Gastropopulism: a sociosemiotic analysis of politicians posing as "the everyday man" via food posts on social media

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Gastropopulism: a sociosemiotic analysis of politicians posing as "the everyday man" via food posts on social media

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have highlighted the bond between contemporary right-wing populism and social media. They have also shown how populist features such as anti-elitism, nationalism and people-centrism are manifested through the exhibition of the leaders' private lives and everyday habits on social media. This paper contributes to this scholarship by looking at how two of these leaders – Matteo Salvini and Jair Bolsonaro – use one everyday feature of life on their social media accounts: food. Combining discursive semiotics and multimodal critical discourse analysis, I investigate how Salvini and Bolsonaro's food posts uphold their image of right-wing populist leaders. I argue that food images allow them to strategically communicate features such as being close to the common people, nationalism and the "us versus them" rhetoric, humbleness and authenticity. I also claim that these values are built both by the food represented in the images and their framing, lights, colours, shapes and textures, which allude to the amateur aesthetic of everyday social media use. As much as other features of the everyday social media use, food posts appear to be an ideological tool through which right-wing populism is communicated as a soft, safe and worthwhile political ideology.

Introduction

Why does Matteo Salvini, the secretary of the Italian party Lega, often publish selfies on his social media accounts in which he appears to be eating pizza or pasta? What kind of message does Jair Bolsonaro, the current president of Brazil, want to send to his followers by sharing online photos of himself having breakfast at home or eating Brazilian popular street foods such as corn on the cob? What do those food posts have in common? And in what ways are they related to Salvini and Bolsonaro's political views?

In this article, I discuss how both Salvini and Bolsonaro, two of the most influential contemporary right-wing populist leaders, use food in order to strategically communicate their political ideology on social media. I look at how their posts about the mundane acts of eating and cooking display and uphold their populism, seeking to understand how it can be manifested by the popular and everyday use of social media, as much as formal political speeches.

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Scholars have highlighted the bond between contemporary right-wing populism and social media (Gerbaudo 2014, 2018). They have also shown that the exhibition of a politician's private life and everyday habits on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have become a significant device for substantiating populist features such as nationalism and the "us versus them" rhetoric, anti-elitism and people-centrism (Bracciale and Martella 2017). This paper contributes to this scholarship by looking at how leaders such as Bolsonaro and Salvini depict one everyday feature of life online: food, which can be used to communicate individual ordinariness and authenticity, as well as the myth of a pure national-popular culture to be preserved from internal and external threats.

There are two reasons for choosing to compare Salvini and Bolsonaro's food posts. First, it is notable on their social media, compared to others I follow, that food is particularly salient. Casually browsing Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Viktor Orbán profiles, it would appear that food, even though it might eventually be present, does not play such an important role as it does for Salvini and Bolsonaro. And second, the affinities between their posts, as well as their similarities with the food images are often shared by users on social media.

That said, why do Bolsonaro and Salvini post about food so often? And why do the images they post follow some very specific aesthetic features, and other posts don't? In order to answer these questions, I analyse, combining discursive sociosemiotics (Greimas and Courtés [1979] 1982; Greimas [1984] 1989; Landowski 2005) and multimodal critical discourse analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen [1996] 2006; Ledin and Machin 2018), how the iconography, colours, shapes, lights, perspective, and framing of the food images posted by Salvini and Bolsonaro are used to communicate their populist worldview. More specifically, I look at how both the food presented in the image and the way in which it is portrayed become crucial ideological tool through which both leaders build their image of patriotists, anti-politicians and ordinary people.

As much as other features of everyday social media use, food posts appear to be an ideological tool through which right-wing populism is communicated as a soft, safe, worthwhile and enjoyable political regime, even when it seems to undermine some of the fundamental rights of liberal democracy (Mudde 2007).

Food and social media

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, food has increasingly become a research topic in the field of discursive semiotics and sociosemiotics. After Roland Barthes' ([1957] 1979, [1961] 1997) and Lévi-Strauss' (1964) seminal works, between the 80 s and the 90 s scholars addressed issues like the narrative structure of recipes (Greimas [1979] 1989), the visual identity of a particular dish (Floch [1995] 2000), and the discursive construction of taste (Landowski and Fiorin 1997).

However, it was in the last two decades that semiotic publications on food became even more frequent. The special issues of *Semiotica* (Stano 2016) and *E/C*, the journal of the Italian Semiotic Association for Semiotic Studies (Giannitrapani and Ventura Bordenca 2019) are examples of such growing interest. Both publications explore various aspects of the semiotics of food, from its role in shaping cultural identity to the connections between food and other social discursive spheres, such as design, urbanism, literature, photography, cinema, old and new media in general.

Among other topics, scholars have specifically investigated the links between food and national identity building, which is also a key issue for this study. They have shown how food became an important tool to connote national mythologies and authenticity. For instance, Stano (2015) has explored the intimate bond between food and Japanese identity, as well as the translation of the Japanese culinary code and culture on a global scale. Focusing on one national emblematic dish, Sedda (2020) has shown how the roast suckling pig ("su porceddu") has been constructed as a symbol of the island of Sardinia and as a stereotype of Sardinian character. Marrone (2016) has done the same with the different regional variations of the Italian risotto. Machin and Cobley (2020) have analyzed how Fair-Trade food packaging reveals the supposed authenticity of distant others, and how consumers engage with them in the act of shopping. The special issue edited by Eriksson and Machin (2020) has also deeply explored the relevance of food in performing sociocultural identities and national mythologies. In addressing the relationship between nationalism and political ideology in a similar way to what I intend to do here, Anderson (2020) has analyzed the figurative construction of Swedish identity and neo-liberalism through the representation of Swedish nature and landscape on food packaging.

