

Visual Self-Presentation of Radical Right Leaders on Social Media: Platform and Gender Differences

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Abstract

Social media play an important role in how populist radical right (PRR) leaders communicate with supporters and present themselves to the public. Previous research has examined how political leaders' self-presentation varies by gender and by platform, but we know less about how these two factors interact. This study addresses this gap by analyzing 900 images posted on the Instagram, Facebook, and X accounts of six prominent European PRR leaders (three women and three men). The results show that gender mattered, but its role in visual self-presentation varied by platform. On Facebook and X, female leaders appeared in substantially more images than male leaders, compared to Instagram. Female leaders also use agentic cues more frequently, which emphasize competence and leadership, rather than communal cues, which emphasize warmth and relationships. These gender differences in self-presentation are smaller on Instagram, where personalized communication is common among all leaders. Overall, the findings imply that how PRR leaders present themselves is shaped not only by gender and platform but also by the distinctive communication styles of individual leaders.

Keywords

gender; populist radical right; self-presentation; social media platforms

1. Introduction

On Christmas Eve 2024, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni posted a selfie on Instagram showing her daughter asleep on her shoulder. In the caption, she wished her followers a day full of peace and joy. The post fits the personal, intimate style of communication that is common on the platform (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Meeks, 2016; Valmori et al., 2021). At the same time, it also aligns with a broader trend where

politicians' private lives are gaining more attention (Langer, 2010). Social media have contributed to this trend by making it easier for politicians to share images from their daily lives directly with their followers.

How politicians use social media to share images of themselves varies across platforms. Platforms are not interchangeable; their design and norms encourage different forms of communication (Bossetta, 2018). These platform-specific pressures may also affect male and female leaders differently (Hikmatullah et al., 2026), as men and women face distinct expectations and constraints when presenting themselves in public (Bast et al., 2022; Mattan & Small, 2021). So far, we know little about how platform differences and gender work together to shape political leaders' visual self-presentation (Hikmatullah et al., 2026). This article therefore asks: How do platform differences and gender shape the visual self-presentation of populist radical right (PRR) leaders on social media?

The study focuses on PRR leaders because leadership occupies an unusually central position within these parties, which tend to be highly personalised and organised around dominant figures rather than strong party organisations (Kriesi, 2025). As a result, party identity is often closely tied to a leader's public image. PRR online self-presentation is also particularly relevant because leaders of these parties might rely heavily on social media to counter associations with extremism and strengthen PRR legitimacy (Bonansinga, 2025). Finally, in PRR parties, female leaders often operate within organisations that promote traditional gender norms, which creates tensions in how they can construct their public image (Bast et al., 2022; Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). For these reasons, studying gendered self-presentation is especially relevant in the PRR context.

Findings from a quantitative content analysis of 900 images shared on the Instagram, Facebook, and X accounts of six prominent European PRR leaders (three women and three men) show that gender mattered, but its role in visual self-presentation varied by platform. On Facebook and X, female leaders appeared in substantially more images than male leaders compared to Instagram. The findings also show that female leaders use agentic (competence-oriented) cues more frequently than communal (warmth- and relationship-oriented) cues, compared to male leaders. Also, here, gender differences were smaller on Instagram. This suggests that differences in how male and female leaders present themselves are partly shaped by the platform that they use. At the same time, individual leaders' personal communication styles account for the largest differences.

2. Visual Self-Presentation of PRR Leaders on Social Media

PRR actors combine populism with nativist and authoritarian ideas (Kriesi, 2025). Populism views society as divided into two opposing groups: ordinary citizens and "the corrupt elite." Populists argue that politics should reflect the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004). As a thin ideology, populism is not inherently radical or right-wing, but can occur across the ideological spectrum. This study focuses specifically on PRR party leaders rather than populists in general. Leaders play a particularly central role within PRR parties, making their self-presentation especially important.

Citizens' evaluations of leaders play an important role in how they evaluate political parties (Bittner, 2011). Citizens assess politicians not only based on their policy positions but also on perceived personal characteristics, such as competence, trustworthiness, and integrity (Bittner, 2011). Images provide an effective way of communicating such characteristics implicitly (Lindholm et al., 2021) and social media allow

politicians the opportunity to share personal, often self-produced images directly with their followers and shape their own visual self-presentation (Russmann et al., 2024).

In this study, visual self-presentation consists of two dimensions: First, it concerns the visibility of leaders in images. Politicians and their communication teams can share a wide range of content on social media, including campaign material, news reports, and party messages. The decision to post images in which the leader is visible is therefore meaningful. Second, visual self-presentation in this study refers to the visual choices made, including setting, clothing, facial expression, composition, and interaction with others, which can signal or emphasize leadership qualities. These choices can also be influenced by the gender of the politician, as female and male leaders face different expectations and pressures when it comes to their visual self-presentation.

2.1. Gender and Leadership in the PRR Context

Within PRR parties, female leaders face a specific tension. PRR ideology emphasises strong and decisive leadership while also often promoting traditional gender roles and family values (Bast et al., 2022). This creates a challenge for female leaders: on the one hand, they must deliver authoritative leadership; on the other, they are expected to conform to traditional gender roles and family values, which can conflict with expectations of authoritative leadership.

