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Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature on the style of populists by focusing on the visual and textual elements of Viktor Orbán's Facebook communication. Orbán is one of the most prominent figures associated with contemporary populism, and his 14 consecutive years in power make him a unique case for the study of the bimodal populist style. To this end, all his image-based posts ($N = 492$) were collected over a three-year period (2018–2020), covering campaigns, the COVID-19 crisis, and slow news ('cucumber') periods. The results of the quantitative visual and verbal content analyses reveal the primacy of visual content in transmitting populist signals, suggesting that Orbán's relationship with 'the elite' is predominantly positive, contrary to expectations about negative populist communication about elites. Although the results indicate only moderate differences in the use of populist style elements across the three time periods, the findings suggest that visual elements are used in populist communication to convey different messages than textual ones.

Keywords: visual politics, populism, bimodality, Facebook, content analysis, social media

1 Introduction

Although there is increased interest among academics in the study of populist communication, most approaches to populism (e.g. de Vreese et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004) define the concept in a way that emphasizes only verbal messaging. In this study, we argue that Moffitt's (2016) populist style approach, with its strong emphasis on the performative dimensions of communication, can be applied to both visual and textual communication. While the performative aspect of political communication has already been addressed in some analyses (see Bucy and Dumitrescu, 2017; Hall et al., 2016), Moffitt (2016) places it at the center of populist communication through three main elements: 1. appeals to 'the people' vs. 'the elite', 2. crisis, breakdown, and threat communication, and 3. bad manners.

Therefore, we translated Moffitt's (2016) conceptual framework into a bimodal (image-based and verbal) coding scheme¹ and tested its viability by examining one of the most prominent figures associated with contemporary right-wing populism (Körösenyi & Patkós, 2017; Mudde, 2016) in the form of Viktor Orbán's visual Facebook communication. To obtain a comprehensive and complex understanding of Orbán's populist style, the research spans a three-year period that includes elections, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and several slow news months without election campaigns or crises, known in media politics as cucumber time or season.

Orbán's anti-elitist approach is often discussed in the literature based on his verbal communication (see Enyedi, 2016). However, in this study, we aim to provide a broader picture and understand (RQ1) how his visual and textual communication on Facebook fits the populist style approach (Moffitt, 2016). Specifically, we focus on (RQ2) the differences between verbal and visual components of posts to see whether populist elements are communicated differently across modalities, and we investigate (RQ3) how the application of populist communication is conditioned by political situations (campaign, COVID-19, cucumber time).

Findings indicate that Moffitt's (2016) categories appear to different degrees in Viktor Orbán's social media communication. One of the three main categories, i.e., *Appeals to 'the people' vs. 'the elite'*, was represented particularly well in Orbán's posts but with a rather unexpected twist. Although we found no remarkable differences across the investigated periods in the use of populist elements, the results show that the most frequently used populist features were more extensively communicated via visual cues than verbal expressions. Further, our study indicates that the visuals in populist communication are used to deliver different messages than verbal elements, e.g., the supposedly 'bad elites' are not as negatively depicted visually as verbally, and enemies do not appear in the visuals.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Approaches to populism

The concept of populism has always been essentially controversial (Canovan, 1981). The variety of approaches defines populism as, among other things, a *thin-centered ideology* (Mudde, 2004), a *political strategy* (Weyland, 2001), a *discourse* (Laclau, 1977; Hawkins, 2009), a *communication phenomenon* (de Vreese et al., 2018), and a *style* (Moffitt, 2016). One of the most important commonalities of these conceptualizations is the emphasis on the opposition between 'the elite' and 'the people.' However, the different approaches yield distinct analytical frameworks for studying populism, with varied ideas about who can be considered a populist, how populism emerges, and what its sources are.

By applying Mudde's (2004) *actor-centric minimal definition*, and the examination of party manifestos, speeches, or the content of political actors' websites (Pauwels, 2017), scholars have been able to identify and compare populist parties and leaders with

¹ See the coding scheme here: https://osf.io/5wuv4/?view_only=54b6d5240e0c43d393546ff213faadda

non-populist actors in different countries (see Akkerman et al., 2016; Mudde, 2007). The *strategic approach* focuses on how leaders seek and maintain political power under different national, economic, and social circumstances (Weyland, 2001). By applying fuzzy-set theory (Weyland, 2017), it is possible to define the level of populism among political actors. Although the origins of the *discourse approach* (Laclau, 1977) include visual symbols, in current populism research, the primary focus remains on the appearance of verbal messages that create a divide between ordinary people and elites across time and countries (Hawkins, 2009). From a different perspective, de Vreese and colleagues (de Vreese et al., 2018) describe populism as a communication phenomenon, a combination of ideological and discursive dimensions, and focus on the frequency of content and style features. By applying content analysis, the degree of populism on different platforms can be described (Engesser et al., 2017a; Ernst et al., 2017).

Accordingly, although some approaches describe visual elements as part of the populist toolkit, most of these are rooted in the operationalization of verbal communication: their empirical focus is mostly limited to the verbal content elements of communication. This is a crucial shortcoming since scholars such as Schill (2012), Barnhurst and Quinn (2012), and Grabe and Bucy (2009) have highlighted the importance of visuals in politics for more than a decade. Recently, researchers have started to recognize the urgency of investigating visuals in political communication, or, as Bucy and Joo (2021) call this area of study, “visual politics.” As Moffitt (2022b) argues, it is time to take visuals seriously if we want to get a “full picture” of populism.

2.2 Visual populist communication

Recently, scientific efforts have been made to define and operationalize visual populism. Images – just like verbal messages – are used to negatively emotionalize through the negative depiction of “the others” (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014), to amplify negative implicit social stereotypes (Arendt et al., 2015), and to broadcast symbolic and economic threats (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). This means that visual elements can effectively reinforce the negative image of certain enemies of ‘the people.’ Furthermore, not only can the visual depiction of negative emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment be disseminated without national or language barriers (Hokka & Nelimarkka, 2019), but images are also able to blur and camouflage explicit radical populist narratives by not providing explanations of the cultural context of the scenes therein depicted (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020).

Accordingly, images are useful tools for conveying messages that are not even verbally expressed and can be understood without specific language skills. Visuals are also used to highlight populists’ closeness to ‘the people’ (Gimenez & Schwarz, 2016). Visual markers and signifiers in populist communication are clearly tools for depicting “us and them” (Salojärvi et al., 2023). Moreover, there are differences in the depictions of ‘the people’ by left- and right-wing populists: the latter depict a more homogenous image of ‘the people’ than the former (Moffitt, 2022a). Another visual populist feature is the frequent depiction of the leader (Herkman, 2019), whose appearance – including clothing, facial expressions, etc. – symbolizes and embodies both ordinary and extraordinary traits (Casullo, 2020; Mendonça & Caetano, 2020). Although the leader-centric nature of pop-

ulism is also known in the literature, with a focus only on verbal elements (Engesser et al., 2017b), studies on the visual elements of populism could add nuance to this finding (see Piontek and Tadeusz-Ciesielczyk, 2019).