Such a proliferation of food-related studies could be read as a reflection of the increasing presence of food in the mediatic landscapes of our everyday lives (Marrone 2014). The global success of *Masterchef*, *Topchef*, *Chef's Table* and other culinary TV shows, as well as the unrestrained spread of food pictures on social media (Mangiapane and Jacob 2019) has radically changed the quantitative and qualitative spectrum of food representations in contemporary western culture. As Marrone (2014) argued, the beginning of the twenty-first century will probably be remembered as the era of "Gastromania", that is, the general obsession with food and the gastronomic imagery.

Alongside "Gastromania", "food porn" is another expression that explains and crystallizes such a compulsion, as well as the rise of visual representations of food in everyday social media use. This term stands for images of food that highlight its plastic and sensorial qualities in order to physically seduce the observer (Lupton and Feldman 2020; Marrone 2019). The growth of "food porn" is strictly related to the evolution of social media, and particularly Instagram (Mangiapane and Jacob 2019). Due to its visually oriented architecture, Instagram promoted the profusion of a plurality of images of everyday life, among which "food porn" pictures emerged (Mejova, Abbar, and Haddadi 2016). It did so more than Facebook or Twitter.

For the purposes of this article, it is relevant to highlight that the visual aesthetic of food porn photography on social media is marked by some specific features. As Marrone (2019) claims, an initial aspect of food porn visual discourse is that it involves amateur photographs. Second, food porn pictures are performative images that aim to trigger all the senses of the observer, stimulating their appetite and anticipating the taste of the food. A third aspect is the preference for humble everyday meals, avoiding anything fancy or factitious. Fourth, emphasis is placed on the chromatic dimension and, in general, lighting that is typical for food porn: "the shades are dense and uniform, with very few internal shades, brilliant, translucent (…) Exposure to light is, however, very high" (Marrone 2019, 12). And a final aspect is the predilection for close-up frames: in almost all food porn posts, the dish is presented alone, almost out of context; even when a glass or a fork shows up, they are seen in the background, often out of focus.

Digital populism

The academic debate around the concept of "populism" is wide and complex. It is not my intention, nor would it be possible here, to encapsulate it in its entirety. For that reason, I limit myself to presenting a short list of fundamental distinctive features that are relevant to the current study.

First, there is the abuse of "empty signifiers" (Laclau 2005), such as the "people" (Canovan 2005), in whose name the sense of belonging to a collective body is constructed and constantly promoted. As it has been noticed, this revolves around the continuous appeal to a national identity (Ionescu and Gellner 1969), as well as the opposition between the "true" and "legitimate" citizens of a particular country and the ethnic minorities and migrants, who are seen as a concrete threat for the State and the national culture (Ledin 2017). Right-wing populist discourse in particular relies on such an idea of a "pure" and "authentic" national way of life (Lorenzetti 2020), expressed by a set of specific signifiers, among which food plays a central role. Second, an insistence on polarized relationships has been noted, especially that between the people and the elites (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Third, the cult of a leader is developed (Moffitt 2016).

In the wake of previous investigations into the links between populism and traditional mass media (Eco 2006; Waisbord 2013), some scholars have explored its overlaps with the internet, underlining the role of social networks in reshaping the discourses mentioned above (Da Empoli 2019; Dal Lago 2017; Fechine 2020; Gerbaudo 2014, 2018; Waisbord and Amado 2017)

According to these studies, the nature of contemporary populism is deeply related to that of social media. As Gerbaudo argues, the reason of such an intimate tie may be because social media has "come to be understood as [platforms] for the voice of the people in opposition to the mainstream news media, accused of being in cahoots with the financial and political establishment" (Gerbaudo 2018, 748–749).

Digital right-wing populism is characterized by the supposed disintermediated relationship between the leader and the people (Waisbord and Amado 2017). In political communication, the concept of disintermediation designates the process through which politicians seem to directly address the public via social media, building a sense of proximity to them (Bentivegna 2015). From a social semiotics perspective, it could be said that the dominant function of the language of social media is, in Jakobson's terms (1963), the "phatic function." According to Jakobson, this concerns the ways in which the addresser seeks to build and maintain contact with his addressee. On social media, this is normally executed through the use of rhetorical questions, exclamations, emojis and other similar tools, through which the "phatic belonging" to the community is constantly fed (Marrone 2017, 12–13; Myers 2009). Digital populists often use this set of discursive strategies (Bentivegna 2015).

The rupture of the boundary between public and private life (Bracciale and Martella 2017; Van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer 2012), as well the leader's outspoken style, which substantiates his alleged simplicity and authenticity (Moffitt 2016; Ostiguy and Roberts 2016), are also key issues for contemporary digital populism. Increasingly, leaders seek to mimic the supposed humble and genuine everyday way of life of ordinary people who inhabit social media: they talk, move, eat, dress, take photos, post and repost like them, "demonstrat[ing] popular taste and similarity to the people at the same time as

suggesting proximity to them" (Diehl 2017, 369). In a sense, they become "anonymous", (Bartezzaghi 2019, 177; Demuru and Sedda 2020), that is, unremarkable, average, banal, people just like everybody else.