This tension between gender and leadership expectations is not unique to the PRR context. Role congruity theory helps explain why it arises. Societal expectations of men and women do not always align with expectations of leadership. Whereas women are stereotypically associated with so-called communal traits, such as warmth, empathy, and care, leadership is associated with agentic traits, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority, which have traditionally been viewed as masculine traits (Mattan & Small, 2021). As a result, women may be perceived as less suitable for leadership or evaluated negatively when they deviate from traditional gender expectations. This dilemma is often referred to as the double bind (Jamieson, 1995). Bast et al. (2022) argue that female PRR leaders face a “double double bind,” in which their self-presentation is shaped by both gender expectations and the ideological expectations of PRR parties.

Strategic stereotype theory argues that leaders and their campaign teams are aware of these expectations and adjust their self-presentation accordingly (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014, as cited in Mattan & Small, 2021). Politicians can strategically emphasise, downplay, or combine agentic and communal traits to gain political advantage (Mattan & Small, 2021). This balancing act is often more challenging for women than for men, as women are expected to demonstrate both agentic and communal traits, which can be difficult to reconcile. Moreover, women face a double risk: signalling communal traits too much can undermine perceptions of competence, while too much assertiveness can conflict with expectations of femininity (Schneider & Bos, 2019). Men generally face fewer such constraints and are less likely to be penalised for combining traits associated with both strength and empathy (Mattan & Small, 2021).

2.2. Strategic Self-Presentation of Male and Female PRR Leaders

Although visual self-presentation can help all politicians build stronger connections with voters, it might be particularly important for PRR leaders. As PRR leaders are often associated with extremism, visual self-presentation can help them construct legitimacy and distance themselves from negative associations

(Bonansinga, 2025). The decision to make the leader visible is therefore not merely an aesthetic choice, but can also function as a political strategy.

Social media content is often carefully curated by professional communication teams. Even seemingly spontaneous images are often staged, such “calculated amateurism” can help create a sense of intimacy with the public (Starita & Trillò, 2022). By sharing behind-the-scenes photos, personal moments, or everyday activities, politicians can foster parasocial relationships with their audiences and strengthen emotional connections (Cohen & Holbert, 2021).

When leaders share images of themselves, how they are presented also matters. Through elements such as setting, clothing, and symbols, images contribute to the impression leaders seek to create (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Serazio, 2017). Images showing leaders in institutional settings, engaging in work-related activities, wearing formal clothing, or with restrained emotions can signal agentic leadership. In contrast, images in informal settings, where the politician is smiling and interacting with supporters, children, or family members, can convey communal leadership (Lindholm et al., 2021; Mattan & Small, 2021; Sullivan, 2023; Valmori et al., 2021). These visual strategies can be interpreted differently depending on the gender of the leader. For example, images of fatherhood can strengthen perceptions of authority and reliability among male politicians, while similar images of female politicians could raise questions about their work and life balance (Langer, 2010). At the same time, personalized content can offer opportunities for female leaders to increase attention and engagement online (Brands et al., 2021; Lindholm et al., 2021). Male politicians also frequently use personalized communication, particularly during election campaigns (McGregor et al., 2017; Meeks, 2016).

Research on PRR leaders shows that their visual strategies on Instagram largely resemble those found in political communication on the platform more generally (Bast, 2024). Previous research shows that female politicians are more often portrayed smiling, interacting with others, or engaging in caregiving and family roles, whereas male politicians are more often shown wearing formal clothing, using more restrained expressions, and occupying more prominent positions within images (Lindholm et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2023; Valmori et al., 2021). Female PRR leaders specifically strategically emphasize competence rather than warmth in their social roles, while still conveying warmth through their visual and non-verbal self-presentation (Bast et al., 2022). An analysis of how Meloni and Le Pen discuss gender-related issues on TikTok and Twitter similarly shows that these leaders combine so-called “strongman traits,” such as toughness and assertiveness, with traits associated with hegemonic femininity (Griffini & Montecchio, 2026). Rather than resolving the tension between agency and femininity by choosing one over the other, female PRR leaders may therefore combine elements of both. At the same time, individual PRR leaders develop distinctive visual styles (Bast, 2024). While gender shapes visual self-presentation, research also indicates that social media platforms provide different opportunities and constraints for male and female leaders to present themselves (Hikmatullah et al., 2026).

3. Platform Norms and the Visual Self-Presentation of PRR Leaders

Previous studies have provided insights into the visual self-presentation of individual PRR leaders on specific platforms (Bast, 2024; Bonansinga, 2025; Starita & Trillò, 2022), as well as into gender differences in political self-presentation (Bast et al., 2022). However, little is known about how PRR leaders adapt their visual self-presentation across different social media platforms.

This study examines visual self-presentation along two dimensions: leaders' visual visibility and the leadership qualities communicated through images. Social media platforms are not neutral communication channels. Each platform has its own norms that make certain forms of political self-presentation more likely. These differences result not only from technical features but also from socially established expectations about appropriate behaviour on each platform (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). Politicians and their communication teams therefore consider both what a platform allows and the forms of communication that users perceive as appropriate.

Such norms emerge through processes of institutionalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). When practices are repeatedly performed, they can become taken for granted. This also applies to social media. On Instagram, for example, sharing personal photos, selfies, and images from everyday life has become an established practice, whereas similar forms of communication are less common on platforms such as X or LinkedIn. Platforms therefore differ not only in their technical possibilities but also in expectations regarding self-presentation.

Bossetta (2018) identifies three platform characteristics that are particularly relevant for political communication: functionality, network structure, and algorithmic ranking. These characteristics can shape both how often politicians use visual self-presentation and the kinds of leadership cues they communicate.

