unposed photos. In some shots, she is almost difficult to identify in the midst of the crowd. This category of spontaneous and unposed images also includes the portraits used in the webcards published both on her personal accounts and those of the party.

Webcards featuring images of Meloni—across the various types such as statements, agenda, and program—are published only on the accounts of FdI. In all of them, she appears alone, in close or extreme close-up, in posed studio-style photos, with meticulous aesthetic care and attention. The result is a carefully crafted and coherent visual narrative centered on her figure—her gaze, hair, and smile. This represents an extreme personalization effort, an image-building operation focused on Meloni's leadership, which evolves and intensifies over the course of the campaign, culminating in a progressive blow-up on her figure, eventually reduced to a detail, a brand (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The image-building strategy of Giorgia Meloni: Three webcards published by FdI in the last days of the elections.

6.2. The Visual Representation of Political Opponents

How did Italian leaders and parties tackle the difficult task of building (and dismantling) their opponents' image through social media communication during the 2024 European elections? Some useful insights into this question can be found in the sub-corpora of images published by the two protagonists of the election campaign, Giorgia Meloni and Elly Schlein. It should be noted that we will focus here on the image of the opponent in the strict sense, i.e., the analysis of visual communication that includes the image of a leader who is a political opponent. This is both in recognition of the extremely personalized nature of contemporary politics and election campaigns, and in order to have a signifier that can be clearly traced back to the opposing camp.

The first interesting fact is that none of the images posted by the two leaders on Facebook and Instagram in the month before the vote depicts a political opponent. What is posted on Meloni and Schlein's personal accounts, therefore, concerns only the construction/maintenance of their personal image and the thematization of their campaign issues, as well as the narrative of the campaign itself. The portrayal of the enemy is entrusted entirely to the party accounts. This may foreshadow a sort of "Italian variant" of the cross-platform strategy, which would rather see a difference in the use of Facebook, for example, for sharing more "public" moments and

Instagram for the pursuit of a strategy of celebritization linked to the sharing of intimate moments (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013; Farkas & Bene, 2021).

The second interesting element is that all images posted by party accounts that feature an opponent are in webcard format, demonstrating the versatility of the format. Although they contain images of opponents and therefore fall within the category of webcards dedicated to attack, the images that make up the two sub-corpora of the visual production of Fdl and the PD are structured according to interesting strategies in terms of both format and content.

Let's start with the webcards ($n = 20$) posted by the PD. The underlying strategy is clearly that of a personal attack, but directed almost equally at the main opponent, Giorgia Meloni ($n = 12$), and at members of her party or coalition ($n = 8$). The "direct" attacks on Giorgia Meloni can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, the use of statements by the leader to highlight her inconsistency ("hypocrites" reads the slogan on a webcard showing two Giorgias side by side, one declaring her government to be at the forefront of the fight against homophobia and the other pointing out that she did not sign the EU declaration on LGBTQ+ rights). On the other hand, there are more direct attacks, carried out through slogans such as "turn your back on the poor" and with the weapons of irony (Figure 8). The communication is graphically very consistent, regularly using a standard layout with a red strip at the bottom containing the slogan in capital letters and white font, but, visually, it probably commits a Lakoffian error. The elephant, Giorgia Meloni, despite appearing in 12 of the 20 images, demonstrates her centrality in the PD's visual communication. This is particularly evident in the comparative webcards: In the one already mentioned, relating to the "U-turn" on LGBTQ+ rights, she appears twice, although one image is intended to be a mirror image, distorted in expression and identified as the leader's "shadow" through the use of black and white. This strategy is also found in the only fully comparative webcard, which shows Schlein and Meloni facing each other, one in color and the other in black and white, under the PD secretary's statement: "That Giorgia Meloni is a woman, a mother and a Christian means NOTHING to Italians who cannot put bread on the table" (Figure 8). This is a somewhat clumsy attempt to reframe the cry from the Vox stage that Giorgia Meloni has managed to turn into a real catchphrase, an identifying feature of her political image that is difficult to dismantle and therefore dangerous to quote.



Figure 8. Direct attack webcard by PD (left) and a comparison attack webcard posted by Fdl (right).