However, it is also important to underline another feature of contemporary digital populist discourse that is relevant here: its passional and "aesthesic"[1] – i.e. sensible – dimension (Landowski 2018). Digital populism is often pervaded by anger, hate, fear, and resentment (Fechine 2020). In this regard, it does not seem to be a coincidence that populist leaders like Trump frequently "scream" using capital letters on Twitter or Facebook (Viennot 2019). As regards aesthesic expressions, they frequently post photos of their almost naked bodies, showing their imperfections and apparent ordinariness (Cosenza 2014). As much as the phatic dimension of the verbal language mentioned above, these images also contribute to creating an affective and nearly somatic bond between the populist leaders and their followers (Landowski 2018).

Thus described, right-wing digital populism appears to be an ideology (Eco 1975; Greimas and Courtés [1979] 1982, 149; Van Dijk 1998) with a very specific set of discourses: "patriotism", "traditional family", "the faith in the leader", being seen as a "man of the people", a "good" and "humble" man who protects the nation against the "evil" of the elites, the "moral corruption" of the left, and/or the cultural and economic threats of the "migrant invasion."

Following these guidelines, some scholars have started to tackle the bond between food and contemporary right-wing populism. Parasecoli (2019) and Revelli and Telese (2019) talked about "gastropopulism" exactly to highlight how food became a propaganda device for right-wing populist parties (Porciani 2019). Yet, they have not based such a terminological choice on empirical analyses, limiting themselves to a punctual suggestion. Starting from the resources provided by this body of research, I tackle the populist meaning making of Salvini and Bolsonaro's food posts next. I show how they work and how a social semiotic analysis of this particular feature of everyday social media use contributes to the scholarship presented above.

Data set

The data for this study includes forty representative food images from Salvini and forty from Bolsonaro, all posted on social media between 1 June 2018 and 1 August of 2020. Salvini's data collection was restricted to Instagram since this appears to be his preferred platform to share his culinary preferences and daily eating choices. For the record, in the period considered for this study, Salvini posted 299 food related pictures on his Instagram account. As regards Bolsonaro, I collected images from his Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube profiles. I have also considered photos posted by other users and profiles, namely: Bolsonaro's son Eduardo Bolsonaro's Twitter and YouTube accounts; *Familia Direita Brasil* (@BrazilFight) and *Patriotas* (@PATRIOTAS) who are two of the most influential Bolsonaro supporters; *Correio Braziliense's*, *G1* (from Grupo Globo); *Folha de São Paulo* and *Poder 360*; and all Brazilian official and traditional news broadcasters. This approach was taken as the food images posted by these profiles enjoyed a wide spread, both on the internet and in traditional media. One significant example here are the shots of Bolsonaro's lunch in a Davos supermarket cafeteria ("bandejão", in Brazilian Portuguese) during the 2019 World Economic Forum. The photos were released by *G1*

and *Folha de São Paulo* on their websites and social media profiles. A few hours later, the term "bandejão" (cafeteria) became a trending search topic on Google.[2] In the following analysis, I take an in-depth look into some significant examples of this data set.

Methodological considerations

Scholars have pointed out the necessity of exploring how ideological discourses spread and sediment in society through nonverbal languages (Machin 2013; Van Leeuwen 2013). At the same time, the urgency of tackling the relationships between ideology and everyday life have also been highlighted (Bouvier and Machin 2018; Machin and Van Leeuwen 2016; Way 2016). As Machin argues, not only ideologies are promoted through different semiotic languages and discursive practices, but people most often experience it "as fun, as style, and simply as part of the taken for granted everyday world" (Machin 2013, 347).

In order to analyse how this is constructed in Salvini's and Bolsonaro's food posts, I rely on visual discursive semiotics (Floch [1995] 2000; Greimas [1984] 1989; de Oliveira 2004; Pezzini 2008; Thurlemann 1982) and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen [1996] 2006; Ledin and Machin 2018). To begin with, I approach Greimas' distinction between the figurative and plastic dimensions of visual discourse. According to Greimas' methodology, "figurative dimensions" refers to the named elements of the world, whose meaning is historically, culturally and socially sedimented: the male body, the hand, the arm, the sea, the sand, a beach, a house, a kitchen, a cafeteria, the water, a pizza, cheese, bread, fruit, and so on. The "plastic dimension" concerns the shapes, colours, lights, material and positions, both of the figures presented in the image and the image itself (Greimas [1984] 1989). Following this, I consider the visual and verbal interactions promoted by the actors in and outside the images. These may be between Bolsonaro, Salvini and any other people represented in the pictures, as well as between them and the follower-receivers of their food posts (Greimas and Courtés [1979] 1989; Landowski 2005).

Such a methodological approach has allowed me to analyse the meaning of the food (a pizza, hot dog, etc.), people (Bolsonaro, Salvini and other actors), scenarios (kitchen, restaurants, cafeterias, etc.) depicted in the image, as well as the style in which they are presented. Semiotic choices and modes such as iconography, colours, lights, textures, shapes, materials, framing, gazes and gestures are considered as tools for expressing and fostering Salvini and Bolsonaro's right-wing populism. Thus described, the discursive semiotic methodological framework could be intended as a heuristic approach complementary to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, with which it shares the interest in the role of visual language – landscapes, framing, colours, shape, visual interactions and so on – in expressing and fostering social beliefs and ideologies (Kress and Van Leewen [1996] 2006; Ledin and Machin 2018).