Functionality determines which forms of communication are central to a platform. Instagram is strongly oriented towards visual communication: every post contains a visual, while text is optional. In contrast, X has traditionally been text-oriented, with images often functioning as additions to written content. Facebook occupies an intermediate position, as images are visible but displayed below accompanying text (Farkas & Bene, 2021). Images on Instagram are therefore more likely to function as standalone messages, whereas images on X and Facebook more often complement textual communication. Because visual content is particularly personalized (Farkas & Bene, 2021), the role of images within a post can shape how leaders use them for self-presentation.

Platform interactions and algorithms can also shape what politicians post. Earlier research, for example, shows that images containing faces attract more attention on Instagram (Bakhshi et al., 2014). Research on Facebook has also found that personal and emotional political messages tend to perform particularly well on the platform (Metz et al., 2020). Because algorithms often reward engagement, politicians and their communication teams adapt their strategies in response to the types of content that attract the most attention. In turn, these adaptations can reinforce platform-specific norms about which types of political content are most effective.

Platform preferences also depend on network structure. X has a more open network structure, meaning that messages can diffuse beyond direct followers, which makes it attractive to journalists and professional audiences (Jacobs et al., 2020). Facebook and Instagram have network structures that are more strongly oriented towards direct followers, but they also differ from one another. On Facebook, politicians communicate through pages rather than accounts, creating a more hierarchical relationship. On Instagram, politicians and users have the same type of account, creating a more direct relationship (Farkas & Bene, 2021). These differences imply that Instagram is particularly suited to personal and relational forms of visual self-presentation, whereas X is better suited to professional and institutional forms of communication.

Facebook occupies an intermediate position, combining personal communication with the more hierarchical structure of political pages.

Although platforms encourage certain forms of communication, politicians retain the ability to deviate from them. Sonnevend and Steiert (2024), for example, show that some leaders deliberately maintain a communication style that does not fully align with dominant platform norms. Angela Merkel, for example, continued to use a relatively institutional and impersonal communication style on Instagram.

3.1. Visual Visibility

Platforms differ in the importance they give to visual content. Due to the central role of images in personalization, and the central role of images on Instagram, we can expect PRR leaders to engage in visual self-presentation more often on Instagram than on X, with Facebook taking an intermediate position (H1).

Platform norms also contribute to gender differences in visual self-presentation. Personal images can increase attention and engagement, particularly for women (Brands et al., 2021; Lindholm et al., 2021); however, they can also expose women to additional evaluations of their appearance and personal roles. Because female politicians face greater pressure to appear both competent and accessible, visual self-presentation could offer a way to manage these competing expectations. We therefore expect female leaders to appear in images more often than male leaders (H2).

At the same time, because personalized communication is more established on Instagram, visual self-presentation is more strongly normalized for both female and male leaders. Male leaders are therefore more likely to appear in images on Instagram than on platforms where personal visibility is less central. As a result, we expect the gender difference in leaders' visual visibility to be smaller on Instagram than on platforms where such norms are less pronounced (H3).

3.2. Leadership Representation

Platform norms can also influence how leaders visually represent leadership qualities. This study distinguishes between agentic representation, which emphasizes authority, leadership, and institutional power; communal representation, which emphasizes closeness and relational characteristics; and hybrid representation, which combines agentic and communal characteristics.

Based on the discussion in Section 3, the more professional focus of X, compared with the more personalized communication associated with Facebook and particularly Instagram, leads us to expect that leaders use agentic representations more often on X than on Instagram and Facebook (H4).

Due to the double bind, female politicians are expected to demonstrate both competence and warmth. As a result, they are more likely to rely on hybrid forms of leadership representation that combine agentic and communal characteristics. Male politicians, in contrast, can generally emphasize agentic characteristics with fewer reputational risks (Jamieson, 1995; Schneider & Bos, 2019). We therefore expect female leaders to use hybrid leadership representations more often than male leaders (H5).

We expect gender differences in leadership representation to vary across platforms. On Instagram, where personal and relational self-presentation is more strongly normalized, communal cues are less exclusively associated with female leaders and are also used by male leaders. On X, where communication is more strongly oriented toward professional and institutional political discourse, female leaders face greater pressure to combine agentic and communal cues, whereas male leaders can simply rely on agentic cues. We therefore expect gender differences in leadership representation to be more pronounced on X than on Instagram (H6). Facebook is expected to occupy an intermediate position between Instagram and X.

4. Methods

4.1. Sample and Data Collection

To analyse how platform design and gender influence the visual self-presentation of PRR leaders, a quantitative content analysis was conducted on images shared on Instagram, Facebook, and X by six prominent European party leaders: three men (Tom Van Grieken, Nigel Farage, and Geert Wilders) and three women (Giorgia Meloni, Alice Weidel, and Marine Le Pen). All leaders are classified in the literature as PRR actors (Rooduijn et al., 2024) and have active, verified accounts on all three platforms, which allows comparisons across platforms.

Instagram, Facebook, and X were selected because they are among the most important social media platforms for political communication in European countries. These platforms allow politicians to share text and images, but due to their differences in design and usage norms, they provide different incentives for visual self-presentation. Images were collected manually in April 2025. For each leader and platform, the 100 most recent posts containing at least one image were collected, resulting in an initial dataset of 1800 posts. Posts from other accounts in which the politician was tagged were excluded. Because historical data was, at the time of data collection, only available to a limited extent through the platforms' research APIs, only a limited period was studied. The dataset therefore represents a snapshot of the selected leaders' online communication at a specific moment in time.