As useful as these fragmentary findings are, they do not provide a comprehensive or integrated understanding of populist communication. They highlight certain crucial visual elements associated with populist communication, but they are less connected to any of the more general conceptual frameworks of populism.

To this end, we apply Moffitt's (2016) conceptualization of populism as a political communication style. This approach can fill gaps related to both multimodal analysis and theoretical soundness through describing the populist style as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46). The main advantage of Moffitt's (2016) approach is the detailed, theoretically grounded description of style elements, built on a comprehensive theoretical review of populism as a style. Reference to populist style here includes not only substantive elements of communication but also a focus on how it is performed, thereby providing a multimodal interpretative framework. According to Moffitt's (2016) description, populism is "not a particular entity or 'thing' but a political style that is done" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 155). Its three main characteristics are: 1. appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'; 2. 'bad manners'; and 3. crisis, breakdown, or threat. These main dimensions encompass a variety of subcategories of populism, such as leader-centeredness, the leader's ability to simultaneously display ordinariness and extraordinariness, closeness to 'the people' and distance from 'the elite,' the creation of crises and enemies, and an oversimplification of complex social and political issues. These features can be communicated through both verbal and visual cues. Consequently, the style-based approach allows researchers to include both verbal and visual aspects of populism by focusing on performers, audiences, stages, and *mise-en-scènes*.

2.3 Viktor Orbán's populism

As of 2025, Viktor Orbán has been the Hungarian Prime Minister for 15 years with a supermajority in parliament. Accordingly, Orbán's longevity in power and his charismatic, populist leadership have attracted the attention of academics from varied perspectives. His populism is mainly described from the perspective of ideology and discourse (Bozóki, 2015; Enyedi, 2015), being characterized as nationalist, anti-liberalist, and anti-elitist, with signs of both left- and right-wing populism (Enyedi, 2015). From the communication perspective, Orbán's rhetoric is based on fear, dread, and hatred (Sükösd, 2022), while the main enemies of Hungary are Brussels, Soros, the liberal opposition parties, the LGBTQ community, and migrants (Metz, 2022). His populist stylistic verbal elements include frequent references to common sense, a personal tone, slang phrases, and bad manners with non-conformism (Körösenyi et al., 2020). These findings are mainly based on campaign research. However, it is also known that Orbán's verbal communication on Facebook during the COVID-19 period was heavily characterized by ordinary language and simplification (Bene & Boda, 2021), as well as the use of war-related metaphors (Szabó & Szabó, 2022).

Moreover, a recent visual discourse analysis revealed that the Prime Minister is constructed through his images on Instagram as an “everyday macho [person], who enjoys traditionally masculine food and adores football” (Szebeni and Salojärvi, 2022, p. 826). Another multimodal analysis showed that Orbán strategically builds his charismatic image on Facebook (Sonnevend & Kövesdi, 2023). Consequently, Orbán’s communication can be described as highly strategic and populist, and he employs multiple modalities to create his unique image, making him a suitable case for testing the populist style approach (Moffitt, 2016) and its dynamics. We expect all three dimensions of the populist style to emerge in Orbán’s communication.

3 Research questions

Due to their different theoretical and analytical approaches, academic studies have so far only provided isolated insights into visual populism. We attempt to fill this gap by testing Moffitt’s (2016) theory using the bimodal Facebook communication of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a high-profile example of a populist political actor. The first research question underlying the research described in the paper is therefore as follows:

RQ1: How well does Viktor Orbán’s visual and textual communication on Facebook fit Moffitt’s populist style approach?

Moffitt’s (2016) political communication style provides a springboard for a more comprehensive investigation that allows the now scattered observations to be integrated into the framework of a theoretically grounded approach. Observations on both rhetorical and visual elements of communication can be treated as elements of populist style. Accordingly, our second research question is related to the visual and verbal elements of populist communication and is formulated as follows:

RQ2: What differences are there between the visual and text messages in Viktor Orbán’s Facebook posts?

Although the current political context might influence the application of populist style, there is little knowledge about the temporal aspect of populist communication. Therefore, a further research question related to the use of populist communication over different periods is formulated. It is now known that verbal populist communication is often used as a strategic tool and is applied more actively before elections than after them (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019). In the COVID-19 period, populist communication was used to reinforce the context of the crisis, create and highlight enemies such as the media and the elites (Burni & Tamaki, 2021), amplify the strong leadership and the leader’s ordinariness, and emphasize the need to fight for national interests (Bene & Boda, 2021). However, this issue has not been studied in the context of specific political actors, and there is limited knowledge about populist communication outside of election campaigns. Accordingly, we formulate the following open research question:

RQ3: Were there differences in Viktor Orbán’s Facebook communication during the election campaign period, the COVID-19 crisis period, and the non-campaign period?

4 Method

This study can be described as a bimodal quantitative content analysis that assessed Viktor Orbán's use of populism in his Facebook image posts over three years to test the coding instrument we created, which may be a useful tool in a wider examination of populist style in the future. As moving images (GIFs and videos) require different methodological approaches (Rose, 2001), they were excluded from the present study. A coding instrument was developed comprising 92 verbal and visual categories. These are largely derived from Moffitt's (2016) conceptual work and supplemented by some other descriptive variables, such as the valence of posts, number of people depicted, and the actors who are depicted, which were taken from pre-existing content analyses of populism (Farkas et al., 2022). Further, the production characteristics of the images were also coded. These additional categories aimed to contextualize Moffitt's (2016) categories and help examine the basic visual characteristics of the posts. Our decision to focus on Orbán's Facebook profile is motivated by the popularity of this social media platform in Hungary and the prominent role of this site in Viktor Orbán's communication (see Merkovity et al., 2021). As for the audience, 76 percent of the Hungarian online population uses Facebook, and 53 percent of these users consume news on the platform (Newman et al., 2023). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has been the most 'followed' political actor since he registered on the platform in 2010 (Bene & Szabó, 2021), with 1.1 million followers as of the end of 2020.

4.1 The sample

Given the aim of gaining insight into visual populism, this study treated individual image posts on Viktor Orbán's Facebook profile as the sampling units. Text posts that accompanied the sampled image posts were included in the sample. Therefore, the sample frame excluded text posts that appeared without images or posts that contained videos rather than still images. The sample was identified using CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook. A total of 495 still image posts were identified on Viktor Orbán's profile between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2020, representing 46 percent of all posts he published during this period. These three years were chosen for convenience (access to archived material) and strategic reasons. The time frame included two major events (elections and the emergence of COVID-19) that posed challenges to the leadership, thus presenting an opportunity to monitor populist trends on social media. As a basis for comparison, this period also provided ample opportunity to examine quiet news periods, known in media politics as cucumber time.