Analysis: how food embodies digital populism

Based on the theoretical and methodological framework presented above, I have identified three discourses that both Bolsonaro and Salvini communicate through the visual representation of their gastronomic habits on social media. The first one is constituted

by the combination of patriotism and the praise of the gastronomic national-popular culture. The second one revolves around humbleness and authenticity. And finally, the third one contemplates the intimate proximity that both politicians appear to be trying to establish with their followers, as well as their apparent anonymity. As I previously argued, these discourses are typical of contemporary digital populism. Yet, here, they are specifically communicated through food posts. More than that: food posts contribute, in Bolsonaro and Salvini's cases, to actualize and strengthen them. Their populist ideology is often hidden behind the exhibition of the mundane act of eating on social media.

Patriotism and national popular culture

The first discourse that characterizes Salvini and Bolsonaro's digital gastropopulism include patriotism and the praise of national popular culture. Italianity and Brazilianity seem to be expressed through stereotyped national and popular food and dishes, presented as "symbolic figures" (Greimas [1984] 1989, 645) of the politicians' respective countries of birth.

Salvini's Instagram page is filled with spaghetti, pizzas, mozzarellas, espressos, tiramisus, Parmigiano Reggiano, Nutella (see Figure 1), ice creams, Sicilian lemons and other local ingredients. More precisely, there appear to be three main ways through which food contributes to communicate Salvini's Italian "Souverainism" – a right-wing populist doctrine that praises the defence of the national sovereignty against international institution and organization (Diamanti and Pregliasco 2018).

The first concerns the selection of emblematic national foods, which are culturally and historically sedimented – and immediately recognizable – as epitomes of Italy. Pizza, pasta, tiramisu, mozzarella and Nutella are examples of this iconic focus. Such dishes, ingredients and internationally famous Italian industrial food work as condensed

Figure 1. Salvini eating Nutella. Source: https://www.instagram.com/matteosalviniofficial/?hl=pt-br.

gastronomic "self-descriptions" (Lotman 1990) of Italianity. That is, they operate as a material incarnation of the "creativity", "resourcefulness", "spontaneity", "simplicity", and "light-heartedness" that mark the stereotype of the "Italian way of life" (Patriarca 2010).

The second is regional food. Salvini often reaffirms his predilection for Italian local specialties such as the Parma Prosciutto, Calabrian ricotta, "Piadina Romagnola" (a very popular sandwich from Romagna), or "Culurgiones" (a potato-cheese filled ravioli from Sardinia) (see Figure 2).

The fact of displaying such culinary-geographic knowledge is directly connected to the geopolitical turn through which both Salvini and Lega went in the last decade. Since at least 2012, when Salvini became Lega's secretary, the party turned from a regional-Northern into an Italian nationalist party (Diamanti and Pregliasco 2018). Salvini's curiosity and discoveries of other Italian regional foods were a key element of this turn (Terracciano 2019). Food posts such as the ones shown in Figure 2 are examples of this strategy. By eating and posting regional dishes like "Piadina Romagnola" and "Culurgiones" from Sardinia, Salvini constructs a specific set of meanings: he demonstrates his deep knowledge of the multiple facets of the Italian culture and territory, while also positioning himself to be qualified to tie together culturally, socially and economically distant parts of the country: the North and the South, the islands and the continent, the mountains and the sea. Moreover, these symbolic figures of regional identity are arranged into a new meaningful totality, i.e. "Italy", whose identity is the result of a combination of each of these pieces. In this sense, we can say that this strategy bears a double outcome. On one hand, it allows Salvini to be perceived as a leader who recognizes and stimulates the local specificity and pride of every single corner of Italy. On the other hand, it constructs a sense of belonging to a collective subject – the "Nation" – to whom he may appear as a leader of all.
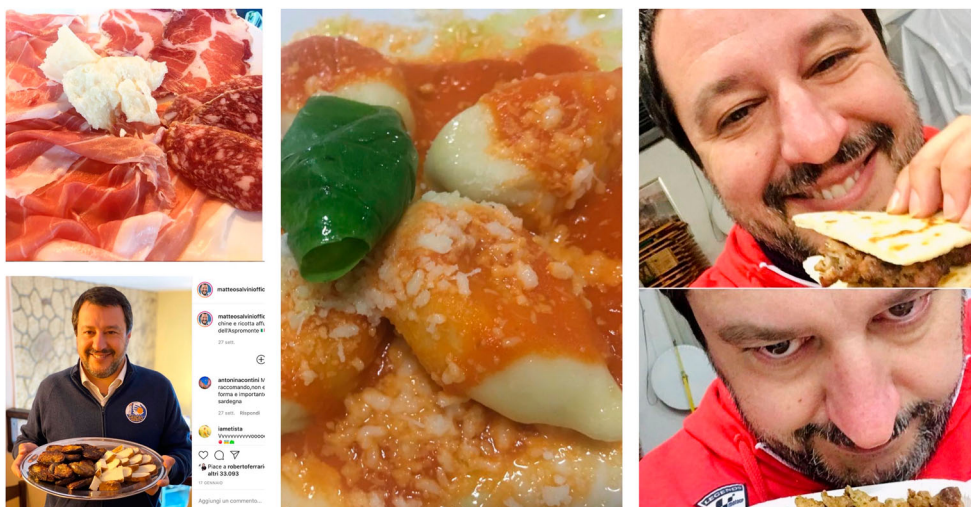

Figure 2. Salvini's taste for Italian regional specialties. Source: https://www.instagram.com/matteosalviniofficial/?hl=pt-br.