A random sample was drawn from this initial collection. Each post was assigned a randomly generated number, and the posts were then randomly sorted by leader and platform. The first 50 posts from each list were selected, resulting in a final sample of 900 images. When a post contained multiple images (a carousel), only the first image was analysed, as this is the most visible image to users and is typically the main image through which the post is encountered (Bast et al., 2022). The downside of this approach is that the first images in carousels are likely to also be more polished than those that follow.

As the sample is limited to six leaders and a short period, the findings cannot be generalized to all PRR leaders or other periods. Furthermore, the timing of data collection means that some images overlap with political events. For example, some images from Nigel Farage were collected during the British general election campaign. The six leaders also differ in institutional position (e.g., Meloni as prime minister and Weidel as co-leader of a party). These differences mean that the findings should be interpreted with caution when comparing leaders.

4.2. Operationalization and Coding Procedure

Because this study focuses on visual self-presentation, the image constitutes the primary unit of analysis. Textual elements, both in and next to the image, were considered only as contextual information for interpreting the image. The analysis consisted of two steps: First, all 900 images were coded for the visual presence of the politician. A politician was coded as present when they were directly recognizable in the image, including promotional images in which the politician appeared alongside text. Images in which the politician appeared only indirectly, such as in screenshots of posts containing a profile picture, AI-generated images, or cartoons, were coded as absent. Similarly, images showing personal objects or family members without the politician being visible were coded as absent. Because this variable is manifest and requires limited interpretation, coder disagreement was minimal.

Second, the 534 images in which leaders were visible were subsequently coded based on their visual presentation of leadership. Initial coding of individual visual characteristics, including facial expression, clothing, and setting, did not consistently help to identify the two leadership types. As Mattan and Small (2021) argue, political images consist of multiple visual cues, including setting, people, positioning, and facial expression, making it difficult to determine the meaning of an image based on any single element. Therefore, the analysis ultimately focused on the dominant leadership frame conveyed by each image. This approach also fits better with how people actually interpret images: visuals are generally considered holistically, rather than by focusing on individual elements in isolation. Each image was therefore coded as representing an agentic, communal, hybrid, or unclear leadership presentation.

Two dimensions of leadership self-presentation were distinguished: agentic and communal representation. Agentic images emphasise the leader as competent and strong, for example showing leaders delivering speeches, appearing in parliament, or giving interviews. Portrait images were coded as agentic when they presented the leader as an active and purposeful political actor. Communal images portray the leader as approachable and connected to others. These include images in which leaders interact with supporters, family members, colleagues, pets, or members of the public. A hybrid category was used for images combining agentic and communal cues, for example, a politician in a highly formal setting while hugging their child, or hugging a fellow parliamentarian. Images lacking clear leadership cues were coded as unclear. A subset of 15 percent of images was independently coded by a second coder. Inter-coder reliability for leadership presentation was acceptable (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.79$).

Applying these categories consistently across leaders was challenging as individual leaders have very different ways of signalling the same cues. To account for this variation, a separate thematic analysis grouped visually similar images together, including those coded as unclear, providing a more qualitative interpretation of how individual politicians presented themselves as leaders.

4.3. Analysis

To test H1 to H3, generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs) were used to predict whether the politician appeared in their own image (visible versus not visible). Analyses examined whether this likelihood varied by platform (H1), by the politician's gender (H2), and whether the gender difference depended on the platform (H3). Because each politician contributed multiple images to the dataset, a

random intercept for each leader was included to account for the fact that observations from the same person are not independent.

For H4 to H6, leadership representation (agentic, communal, or hybrid) was analysed across platforms (H4), by gender (H5), and in relation to the interaction between gender and platform (H6). As the outcome had three categories, chi-square tests and cross-tabulations were used to examine associations between leadership representation and platform or gender. However, this approach does not provide a formal test of the gender and platform interaction or account for the repeated observations contributed by individual leaders. The H4 to H6 findings should therefore be treated as descriptive and interpreted with caution.

5. Findings

5.1. Visual Visibility of Political Leaders by Platform and Gender

Figure 1 shows how often each political leader is visible in the images shared on their Instagram, Facebook, and X pages. Overall, visibility in images is highest on Instagram (73.3%), followed by Facebook (55.7%), and X (49%). Female leaders were more frequently visible in the images than male leaders (74% versus 44.7%). Chi-square tests show significant differences in visibility by gender, $\chi^2(1) = 79.03$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.30$; platform, $\chi^2(2) = 39.32$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = 0.21$ and leader, $\chi^2(5) = 282.82$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.56$. Cramer's V indicates that, while there is an effect for platform and gender, there is a considerably larger effect size for leader. This indicates that leaders' individual styles play a more important role in determining whether images featuring them are shared than gender or platform alone.