Three election campaigns took place during the study period: (1) the Hungarian Parliamentary (02/17/2018 – 04/08/2018), (2) European Parliamentary (04/06/2019 – 05/26/2019), and (3) Hungarian Local (08/23/2019 – 10/13/2019) election campaigns. The sample also included the entire first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (03/04/2020 – 07/17/2020) and more than half of the second wave (07/18/2020 – 12/31/2020). The COVID-19 periods were determined based on the work of Uzzoli and colleagues (2021), while the campaign periods are the official, legally defined timeframes for the election campaigns. Periods between

elections and before the pandemic were treated as cucumber time. The Campaign Period produced 86 image posts, the COVID-19 Period 176, and Cucumber Time was represented by 230 posts.

a) Coding instrument

The units of analysis were the individual posts from Orbán's Facebook account. An image post contained at least one image and typically included accompanying text content (96 percent with text). Most categories were applied separately to the image and text content. Superimposed text on the image was treated as part of the image and coded accordingly.

A few categories were designed to obtain descriptive insight. These include the valence (positive, negative, neutral, mixed) of posts as well as production variables related to the camera shot angle (high, eye-level, low) and the shooting distance (long, medium, close). The category system employed to assess populism was based on three dimensions conceptualized by Moffitt (2016) as 'the people' versus 'the elite', bad manners, and crisis, breakdown, and threat, but several individual categories that could easily be linked to this conceptualization were taken from prior content analysis (Farkas et al., 2022). Table 1 provides a summary of the operationalization of Moffitt's (2016) dimensions into individual categories, their frequencies in the posts, and their intercoder reliability scores. As mentioned earlier, most categories were operationalized to have both visual and verbal equivalents, allowing for comparison between the two modalities. In most cases, the presence or absence of a populist trait was captured by 'Yes' and 'No' options within the categories.

Table 1 Summary of the coding system based on Moffitt's (2016) populist style

Main categories		Visual F (%) ^b	Verbal F (%) ^b	Visual K- α ^c	Verbal K- α ^c
<i>Appeal to 'the people' vs. 'the elite'</i>					
Closeness to ordinary people ^d		27.0		0.90	
Sub-categories ^a	Individualized physical attention to people	1.6	0.4	1	1
	Approving audiences	0.6	0	1	1
	Vox pops	0	0	1	1
	Performative gestures/expressions of the leader	0.8	15.9	1	0.85
	Leader engaged in performative rituals	3.9	8.1	0.83	0.87
	Leader visiting the people	0	0	1	1
	Leader attentive to children of ordinary people	2	0.6	0.89	1

Table 1 (continued)

Main categories		Visual F (%) ^b	Verbal F (%) ^b	Visual K- α ^c	Verbal K- α ^c
Ordinariness ^d		79.5		0.96	
Sub-categories ^a	Rural setting	7.9	7.5	0.9	1
	Ordinary food	5.7	2.8	0.92	1
	Ordinary leisure	4.7	1.4	0.70	0.85
	Family of the leader	5.7	1.4	0.92	1
	Animals	0.8	0.2	1	1
	Sport events/language	0.8	1.2	1	1
	Humble personal background	0.4	0.4	1	1
	Agricultural activities	0.2	0	1	1
	Leader carrying a backpack	2.6	0	1	1
	Leader in informal clothing	33.7	0.2	0.96	1
	Leader in athletic clothing	0.2	0	1	1
	Leader associated with national symbols	37.2	10	0.86	0.84
	Religious symbols	11	13	0.89	0.98
	Leader denying expert opinions	0	0	1	1
Extraordinariness ^d		39.0		0.91	
Sub-categories ^a	Presence of celebrities	4.9	3	0.84	0.88
	Presence of other populist leaders	8.5	3.7	0.84	0.92
	Fitness/health displays	0.2	0.2	1	1
	Masculinity	5.3	0.6	0.85	1
	Graphication	1	0	1	1
	Accomplishments of the leader	3.7	13.2	0.85	0.87
	Mediatization of the leader	10.8	4.3	0.85	0.87
Elites ^d		67.7		0.92	
Sub-categories ^a	Setting signifying wealth	31.1	2.2	0.80	1
	Presence of the elite	50.8	31.7	0.84	0.84

Table 1 (continued)

Main categories		Visual F (%) ^b	Verbal F (%) ^b	Visual K- α ^c	Verbal K- α ^c
<i>Bad manners</i>		1.8		1.00	
Sub-categories ^a	Slang	0	1.2	1	1
	Swearing	0	0	1	1
	Political incorrectness	0.6	0	1	1
<i>Crisis, breakdown, threat</i>					
Enemies ^d		2.2		0.94	
Sub-categories ^a	Migrants	0	0.6	1	1
	Brussels	0	0.2	1	1
	George Soros	0	0	1	1
	Ferenc Gyurcsány	0	0	1	1
	Gergely Karácsony	0	0	1	1
	COVID-19	0	0.4	1	0.66
	Elites	0	0	1	1
	Other enemies	0.2	1.4	0.66	0.85
	Media	0	0	1	1
Priming threat ^d		15.7		0.92	
Sub-categories ^a	Border	0	1	1	1
	Armed forces	7.9	2.6	0.89	0.90
	Sounding the alarm	0.4	5.1	1	0.82
	Simplification	0	3.5	1	0.89

^a The descriptions of the categories and examples are provided in the coding book: https://osf.io/5wuv4/?view_only=54b6d5240e0c43d393546ff213faadda

^b Frequency (Valid %)

^c Krippendorff's alpha

^d Not directly measured umbrella category based on the aggregation of the visual and verbal subcategories. Krippendorff's alpha values are based on this aggregation.

As the coding instrument is an essential element of the study, a summary of the three main dimensions and their sub-dimensions with some illustrative examples of posts is given below.

The people versus elites

To assess how Orbán represents ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, four sub-dimensions were identified, each measured by several categories. First, the categories for closeness that were assessed demonstrated his comfort with regular people, signaling that the leader is one of them through physical access to him. Physical attention to ordinary people, being among them, visiting their homes and neighborhoods, paying attention to the children of regular people, giving voice to them, and using nonverbal gestures and expressions to acknowledge people, were included here. Figure 1 presents a visual example of individualized physical attention to ordinary people.

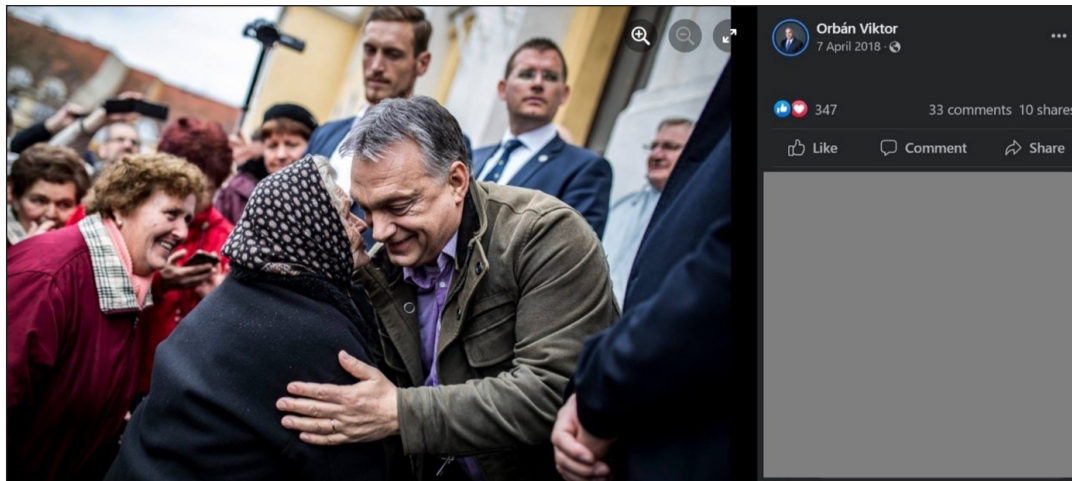


Figure 1 Example of visual closeness (individualized personal attention).
Viktor Orbán’s Facebook post, 04/07/2018.