As Terracciano ([2019](#)) points out, such a gastronomic blend of local food and ingredients is often manifested in one single plate, like the "tortellini with 'nduja" (tortellini from Emilia Romagna and "nduja", a spreadable pork cream from Calabria) and the "Ravioli with burrata, 'piennolo' grape tomatoes from Vesusio and Bronte's Pistachio" (the top left photo in [Figure 3](#)). These two dishes, in particular, are a significant example of Salvini's "regional syncretism" (Terracciano [2019](#)). Through these, he translates the different codes of Italian cuisine (Stano [2015](#)), mixing them into a new cohesive unity. The burrata ravioli perfectly embodies such a recombination of the local specificity into a "synecdotic globality", in which the part stand for the whole and vice-versa. Yet, national unity and identity are not only displayed through the figurative, but also through the plastic dimension, and specifically through the colours. Indeed, the combination of red, green and white of the burrata ravioli dish is a direct homage to the Italian flag.

The third way through which Salvini manifests his patriotism and praise of Italian national popular culture occurs via his attack of non-Italian imported foods, such as Turkish oranges, Brazilian meat and Spanish peaches (Terracciano [2019](#), 10), which parallel the anti-immigration and anti-Europeanist narrative of Lega and Salvini (Diamanti and Pregliasco [2018](#)). In semiotic terms, it could be said that food underpins the "us versus them" rhetoric of contemporary right-wing populist discourse (Porciani [2019](#)).

Bolsonaro's case is quite different. The gastropopulist strategy through which he affirms his Brazilianity appears to be more oriented to ordinary everyday food, beverages and culinary habits, which are, nonetheless, culturally and socially identified as expressions of national popular culture. Bolsonaro's social media profiles provide several examples of this approach. I present four such representative examples below.

A first example is the video released on 11 November 2018 by TV Globo, which was reposted by Bolsonaro in his YouTube account the day after. It portrays the then newly elected Brazilian President drinking coconut water at a beach kiosk and having a

Figure 3. Salvini's "Italian flag dishes". Source: https://www.instagram.com/matteosalviniofficial/?hl=pt-br.

"churrasco" – the typical Brazilian barbecue (Cascudo [1967] 2008). "Churrasco" also appears on other occasions, such as in an Instagram post of a young Bolsonaro sitting with a friend in front of some meat and sausage skewers, posted on 15 July 2018. A second example is how widely consumed industrial foods are featured. These include the popsicle, "Leite moça", Nestlé's condensed milk (Figure 6), and "Nissin" Instant noodles (Shinohara et al. 2013a, 2013b). The latter can be seen in Figure 4, showing Bolsonaro in his hotel room during his 2019 diplomatic trip to Japan, as reported by *Folha de São Paulo*. A third example pertains to the frequent appearance of "Café coado", the everyday Brazilian dripped coffee, which is always stored in a big plastic thermos (see Figures 6 and 7). Together with the "Minas Gerais" fresh cheese and the so-called "pão francês" (literally, "french bread"), these are three common breakfast items for the humble man/consumer across Brazil (Moro and Gonçalves 2016). A final example is the occurrence of popular street food such as corn on the cob, "cachorro quente" ("hot dog"), and meat skewers, which he made a point of publicly eating during the pandemic (Figure 5).

The Instagram image posted on 19 October 2018 in particular can be considered as an emblem of this strategy (Figure 6). This photo, which was one of the most popular ones across his profile (with 1,200,000 likes), portrays Bolsonaro having breakfast at his house. "Pão francês", Nestlé's condensed milk and Minas cheese lay directly on the unclothed wooden table. Wearing the uniform of Sao Paulo's Palmeiras Football Club, Bolsonaro is serving himself a glass of coffee from a blue plastic thermos. The glass he is using is, however, no random glass. It is the so called "copo americano" (american glass), the most popular Brazilian kind of glass (Vila Nova 2020). This substantiates, along with the other

Figure 4. Bolsonaro's taste for industrial food. Sources: Left image: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2019/10/bolsonaro-ironiza-a-folha-e-publica-foto-com-macarrao-instantaneo.shtml. Right top image: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fpZdSq-h2I. Right bottom image: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huKjTtn1iUg.

Figure 5. Bolsonaro's national popular food habits. Sources: Left image: https://twitter.com/correio/status/1201961805246976001; Right top image: https://twitter.com/bolsonarosp/status/125190348856252528258. Right bottom image: https://www.instagram.com/jairmessiasbolsonaro/?hl=pt-br.

Figure 6. Bolsonaro's breakfast. Source: https://www.instagram.com/jairmessiasbolsonaro/?hl=pt-br.

elements of the picture – including the humble cutlery – the imagery of national popular identity, that is, as we will see in the next section, of the "authentic" Brazilian average man.

Humbleness and authenticity

"Patriotism" and "national popular identity" are mostly manifested on the figurative level of the visual representation, i.e. by the food found in the images. But when it comes to displaying "humbleness" and "authenticity", both the figurative (pasta, pizza, coffee, cheese, etc.) and the plastic dimensions of the images (colours, lights, spaces, shapes, positioning, framing, etc.) play a crucial role.