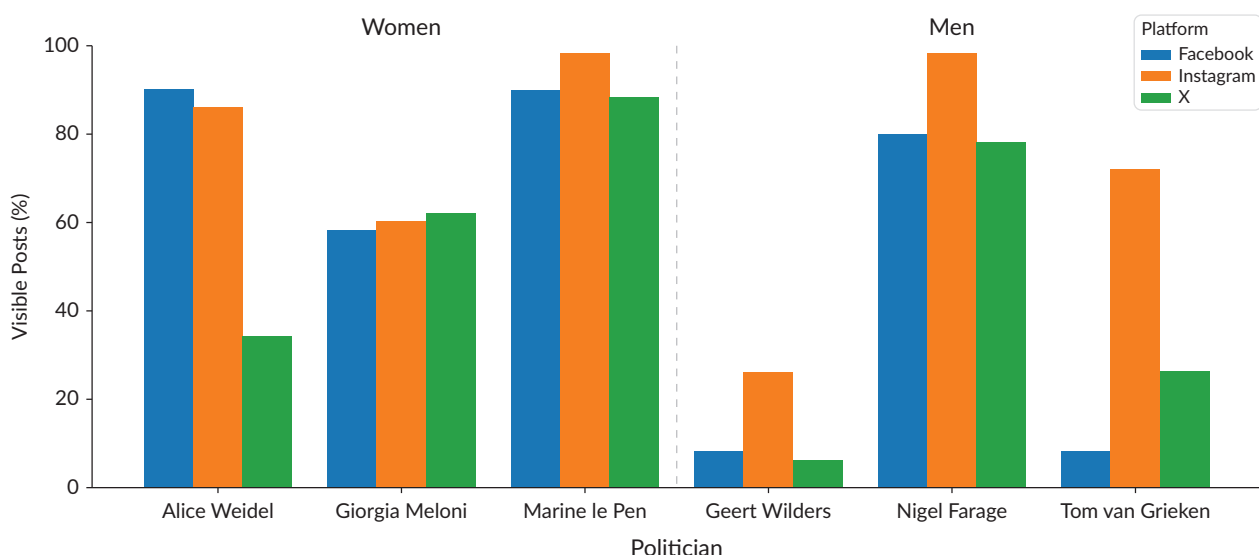


Figure 1. Percentage of images in which the political leader is featured by leader and platform.

H1 predicted that politicians would be more visible on visually oriented platforms such as Instagram. A GLMM examining platform effects on visibility, with a random intercept for leader (see Supplementary File for full results), shows that the probability of politicians sharing images in which they are visible is significantly higher on Instagram than on Facebook ($b = 1.18$, $SE = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly lower on X than on Facebook ($b = -0.40$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = 0.045$). This finding, with Instagram being highest, Facebook intermediate, and

X lowest, fits the expectations that were outlined in the theory. When gender is added as a control variable, these platform effects remain robust. Therefore, H1 is supported.

H2 predicted that female leaders would share images in which they are visible more often than male leaders. In the gender-only model, female leaders had a higher predicted probability of visibility than male leaders (0.77 versus 0.44). However, this difference was not statistically significant ($b = -1.47$, $SE = 1.01$, $p = 0.145$). The difference remained non-significant after platform was added to the model ($b = -1.60$, $SE = 1.09$, $p = 0.141$). Although the chi-square test indicates a significant association between gender and visibility, the GLMM does not find a significant gender effect once the repeated observations within politicians are accounted for. H2 is therefore not supported as an overall gender effect.

H3 predicted that gender differences in visual self-presentation would vary across platforms, with the gender gap becoming smaller on Instagram, where self-presentation is normalized. Unlike H2, which looks at overall gender differences, H3 instead addresses whether the extent of gender differences varies across platforms. Relative to Facebook, the gender gap in visibility was significantly reduced on Instagram ($b = 2.23$, $SE = 0.46$, $p < .001$) and on X ($b = 1.37$, $SE = 0.43$, $p = 0.001$). As shown in Figure 2, the gender gap was smallest on Instagram, where the predicted probability of visibility was 0.76 for male leaders compared with 0.85 for female leaders. On X, the gap was also smaller than on Facebook, although female leaders had a higher predicted probability of visibility than male leaders (0.64 versus 0.30). The difference between the gender gaps on Instagram and X was not statistically significant ($b = -0.85$, $SE = 0.44$, $p = 0.052$). H3 is therefore partially supported: relative to Facebook, the gender gap was significantly smaller on Instagram and X.