Second and third, to capture the complexity of populist leaders positioning themselves as both one with the people and exceptional in comparison to ordinary people, self-depictions of ordinariness and extraordinariness were documented. The categories of ordinariness focused on the persona of the leader who shares the values (e.g., religion and national pride), passions, and interests of ordinary people. These include consuming food and drinks typically consumed by ‘the people,’ engaging in leisure activities that they enjoy (e.g. attending sporting events, spending time with family, caring for pets), wearing informal attire (e.g., sportswear, jeans, carrying a backpack), and dismissals of high-mindedness and expertise or embracing common sense. Emphasizing a leader’s humble personal background and attachment to or appreciation of agriculture were also among the categories of ordinariness, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2 Example of ordinariness (appreciation of agriculture).
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 09/08/2020 (Text post: "Afternoon moonlighting.
Here at the Puskás Academy, everyone has to be competent in everything.")

The items on extraordinariness documented the self-representation of leadership qualities and personal prowess. As Figure 3 illustrates, with a depiction of Chuck Norris and the members of the Counter Terrorism Centre, familiarity with celebrities and masculinity were coded here, and the categories of physical fitness, media interest in the leader, and accomplishments were also considered indicative of extraordinariness.



Figure 3 Example of extraordinariness (celebrities, masculinity).
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 11/27/2018.

Fourth, populist relations with the elites were tested using categories measuring their presence in the posts as well as settings that signal wealth and privilege. These two categories are shown in Figure 4.

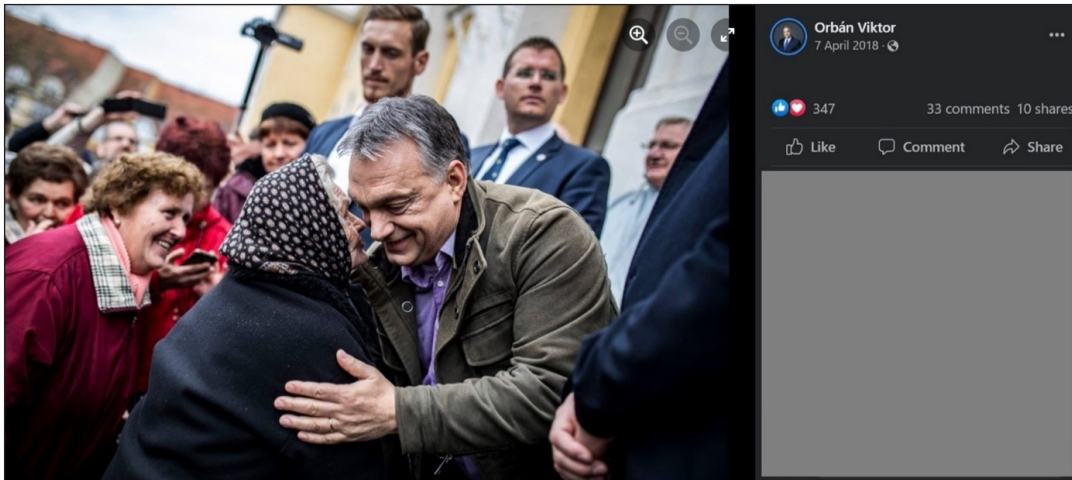


Figure 4 Example of the presence of the elites and setting signifying wealth.
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 02/04/2020

Bad manners

Three categories were developed to capture how populists distance themselves “from other political actors in terms of legitimacy and authenticity” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 60) by breaking unwritten rules. The use of slang, swearing, and politically incorrect statements was recorded in verbal posts. Visual images featuring written signs (e.g., held by supporters or depicted in graffiti) or visual manifestations of politically inappropriate behavior (e.g., inappropriate physical contact) were also counted here; the latter is demonstrated in Figure 5.

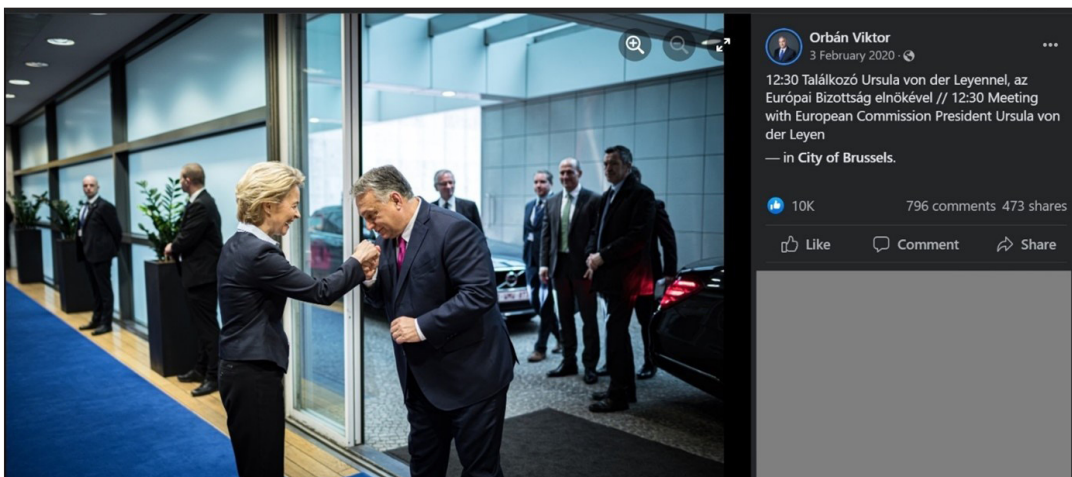


Figure 5 Example of visual bad manners (politically inappropriate behavior).
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 02/03/2020

Crisis, Breakdown, Threat

This dimension encompasses the populist tendency to create and maintain crises by communicating perceived or real threats. It was operationalized through four techniques: Constructing groups and individuals as threats, reminding followers of how a crisis is mitigated, exaggerating threats, and offering simplistic solutions to complicated problems. In Orbán's case, people and groups potentially on his 'enemies list' are migrants, George Soros, Brussels, two Hungarian opposition leaders, Ferenc Gyurcsány (ex-PM) and Gergely Karácsony (Mayor of Budapest), the media, and elites. COVID-19 and other unspecified enemies were also added to capture threat appeals. Threat mitigation included signals of protection from danger. Visual or verbal cues to the country's border and armed forces were recorded. Figure 6 is an example of the depiction of armed forces.