In the webcards ($n = 36$) posted by Fdl, the strategy is more complex, primarily because there are two leaders against whom action is being taken: Elly Schlein and Giuseppe Conte. This is a relevant element explaining the overall meaning of the campaign, with Giorgia Meloni's party devoting maximum attention ($n = 22$) to attacking two different personalities, who in turn direct their attacks mainly at Giorgia Meloni through their parties and, in Conte's case, also through his personal account, thus confirming her undisputed central role. It should be added that, in Fdl's communication, the most attacked leader is Conte ($n = 14$, compared to 6 dedicated to Schlein and considering 4 in which the two are portrayed together). It is also possible to detect, with reference to Conte, a clear thematic consistency in the attacks, which are directed at the person but based on a specific political choice, indicating, at least in the speakers' intention, the concreteness of the argument. In eight out of 14 cases, the target of the attack is the "superbonus," a building incentive measure introduced by the second Conte government in May 2020, which the leader "does not regret" even though it has "exacerbated inequalities" and "will weigh heavily on (public) debt for decades." All webcards feature the aforementioned strategy of quoting a news article and affixing the logo of the publication that published it, as a reference to current events and, ultimately, to the concrete nature of Fdl's position. The use of the comparative format is also interesting: Whereas for Schlein the choice was purely visual, with the faces of the two leaders juxtaposed under a quote from the PD secretary talking about the prime minister, here the strategy is more "classic." Above Giorgia Meloni's confident and determined face are her achievements: "Increase in employment; increase in permanent contracts; defence of borders; increase in healthcare funding." Above Schlein's face, not coincidentally alone but in the foreground with Campania governor Vincenzo De Luca on her right and M5S leader Giuseppe Conte on her left, are some words that, again not coincidentally, represent the "real" battle horses of Meloni's opponents. Not ideals or policies, but assessments of her opponent. "There's Telemeloni," a reference to the government's control of public radio and television. "Giorgia is not a true female leader," a reference to the refusal to celebrate the prime minister's success as a champion of feminist ideals. "Get to work, asshole," off-air comments in which De Luca insulted Meloni during a clash between the two. Once again, Meloni is not only the center of attention, but also the real issue at stake in the elections, the topic of conversation, the obsession of her opponents. Finally, as a further element of disavowal of Schlein's leadership, half of the webcards containing attacks on other members of opposing parties refer to the aforementioned Giuseppe De Luca—a clear reference to the risk that a charismatic figure such as the governor of Campania could overshadow the PD leadership and hinder it in the event of an election victory (Figure 8).

7. Conclusion

This article developed an interdisciplinary framework to analyze visual political communication in the 2024 European elections, focusing on Italian politicians' social media content and visual representation strategies. It aimed at offering a methodological as well as empirical contribution to such a growing research area.

On the one hand, the article bridged political communication, visual culture, and computer science, applying quantitative and qualitative visual content analysis as well as computer vision to examine content typologies. Such a mixed-method analysis thus revealed key visual formats, themes, and leadership portrayals across Facebook and Instagram posts. In particular, the methodological section employing computer vision demonstrated the effectiveness of using a pre-trained ReViT to classify political campaign visuals as either webcards or photographs. Using ReViT's global context modeling and residual attention mechanism, high classification accuracy was achieved, with cross-validation yielding an average of 97.7%. Future work could

move beyond classification toward interactive analysis tools, incorporating methods like visual question answering (Kohavi, 1995) or object detection (Diko et al., 2024) to explore political imagery more deeply (e.g., identifying logos, individuals, or sentiment cues) bopenning new avenues for interdisciplinary research in visual political communication.

On the other hand, the empirical findings contribute to ongoing research on the ways in which political actors produce and disseminate visual content to shape political communication, frame key issues, and performatively construct leader identities during electoral campaigns. The findings highlight differentiated patterns in production practices and visual formats, as well as transversal strategies of legitimizing political leaders and delegitimizing opponents through visual symbolic contrasts and emotional appeals. Among the key results, webcards were far more frequently used than photographs for the agenda/calendar and program functions, while photographs were predominant for the campaign activity function aimed at documenting events. Also, for this reason, the vast majority of photographs were specific, not generic, referring to situated contexts, events, or subjects.

In particular, the research section on the visual self-representation of leadership showed a significant self-celebratory use of self-portraits on social media, hovering between 80% and 100% of images of leaders published by political actors in the four-week-long electoral campaign in Italy. Similarly, among the most recurrent visual formats used across different actors, a stark dichotomous opposition of “us vs. them” was registered. Such a dichotomous visual format mainly served an argumentative and identificatory function, defining political positioning and constructing the political and moral image of leaders, often based on the delegitimization of opponents in the electoral competition. Political leaders present themselves in their public/professional role, mainly “on stage” or with ordinary people, supporters, or activists. The research section on the visual representation of political opponents, instead, included quite direct attacks highlighting inconsistency and untrustworthiness. In the overall collected material, a quantitatively scarce but qualitatively interesting category of visual content included AI-generated images—a research object that might soon become increasingly central also in the field of visual politics and electoral campaigns.

Finally, mainly because of the requirements of the national funding body, the scope of this research was limited to a national context—and to a specific political and historical timeframe. At the same time, the proposed analytical framework and the collected empirical findings might also be used for comparative, cross-national analysis of visual political communication during electoral campaigns. Recent projects have increasingly pursued such a research strategy that might be further developed in the near future.

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Conflict of Interests

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