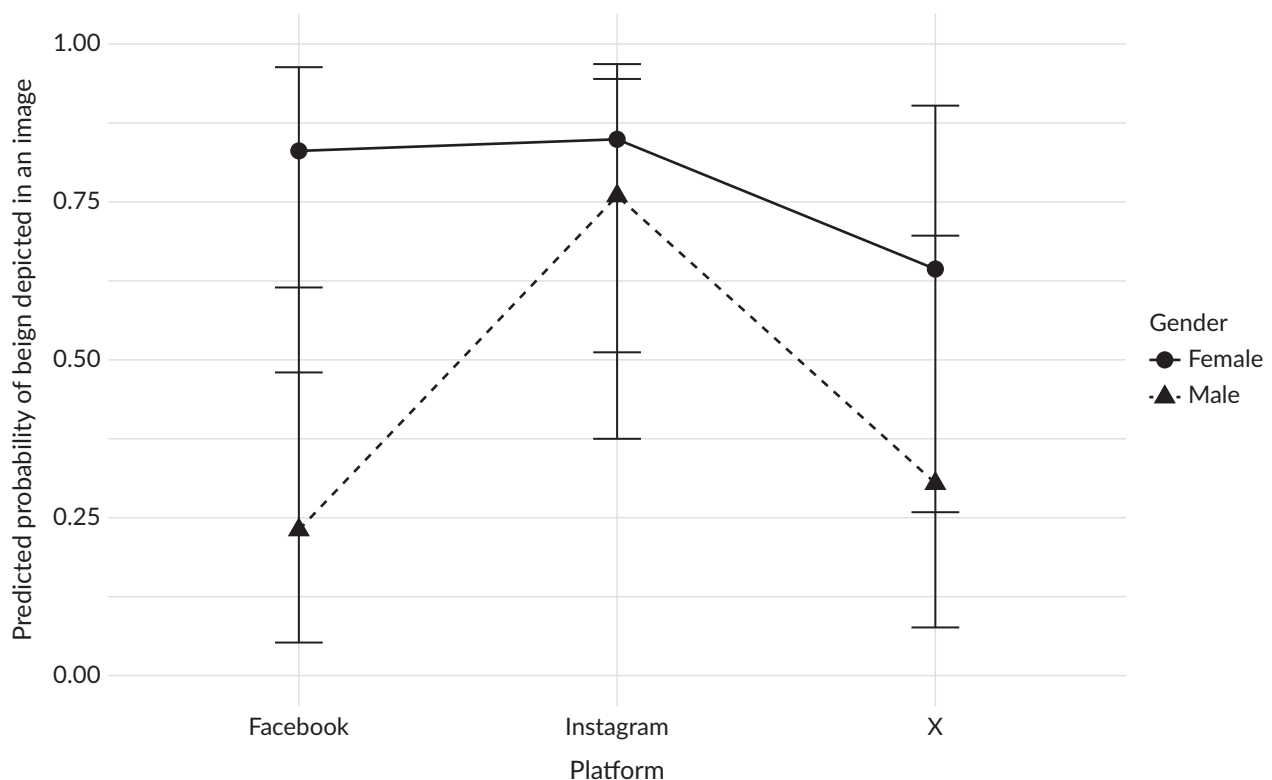


Figure 2. Predicted probability of visibility of political leaders in images by platform and gender.

Instagram's focus on personal and visual communication gives political leaders greater visibility across genders, reducing the gender gap in visual presence. At the same time, the findings indicate that gender differences in visual visibility cannot be explained simply by distinguishing between more and less visually oriented platforms, or between platforms characterized by more open or more closed follower networks. Despite offering fewer visual affordances and a more open network than Facebook, X is associated with a higher proportion of images featuring the politician. This suggests that the platform's public and professionally oriented communicative environment might encourage leaders to use their personal image as a resource for public persona construction.

Together, these results show that platform and gender do not operate independently but interact in shaping politicians' visual visibility. While platforms differ in the extent to which visible self-presentation is prevalent, the findings also suggest that gender differences vary according to the communication environment in which leaders operate.

5.2. Signalling Leadership on Social Media

When leaders appeared in images, how were they presented? Among the 534 images featuring leaders, agentic representations were most common (47%), followed by hybrid (23%) and communal representations (21%). Around 9% of images could not be classified into one of these leadership styles because these portrayals did not contain a clear representation, or they were shot from too far to properly assess them. These images were excluded from the remaining analyses to get a clearer comparison of leadership representations.

H4 predicted that leaders would be more likely to adopt agentic representations on X than on Instagram or Facebook. While the highest proportion of agentic representations was indeed on X (56.4%), followed by Facebook (53.9%) and Instagram (47.5%), this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 3.77$, $p = 0.438$, Cramér's $V = 0.062$). H4 is therefore not supported. The findings instead suggest that agentic representation is not particularly associated with X, but is a relatively common form of political self-presentation across platforms among PRR leaders.

H5 predicted that female leaders would be more likely than male leaders to adopt hybrid representations. The data do not support this expectation. Instead, female leaders were more frequently represented through agentic leadership cues than male leaders (56.8% vs. 43.5%), while hybrid representations were slightly more common among male leaders (29.4%) than female leaders (23.1%). While female leaders were predominantly framed using agentic cues, male leaders showed a more even distribution across agentic, communal, and hybrid representations. The overall distribution of leadership representations differed significantly by gender ($\chi^2(2) = 8.03$, $p = 0.018$, Cramér's $V = 0.129$), but the effect size was small. H5 is not supported.

H6 predicted that gender differences in leadership representation would be smallest on Instagram. H6 was evaluated using separate chi-square analyses examining the association between gender and leadership representation within each platform. While this approach allows for descriptive comparisons of gender differences across platforms, it does not formally test the interaction between the two. Female leaders have higher proportions of agentic representations on every platform, but the difference with male leaders varied across the platforms. On Instagram, female and male leaders showed relatively similar distributions across leadership representations, particularly for hybrid representations. Agentic representations, however, being

the most common for both groups (50 % vs. 44.1%). The gender difference was most pronounced on Facebook and, somewhat less, on X, where female leaders were more frequently represented through agentic cues than male leaders (60% vs. 39.5% and 62.2% vs. 46%, respectively). Representation of male leaders also included relatively many communal cues (on Facebook) and hybrid cues (on X) compared to those of female leaders. The association between gender and leadership representation was weakest on Instagram and was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 1.43$, $p = 0.489$, Cramér's $V = 0.084$). Stronger associations were observed on Facebook ($\chi^2(2) = 8.82$, $p = 0.012$, Cramér's $V = 0.248$) and X ($\chi^2(2) = 10.14$, $p = 0.006$, Cramér's $V = 0.269$). The descriptive pattern is therefore consistent with H6.

These findings suggest that gender differences in leadership representation are not consistent across platforms. One possible explanation is that platforms characterized by stronger norms of personal communication can provide greater scope for female leaders to incorporate communal or hybrid leadership cues, whereas platforms with fewer such norms may be more strongly associated with agentic representations. The relatively strong presence of agentic representations among female leaders, contrary to expectations of the double bind, could indicate that women signalling agency and leadership are more compatible with the emphasis on authority and strong leadership in PRR politics.