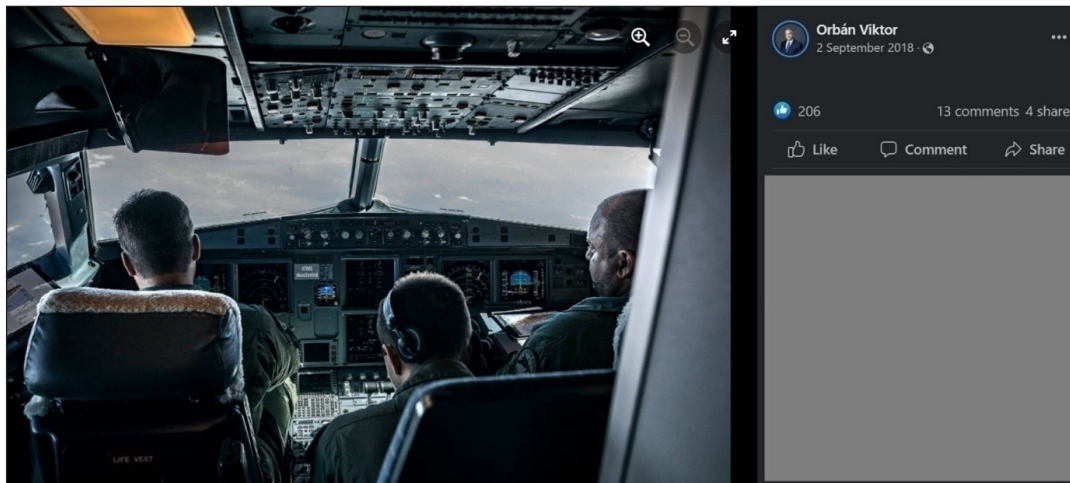


Figure 6 Example of crisis, breakdown, and threat (armed forces).
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 09/02/2018

Alarmist posts that dramatize or exaggerate crises and dangers, as well as simplified and sweeping solutions to threats, were also coded.

As can be seen from the examples, it is possible to code a post into several categories. For example, the image of closeness not only depicts Viktor Orbán's physical closeness to people, but also his ordinariness through the Prime Minister's casual, everyday clothing.

b) Data collection

Posts were coded by two coders, a student of political science and one of the authors of this article. After two coder training sessions, a random subsample of 187 posts (38 percent of the total sample) was subjected to an intercoder reliability test, which yielded a mean Krippendorff's alpha of 0.91. Three variables that did not reach the acceptable value of 0.8 (visual leisure, verbal COVID-19, visual other enemies) were excluded from the data analysis.

However, in all cases where there were no observations for a variable, the intercoder reliability value was 1, meaning that both coders agreed on the absence of a particular aspect. The data were collected over the course of four weeks.

5 Results

a) Preliminary descriptive findings

Of the 495 image posts included in the sample, three images contained only text (e.g., only statistics, diagrams, or screenshots of laws and regulations) and were therefore excluded from analysis. Of the remaining 492 image posts, almost 96 percent were accompanied by a separate text post, and a further 1.8 percent contained text superimposed on the image posts.

Descriptive insights about the depicted actors suggest that Viktor Orbán's Facebook page is highly individualized and avoids presenting political enemies, as Figure 7 shows. The leader is presented in 77 percent of the posts, which means visual depiction in all cases, and verbal self-references are present only in five posts. Interestingly, the second most frequently depicted actors are the elites (57 percent), indicating that Orbán often presents himself with political and economic elites. In contrast, 'the people,' other populist leaders, and Brussels appear only in 10 percent of the posts. Supposed enemies of Viktor Orbán, such as George Soros, Ferenc Gyurcsány, and Gergely Karácsony, do not appear in the posts either verbally or visually at all, and even migrants are present in fewer than 1 percent of the posts.

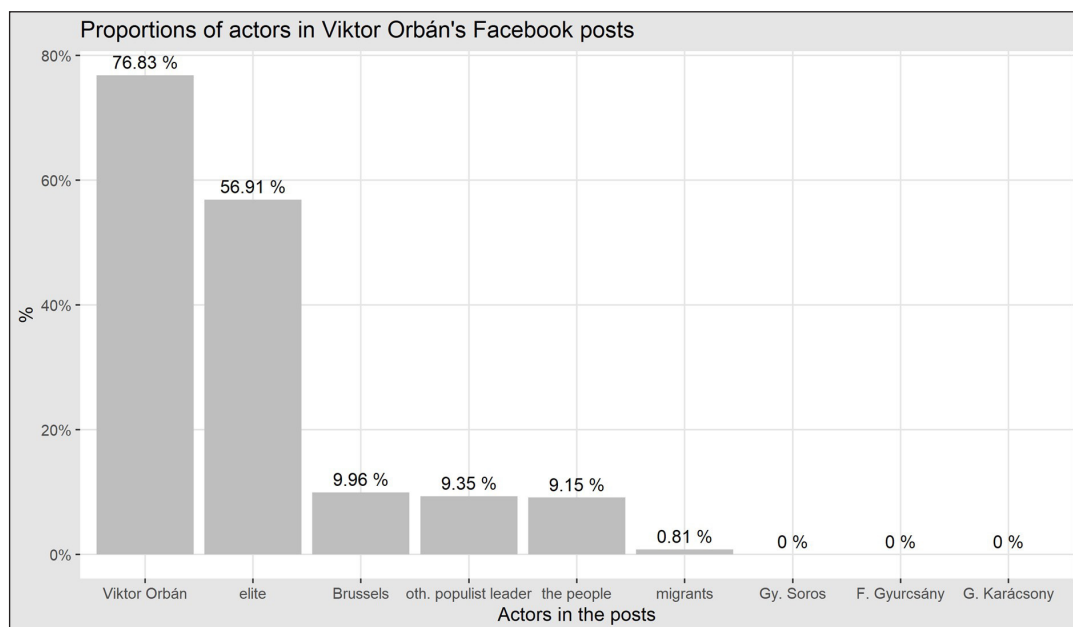


Figure 7 Actors presented in Viktor Orbán's posts

In posts featuring Viktor Orbán, these actor types appear in very similar proportions. The only significant difference relates to the elites: Orbán prefers to present himself in the company of other elite actors, as 68 percent of the posts show him with other important political or economic figures.

In terms of valence, the majority (63 percent) of posts were positive. Negative and neutral posts each accounted for 15 percent of the total, and 7 percent of posts contained a mixture of positive and negative tones. However, posts depicting the Prime Minister were significantly more emotional ($\chi^2 = 25.006$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$): While 55 percent of the posts that do not show Orbán are positive and 9 percent are negative, 65 percent of the posts in which he appears are positive and 17 percent are negative.