Figure 6 above is a significant example of this strategy. Both the food presented in the image (figurative dimension) and the aesthetic style of the photo (plastic dimension) communicate Bolsonaro's humbleness and authenticity. At first glance, the analysis shows that both discourses are embodied by the "Leite Moça" condensed milk, the "pão francês", the "café coado" and the "Minas Gerais cheese." These are all, as mentioned above, part of a very common and modest meal in Brazil. Such a sense of a mundane and ordinary everyday-life moment is also upheld by the cell phone charging in the midst of the breadcrumbs, which may also serve the purpose of signifying Bolsonaro's sense of digital communication and social media. Although it builds an aura of spontaneity, the picture seems to be meticulously designed. Nothing in it appears to be left to chance. The food, the charging smartphone, the clutter on the table, the clothes: the whole scenario reaffirms Bolsonaro's populist humbleness and authenticity. Next, we can highlight that the composition of the image is part of what allows one to analyse the intrinsic meanings of it. Through framing and positioning (Kress and Van Leeuwen [1996] 2006) – that is, through the topological disposition of the elements of the image (Greimas [1984] 1989) – the viewer's sight is drawn to an imaginary line that goes from Minas cheese to Bolsonaro's arms, connecting and highlighting these with the other items in the middle: the condensed milk, the bread and the cell phone. Moreover, the whole style of the photo should also be considered as a symbol of his simplicity and supposed truthfulness. The quality of the image is poor, and it seems as if no filters were applied. The framing angle and perspective, from top to bottom, suggests that the image was taken in a spontaneous and unpremeditated manner. The strong white light on the left side of the background reinforces this sense of immediacy. Hence, we can conclude that from a visual semiotic standpoint, both the plastic and the figurative mutually contribute to underpin the semantic qualities of the image and, in general, of all of Bolsonaro's food posts. Indeed, as Possenti (2019) pointed out after Bolsonaro's election in

Figure 7. Bolsonaro's breakfast during the COVID crises on July 2020. Source: https://www.instagram.com/jairmessiasbolsonaro/?hl=pt-br.

2018, such "lo-fi" aesthetics are one of the most distinctive features of his digital populist identity. Bolsonaro signs his presidential bills with a regular BIC pen, withdraws money himself at the ATM, eats hot dogs and condensed milk like every average Brazilian does, and posts "low quality" and "unpretentious" pictures just as every "generic internet user" does (Gerbaudo 2014).

Other examples of this strategy are two other "breakfast portraits" posted by Bolsonaro on July 2020 (Figure 7). In both images, we can recognize the "pão francês" and the coffee carafe. In addition to these recurrent figurative elements, the plastic dimension also contributes to corroborate humbleness and authenticity. The modulation of the image, with its flat saturation and brightness (Floch [1995] 2000; Ledin and Machin 2018, 103), as well as the blurry texture of the second photo, reinforce the idea that there is a continuity between Bolsonaro and the Brazilian generic social media user. They are both amateurs, average, regular, ordinary people who post amateur, average, regular and ordinary photos of their everyday life experiences.

The visual registers of Bolsonaro's gastronomic escapades during the coronavirus quarantine are also representative examples of such a semiotic strategy. Let us take, for instance, the video in which the Brazilian President is having a "cachorro quente" (hot dog) in Brasilia, uploaded by Bolsonaro to his official Facebook page. Characteristic of Bolsonaro's online communication, the movie seems to be shot by cell phone. The images are blurry. Surrounded by journalists and plenty of followers, Bolsonaro, with a mask on his neck, answers their questions between bites and taking a sip of his Coke. At a certain point, he bites his sandwich and the melting cheese makes a big string, which he later puts back into his mouth (Figure 8). Both Bolsonaro and the hot dog appear now in its pure and raw materiality. The roughness of the cheese and, in general, of this culinary experience, resound that of the images, provoking, in sociosemiotic terms, an aesthesic reaction to the viewers (Greimas 1987; Landowski 2005). Together with other videos shot during the COVID crisis, this film can be seen as both a reaffirmation of Bolsonaro's passion for junk food and as him being aligned with the "real people."
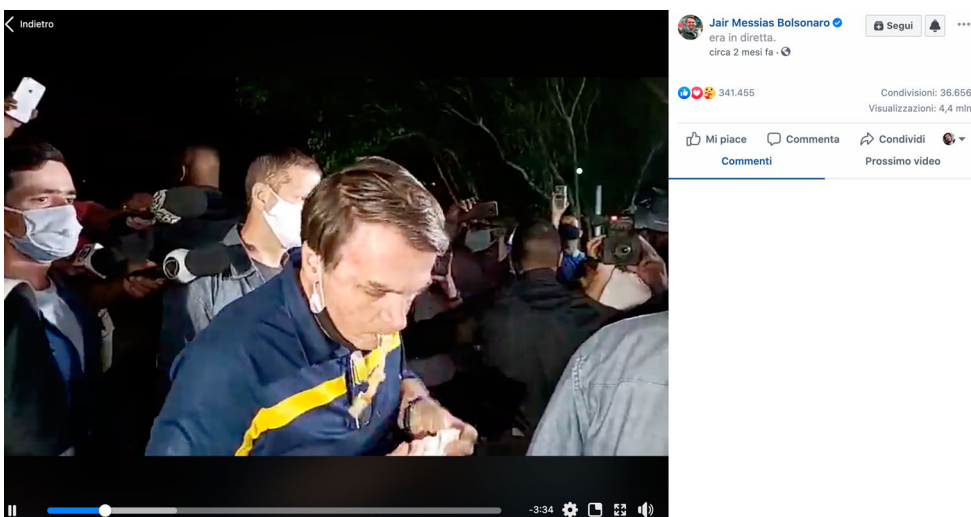

Figure 8. Bolsonaro's quarantine hot dog. Source: https://www.facebook.com/jairmessias.bolsonaro.