Leadership representation also differed significantly across individual leaders ($\chi^2(10) = 71.06$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.271$). This association was stronger than the associations observed for gender or platform. Figure 3 shows leadership representation by leader and platform. Weidel and Wilders were mostly framed through agentic cues. As Wilders was only visible in a handful of images, his findings should be interpreted cautiously. Farage and Le Pen were more frequently represented through communal cues, while Meloni and Van Grieken also relied more frequently on hybrid representations. Representation patterns remained relatively consistent across platforms for most leaders, except for Wilders, whose limited number of visible images makes platform-specific patterns difficult to interpret. The following subsections provide a qualitative overview of how the different leaders construct their visual leadership.

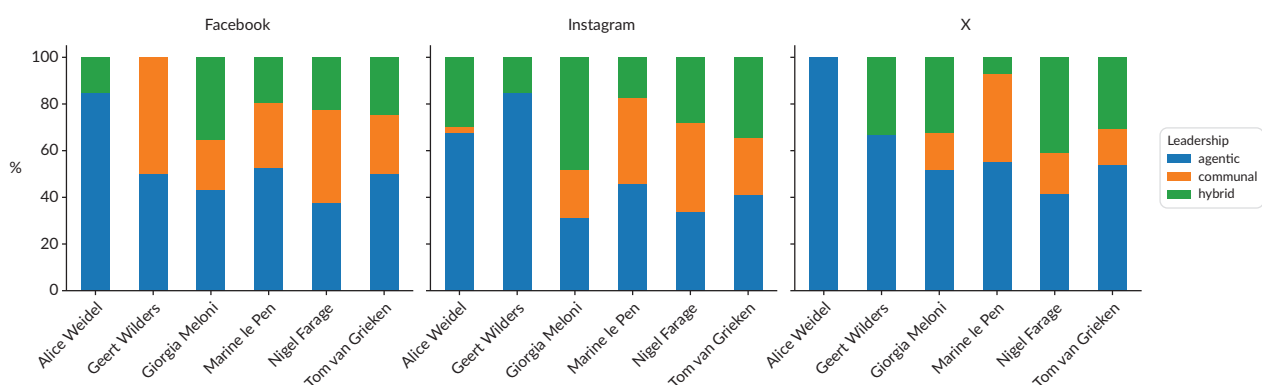


Figure 3. Leadership styles split by politician and platform (excluding images with no clear leadership representation).

5.2.1. Representation of Female Leadership

All three female leaders signal agentic leadership, but differ in the extent to which, as well as how, communal cues are incorporated into their self-presentation.

Marine Le Pen combines agentic and communal traits. Her signalling of communal leadership mainly happens through relationships with citizens: listening to citizens, visiting disaster areas, meeting supporters; embracing elderly people, children, and animals; and smiling. She shares few to no family-related images. Agentic leadership is primarily signaled through her central positioning in speeches and official commemorations. Le Pen often appears in a blue blazer, a color associated with authority, and one that coincidentally reflects the blue of the French flag next to which she is frequently pictured, another symbol of power.

Giorgia Meloni represents a different, but similar strategy. Her agentic leadership is primarily signaled through images of state visits alongside other political leaders and through images of her walking resolutely. Many of the communal images are hybrid and take place within institutional settings, such as hugs with Elon Musk or Matteo Salvini. Meloni is the only female leader in the sample who shares markedly personal images of her private life, including her daughter and close-up selfies. More so than Le Pen, she contrasts her strong agentic representation with conventionally feminine styling, including brightly coloured pink suits, floral earrings, purple eye shadow, and red lipstick.

Alice Weidel differs from Le Pen and Meloni. Instead, she builds her visual communication primarily around institutional authority and strong standardization. Her communication is dominated by the repeated use of the same professional portrait combined with party logos and programmatic messages. This results in a highly consistent and strongly party-aligned visual repertoire. While there are images of official settings, debates, and state visits, images dominated by communal leadership cues are mostly absent. Only on Instagram are more hybrid forms of representation visible, but also here repeated party communication dominates. This institutional consistency is also visible in her styling: she often wears a dark suit or blazer.

5.2.2. Representation of Male Leadership

Compared with the female leaders, the male leaders display more distinct and differentiated visual strategies.

Nigel Farage can be characterized as a populist showman whose communication is highly performative and oriented toward visibility, theatricality, and staged charisma rather than institutional authority. His images are dominated by agentic displays, such as standing alongside prominent political figures or adopting rockstar-like poses in front of large crowds. At the same time, Farage's communication contains elements of communality. Images of him dressed as a steelworker among laborers, standing with his arms on two tractors to signal support for farmers, or repeatedly raising a glass of beer toward the audience, despite reportedly not being especially fond of beer himself (Valluvan & Singh, 2026), indicate a largely staged form of communality. Similarly, although Farage is frequently pictured with crowds, these images are often highly posed: he typically keeps his distance from the crowd, positioning himself in front of a relatively stiff and posed audience. Farage thus fits well with the conceptualization of populism as a communication style in which normality is strategically performed (Moffitt, 2016).

Tom Van Grieken represents a different populist strategy, constructing leadership through proximity, normality, and approachability rather than spectacle. Images regularly show him in everyday campaign situations, such as handing out flyers, participating in protests, or interacting informally with campaign teams. Even in more formal contexts, his presentation generally is informal, and he is often pictured among

the audience rather than positioned above or in front of it. Also in his media appearances, he is often shot as if having a relaxed conversation, in casual outfits or settings. One key image shows him during an interview while his daughter holds onto his leg. Compared to other leaders, his use of institutional symbolism, such as flags, is limited. His style is furthermore less theatrical, with more images appearing less deliberately posed than those of Farage.