The majority of images in which the leader is depicted are medium-sized shots (77 percent), which suggests a personable but not intimate personal distance (see Meyrowitz, 1986). About 20 percent of the shots featuring Orbán were long shots, which are often used as scene-setting or 'establishing' shots without much opportunity for advancing personal connections between the leader and social media users. Only 1 percent of the shots were close-ups, suggesting Orbán's reluctance to use close-up para-proxemic cues in his posts.

Eye-level was the most common angle (90 percent) used in images of Orbán, followed by low (6 percent) and high (3.5 percent) angles. It appears that Orbán and his communications team do not tend to favor empowering people by portraying them from a low angle or diminishing them by shooting from a high angle (Meyrowitz, 1986).

b) Viktor Orbán's populist style

To answer our research questions, the data were collapsed along the major dimensions of conceptual interest and sub-themes such as people vs. elites (closeness, ordinariness, extraordinariness, elites), bad manners, and crisis communication (enemies, threats) (see Table 1). This approach enabled statistical analyses of aggregated dimensions despite low-frequency counts for many individual subcategories.

The first research question prompted us to investigate the extent to which Moffit's (2016) three dimensions of populist style are used in Viktor Orbán's bimodal Facebook communication. In general, as Figure 8 shows, the presence of each element in the post either visually or verbally suggests that Orbán's Facebook communication is mostly about 'the people' and 'the elite', while he clearly avoids bad manners and moderately focuses on potential threats.

Unpacking the details of the subthemes of the most frequently applied *Appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'* category reveals a slightly paradoxical but expected pattern. Orbán and his communications team have placed great emphasis on presenting his 'ordinariness', which was expressed in four out of five posts, while at the same time he presented elite actors in two out of three posts – somewhat in contrast to the image of 'ordinariness.' This contrast is also reinforced by the fact that extraordinariness appeared in 39 percent of posts, while closeness appeared in 27 percent. Thus, it seems that Orbán and his communications team play with a dual image on Facebook – one that is ordinary and accessible, but also extraordinary and embedded in the political elite. Moreover, this contrast is often made clear as the elements related to ordinary people – such as closeness and

ordinariness – appear together with the representation of the elites in 56 percent of all posts. Although it may seem paradoxical at first glance, similar patterns have been found with other populist leaders as well (see Mendonça and Caetano, 2020).

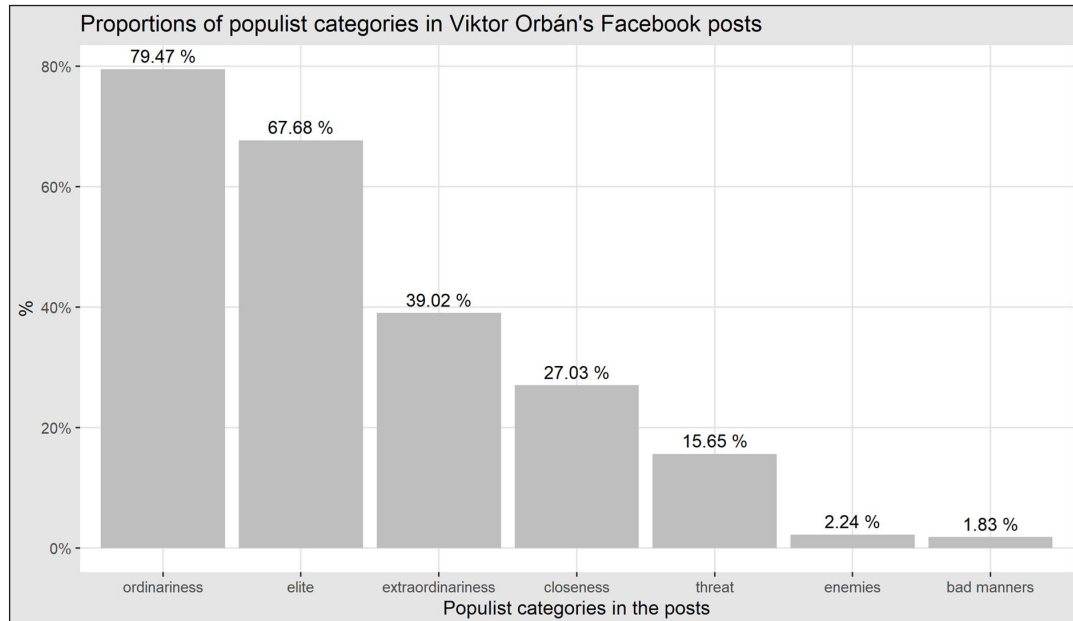


Figure 8 Proportions of populist categories in Viktor Orbán's posts

Nevertheless, this contrast is not a depiction of the conflict between ordinary people and the evil elites: 'the elite' in general is not necessarily portrayed negatively in Viktor Orbán's communication. Rather, they are more often portrayed in a positive context. Almost two-thirds of the posts featuring elites have a positive valence, and only 15 percent are clearly negative, with 8 percent having a mixed valence. Negative or neutral posts, in which both the elites and people-centric closeness or ordinariness categories are found, appeared in 14 percent of all posts. This means that the explicit contrast of 'the people' versus 'the elite' is not typical, but it is far from rare, with one in seven posts using this strong distinction. This may be due to Orbán's particular situation, since as an incumbent PM since 2010, it would be difficult to convey an undifferentiated anti-elitist stance.

All other categories are used less frequently, especially *Bad manners*, which appears in only 2 percent of all posts. *Crisis, breakdown, and threat* categories are present in 17 percent of all posts, while enemies are not frequently depicted in Orbán's image posts. In 18 percent of posts, at least two main categories are present, and only 3 percent of posts have no populist element.

As *Appeals to 'the people' versus 'the elite'* subthemes seem to be the most important part of Viktor Orbán's populist style, it is worth focusing in more detail on the variables in this general category. When looking at these subcategories specifically, it is important to keep in mind that the frequencies of some of these were extremely low. Therefore, their reliability values are mostly based on the absence of these elements rather than their presence.

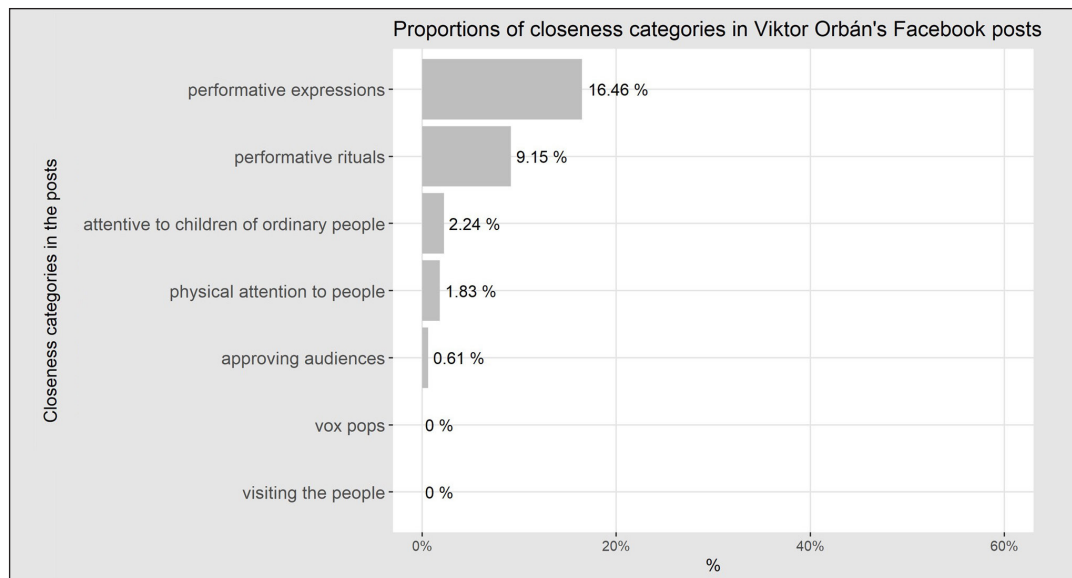


Figure 9 Detailed proportions of Closeness categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