Indeed, figuratively speaking his humbleness and authenticity are also communicated by the contact he has with ordinary people, with whom he makes the point of eating together. This was documented as happening on several occasions, including the 2019 Davos meeting.

Like Bolsonaro, Salvini is mostly shown eating simple, ordinary and genuinely national popular food: pizza, pasta carbonara, lasagne, ice cream, espresso, polenta, mozzarella, etc. Moreover, he often cooks and posts his own meals, or the dishes that he prepares for his daughter, such as a "Cotoletta" (the cutlet) or a "heart-shaped" fried egg (as in Figure 9). Besides this bolstering his good man and doting father image, this shows off his ordinariness and averageness.

Moreover, simplicity and truthfulness are also expressed in the plastic dimension of Salvini's food posts, which reverberate the food porn aesthetic of generic social media users, as discussed above (Figure 10). As food porn images, Salvini's photos always appear as amateur images. Fuzziness, blurriness and very high or low saturation are recurrent plastic distinctive features (Greimas [1984] 1989; Floch [1995] 2000). Pictures are often too bright or too dark, too opaque or too glancing, as well as out of focus. Framing (Kress and Van Leeuwen [1996] 2006) is also a relevant sign of his amateurishness and supposed naiveté. His portraits are frequently crooked: Salvini prefers the diagonality over the horizontality, the curve over the line, motion over stability (as in Figure 11). These traces are regularly used on Instagram, as highlighted by Manovich (2016), and can be understood as marks of spontaneity and amateur inventiveness. As the author points out, "the use of diagonals, the appearance of objects and bodies cut by an image frame in designed Instagram photos are signs of the immersion, and of life as improvisation" (Manovich 2016, 126).

However, Salvini also usually portrays himself whilst eating or promoting Italian food in the company of other people. As in Bolsonaro's case, this strategy seems to be aimed at

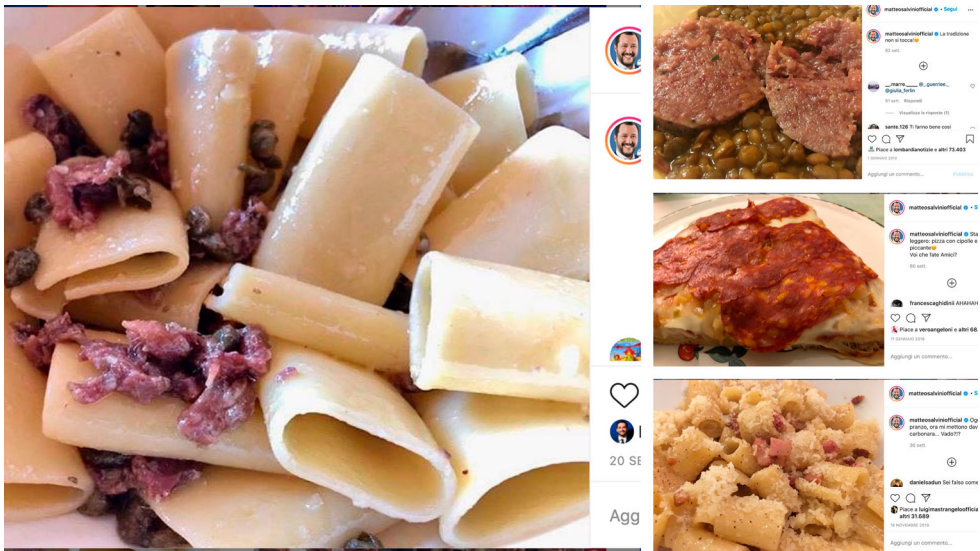**Figure 9.** Salvini's fried egg and "cotoletta". Source: https://www.instagram.com/matteosalviniofficial/?hl=pt-br.

Figure 10. Salvini's food porn aesthetics: Source: https://www.instagram.com/matteosalviniofficial/?hl=pt-br.

putting himself on the same (figurative) level as "the people" he represents. This serves to give a face, as Terracciano argues (2019, 9), to the real Italians with whom he shares the values of family, patriotism and honesty. Moreover, while it is true that Salvini's culinary photo style echoes the classic food porn aesthetic, it also evident that in some cases – such as the cutlet mentioned above – his style resonates another aspect of the food porn phenomenon. This is the representation of non-professional, or even bad cooking.

Figure 11. Salvini's "diagonal" proximity. Source: https://www.instagram.com/matteosalviniofficial/?hl=pt-br.

This can be seen in Facebook pages such as "Cucinare Male" (Cooking Badly) which celebrates, as noticed by Stano (2018), the failures and the ugliness of everyday gastronomic adventures. The meaning making of these pictures is prominently aesthesic: as highlighted by Greimas in *De* l'Imperfetion (1987), the look became, in cases as such, tactile. Moreover: through the vision, all the senses are awakened. Salvini's gastropopulism builds a bridge between the visual and the whole synesthetic experience of the observer. The nature of its meaning is not only cognitive, but also somatic (Landowski 2005; Marrone 2019).

In sum, through a very detailed and articulated visual semiotic of everyday life food, both Salvini and Bolsonaro manage to appear "humble" and "authentic" as common Brazilian and Italian men, or average Brazilian and Italian social media users. Not only do they eat like commoners, they also capture and post food pictures just like an average joe.