Geert Wilders presents a distinctly different pattern, characterized by a minimal and atypical form of visual self-presentation. Most images posted on his accounts were excluded from the analysis because he was not visible in them himself. This absence is itself relevant, suggesting that a substantial part of his communication does not revolve around visual leadership representation at all. Among the relatively small number of images in which he does appear, no consistent visual strategy could be identified.

5.2.3. Variation in Representations of Leadership

Both female and male leaders use distinct visual strategies, which are summarized in Table 1 by bringing together leaders' levels of visibility, dominant leadership representations, and overall visual style.

Table 1. Typology of leadership styles.

Leader	Visibility	Leadership	Visual style
Le Pen	High	Agentic & Communal	Compassionate stateswoman
Meloni	Medium	Agentic & Communal	Approachable commander
Weidel	High	Agentic	Controlled communicator
Farage	High	Agentic & Communal	Populist showman
Van Grieken	Medium	Hybrid	Grassroots populist
Wilders	Low	—	Programmatic minimalist

Variation between leaders can partly be linked to differences in political systems, institutional positions, party organization, and national political culture. Le Pen's high visibility and emphasis on agentic representation can be situated within the personalized and presidential nature of French politics, where party leaders are central to campaigns and strong leadership ideals remain influential (Krogstad & Storvik, 2010). Meloni stands out among the six leaders for combining high levels of both agentic and communal signalling. This might reflect her position as prime minister, where projecting both strong and approachable leadership could matter more than the direct supporter-oriented messaging that opposition leaders typically rely on. Although previous research suggests that images of motherhood can expose female politicians to criticism (Langer, 2010), Meloni frequently uses them. One possible explanation is that her strong political position, combined with the cultural significance attached to motherhood in Italy, may make such images more compatible with her leadership persona. Weidel's institutionalized, standardized communication fits her role as co-leader of the AfD, a party which, due to previous conflicts, may favor cautious, low-risk, repeated formats. This may also indicate her position as one of the party's public faces rather than its sole representative. The emphasis on consistency over intimacy is also not unusual in the German context (Sonnevend & Steiert, 2024).

Farage represents a highly performative, media-oriented leadership style in which visibility and theatricality function as central resources for constructing authority. This highly visible approach may reflect the British

first-past-the-post electoral context and, more specifically, the campaign period during which Farage's data were collected. By contrast, the two male leaders from more proportional political systems use less centralized images of authority: Van Grieken through a community-centered leadership style, Wilders through his relative absence from his own visual communication. Van Grieken builds leadership through proximity rather than spectacle, which corresponds with the party's broader emphasis on building a political community, where accessibility, informality, and everyday contact function as tools of political bonding (Sijstermans, 2021).

Wilders presents a markedly different case from all other leaders: he posts very few images of himself, and those that do feature him do not construct a coherent visual leadership persona. As the party's sole official member, Wilders himself is inseparable from the party organization, yet his visual communication rarely centers on his own physical presence. At the same time, the personal is deeply political in Wilders's case: many of the images excluded from the sample as AI-generated were related to death threats he received from Islamist extremists. Living under constant security because of these threats means that politics is inseparable from his personal life. In that sense, Wilders may be the clearest example of how the personal and the political become inseparable, despite his relatively impersonal visual communication.

6. Conclusion

This study addressed how platforms and gender shape the visual self-presentation of six European PRR leaders on Instagram, Facebook, and X by analysing their visibility and visual leadership representations.

The findings show that PRR leaders were more likely to appear in their own images on Instagram than on Facebook or X, consistent with the platform's emphasis on visual and personalized communication. Gender also mattered, but its role in visual self-presentation varied by platform. Gender differences were smallest on Instagram and bigger on Facebook and X. On the latter two platforms, female leaders appeared in substantially more images than male leaders, whereas this difference was smaller on Instagram, where both male and female leaders shared many images of themselves.

Beyond visibility, the analysis of leadership representations showed that, contrary to expectations derived from the double-bind literature, female PRR leaders used more agentic representations than male leaders. Consistent with Bast et al. (2022), these findings suggest that in PRR contexts, where strong leadership is highly valued, female leaders may be more encouraged to use agentic traits in their self-presentation. Future research comparing PRR leaders with politicians from other party families could examine whether this finding is specific to the PRR. Here too, the role of gender appeared to depend on the platform, although this was not formally tested. On X and Facebook, female leaders used more agentic representations than men, whereas this difference was smaller on Instagram. This indicates that platforms encouraging more personal and relational communication may provide greater room for both male and female leaders to signal competence alongside warmth.

The findings of this study have broader implications for research on political communication. First, they reinforce the importance of studying social media platforms as distinct communication environments, with different designs and norms that create different opportunities for political communication. Second, the findings highlight the relevance of considering these online opportunities when studying the self-presentation of male and female leaders. Some platforms may reduce gender differences, while others

may reinforce them. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the double bind is expressed differently across platforms, with female leaders more likely to combine agentic and communal cues on some platforms than others. Finally, this article highlights the importance of individual politicians' styles. Although gender and platforms create opportunities and constraints, they do not completely determine how leaders present themselves. Strong variation exists between individual leaders, who often have consistent and recognizable visual styles across platforms. This is in line with Bast's (2024) conclusion that individual communication style remains an important aspect of PRR leaders' visual self-presentation.

While these findings open up new avenues for research, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study includes only six leaders and three platforms, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The data were also collected using convenience sampling over a limited period, which may have resulted in an overrepresentation of campaign communication or responses to specific political events. Future research could explore whether similar findings emerge during election campaigns, periods in government, or political crises, as well as explore variation across ideological families, countries, and other platforms.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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