Closeness categories in Orbán's posts appear primarily in performative rituals and expressions; other categories are rarely applied (Figure 9). In other words, closeness for Orbán is manifested in staged events rather than in more natural connections to ordinary people. Ordinariness appears in the forms of symbols, especially national symbols, through informal clothing and rural settings, which show that Orbán is similar in values and taste to his voters (Figure 10). Extraordinariness is shown primarily through media interest in the leader and the portrayal of his achievements (Figure 11).

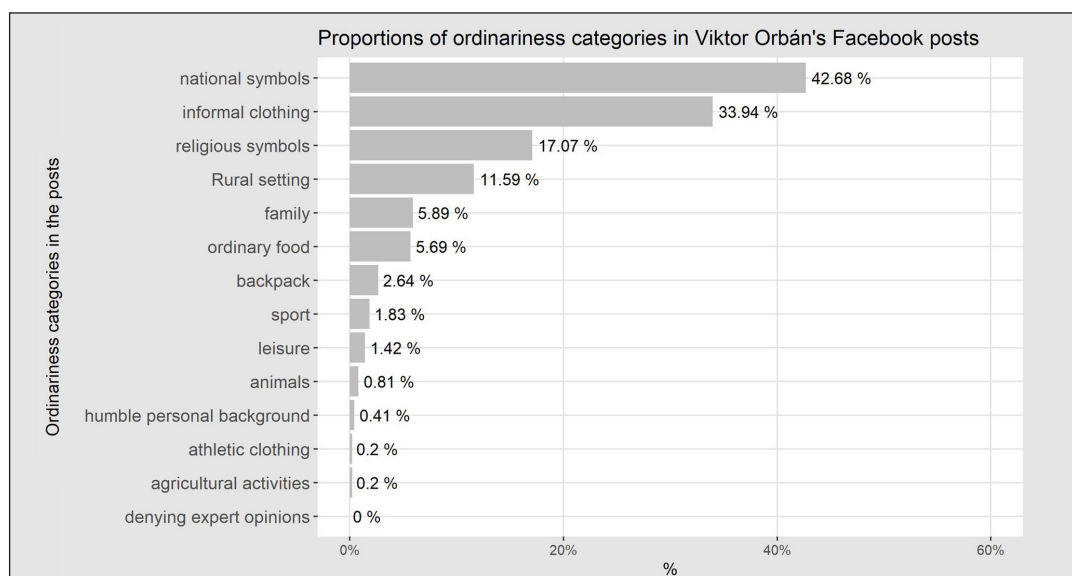


Figure 10 Detailed proportions of Ordinariness categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

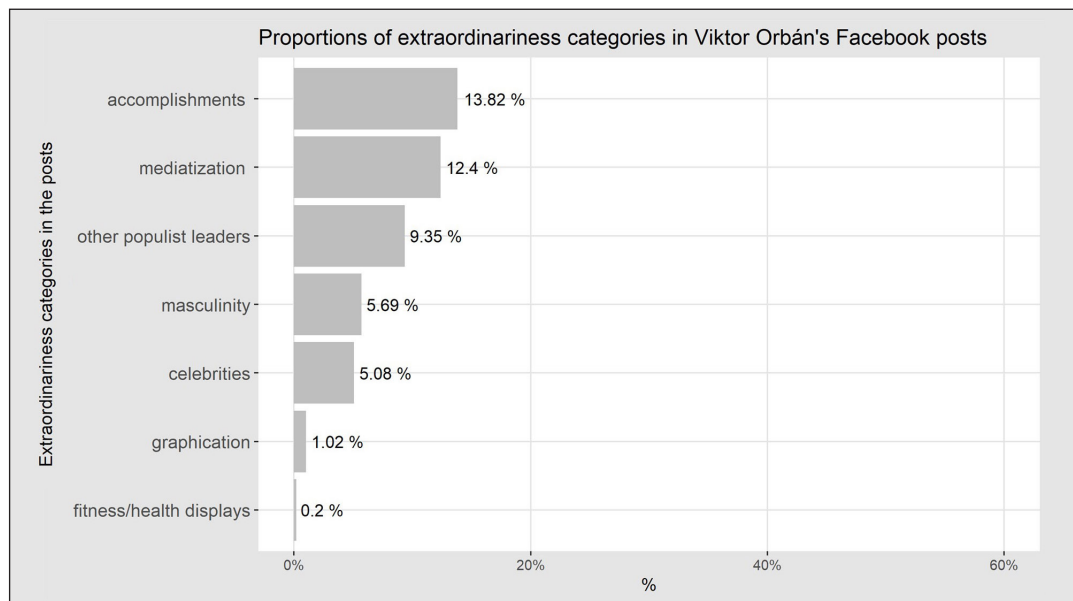


Figure 11 Detailed proportions of Extraordinariness categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

Both components of the category 'the elite' are frequently used: In a significant proportion of posts (57 percent), some kind of elite actor appears, while the depiction of a wealthy environment occurs in one in three posts (Figure 12). This means that while Orbán emphasizes his similarity to ordinary voters, he also highlights his particular elite status through the surroundings in which he works.