Anonymity and proximity

In the light of what we have just observed, Bolsonaro and Salvini's food representation strategies can be defined as populist narratives that emphasize their genuine identity and also their anonymity and proximity with the common people who share their lives on social media on a daily basis. By anonymity, I here mean the lack of marked individual and unusual features, that is, the fact that both Bolsonaro and Salvini present themselves and seem to behave on social media as mundane, unremarkable people (Bartezzaghi 2019; Demuru and Sedda 2020). The term proximity designates a sense of closeness to "the people" that derivates from acting like anonymous, average internet users.

As regards Salvini and Bolsonaro, food posts seem to be another strategy for them to camouflage themselves in the environment of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube. As said before, both Bolsonaro and Salvini are amateur photographers, like the majority of Instagram users. Their shots follow those same figurative and plastic leads (Manovich 2016). They magnify them, celebrate them, vanish into them. In that sense, it could be said that they are close to the people: by using this specific stratagem, they construct a sense of proximity to their followers. Drawing on the above analysis on humbleness and authenticity, it could be said that proximity is manifested, on a first level, through the figurative dimension – by the presence of Salvini and Bolsonaro at the same kiosks and/or at the tables of unknown, ordinary people (as in Figure 5). And on a second level, that of the plastic dimension by copying the aesthetic of the generic social media user. In other words, they are "one of us." Possibly, we could come across one of them in an everyday place, and the pictures we post might as well be theirs, given that there are no distinct figurative features.

Still, these are not the only ways in which proximity is constructed and promoted by the two politicians. In this regard, there is also another aspect of their gastropopulist discourse that should be highlighted. This concerns both visual and verbal enunciation, as well as their intersection. Scrolling through Salvini's Instagram feed, one can easily notice that in most photographs he looks directly at the camera (Figure 11). In several occasions, he seems to offer the ingredient, the plate or the cup of coffee to the observer, as also Bolsonaro occasionally does (Figure 7–11). Such a convocation of the addressee into the visual discourse of the addresser is reinforced, at the same time, by the verbal language. As he hands food or a beverage to his virtual table

companion, Salvini usually states or asks something in order to create a bond and engage the reader into his everyday life scenario: "breakfast and kisses from Caserta. Good morning!"; "Vanilla ice cream and Fabbri's amarena. Should I go for it?"; "Grilled Parmigiano Cheese (…) Good evening, friends, what are you doing?" Likewise, Bolsonaro often wishes "bom dia!" (good morning), to his followers: "GOOD MORNING EVERYONE", he writes in capital letters on July 25, whilst he shows a box of Chloroquine, the medicine he claims to have been used to treat his Covid-19 infection (Figure 7). "Good Friday everyone!", he posts on October 19, with an exclamation point followed by a thumbs up emoji (Figure 6).

The semiotic meaning making of such an address can be considered in a twofold manner. Firstly, the posters appear to talk in a casual manner, like everyone from common users to "semi-famous" influencers. This reaffirms their simplicity, ordinariness and anonymity. Secondly, they make a point of constructing a phatic bond and engage in a nearly somatic interaction with their followers (Fechine 2020; Landowski 2005, 2018). As discussed above, this is a highly common linguistic feature of online discourse (Marrone 2017), which both Bolsonaro and Salvini use to build their image of populist leaders who are close to the people.

Conclusion

Social media has become a breeding ground for the growth of right-wing populism in Western democracies. As shown by the scholarship discussed in this article, the ascensions of leaders such as Trump, Bolsonaro and Salvini cannot be understood without a deep comprehension of how they craftily adopt popular expression and representation online. Taking advantage of the polarized and emotion-centred social media environment, such politicians have managed to promote features like ethno-nationalism, people-centrism and anti-elitism. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp were used as tools for explicitly attacking political opponents, journalists and the media, immigrants and foreigners, who are depicted as a threat to national security and as enemies of the people. Nonetheless, social media seems to have contributed to the spread of such an ideology in another, less evident way, in which the online sharing of the populist leader's everyday life plays a crucial role. Mundane practices such walking, taking a nap, watching sports on TV, scrolling your Instagram feed, and, of course, eating, have become tools for communicating a politician's patriotism, humbleness and authenticity, as well as their proximity to ordinary people. The study of Salvini and Bolsonaro's food posts aimed exactly to show how this takes place in their social media accounts. The analysis revealed that both leaders use food to build an image as supposedly authentic "men of the people", or, as I said above, "generic internet users." Posting amateur pictures in which they appear to be eating traditional Italian or Brazilian popular dishes, they manage not only to corroborate their people-centrism, anti-elitism and praise of national mythologies, but also to communicate right-wing populism as a soft, fun and enjoyable political ideology. As much as other features of everyday social media use, food posts appear thus to be a powerful ideological tool through which such a political worldview is mitigated in order to be perceived as another acceptable form of liberal democracy, even when it seems to undermine some of its granted fundamental rights.

Notes

1. The concept of *aesthesis*, which stands, in ancient Greek, for sensibility and perception, was introduced in the field of discursive semiotics by Algirdas Julien Greimas (1987) to tackle the role of the senses, as well as polisensoriality and synaesthesia, in the construction of meaning. A theory of aesthesis in social semiotics has been later developed by Eric Landowski (2005), who has also explored the implications of the aesthesic dimension in contemporary populist discourse (Landowski 2018).
2. https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/monicabergamo/2019/01/bandejao-e-um-dos-termos-mais-buscados-por-brasileiros-interessados-em-davos.shtml.

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Disclosure statement

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