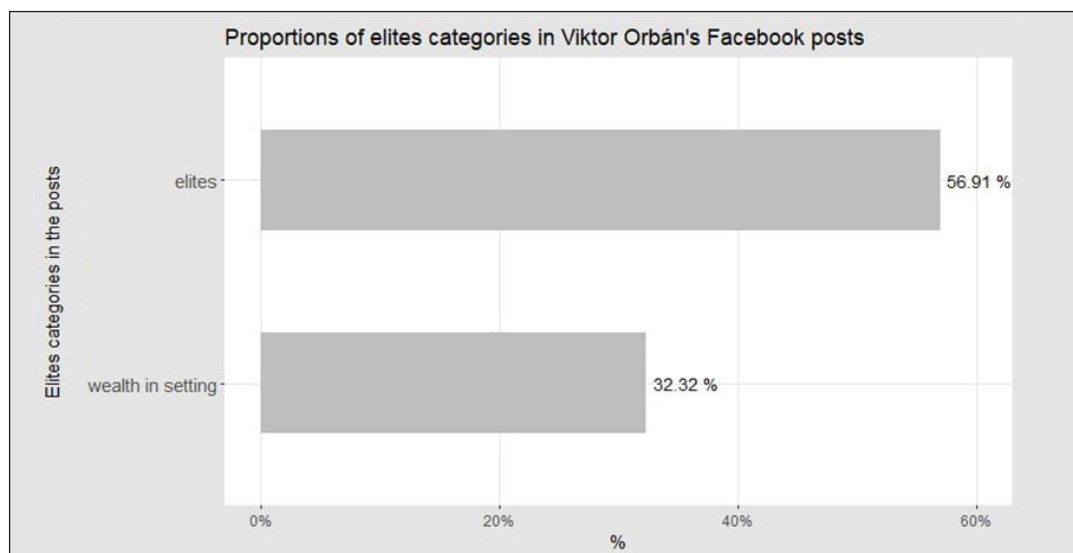


Figure 12 Detailed proportions of Elites categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

To answer the second research question, we examine our variables separately in terms of verbal and image-based communication. As Figure 13 shows, there are differences in the application of the categories based on the modalities.

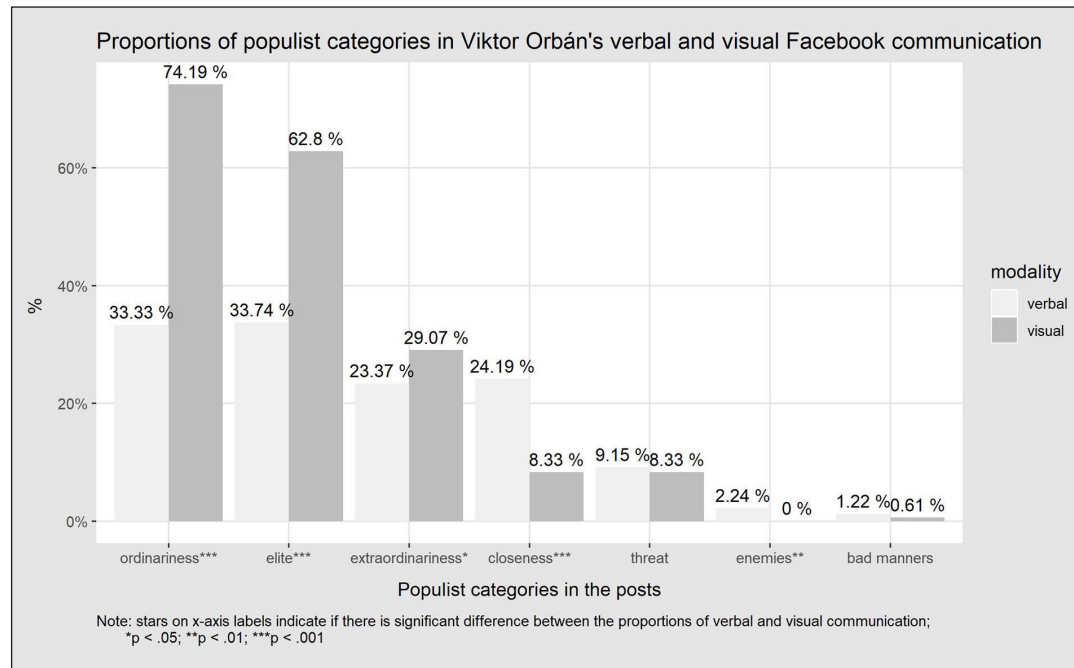


Figure 13 Proportions of visual and verbal populist categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

Closeness is conveyed by the Prime Minister primarily verbally, while ordinariness and elites are presented much more visually in his posts. The results related to visual ordinariness can be understood if one considers that categories of ordinariness are mainly represented by symbols and clothing. Furthermore, it is important to see that elites and wealthy environments are mainly shown but not explicitly discussed in these posts. Further, smaller but still significant differences can be perceived between the more visually depicted extraordinariness and the only verbally represented enemy images, which, from this perspective, might be considered 'invisible enemies'. Bad manners and threats appear in similar proportions, verbally and visually.

Looking at the results across the three different time periods, the data show relatively small differences.

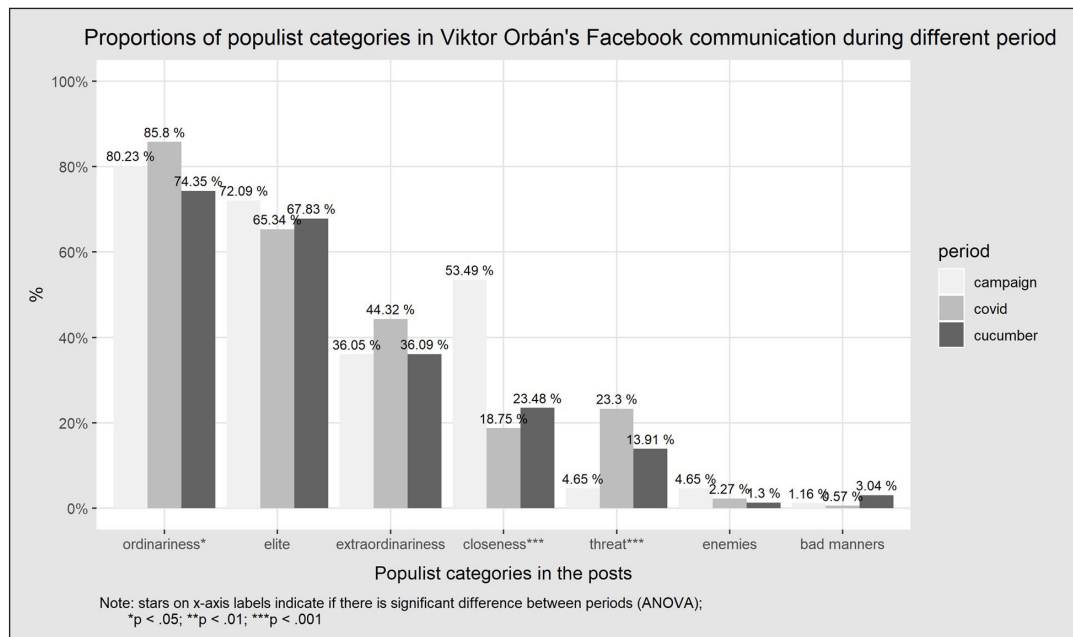


Figure 14 Proportions of populist style categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts across the three different time periods

As Figure 14 shows, unsurprisingly, closeness categories are significantly more prevalent in Viktor Orbán's image-based Facebook communication during the campaign period than in other periods. When it comes to the campaigns, the leader's closeness to 'the people' appears in every second post. It is also no surprise that the threat during the COVID-19 period was much higher than in the other periods. However, it was least prevalent during campaigns, so it seems that it has been used less to mobilize voters. There are only minor differences in the application of ordinariness categories, but it is worth noting that their share during the COVID-19 period is a little but significantly higher than during the cucumber period.

6 Discussion

The study described here examined Viktor Orbán's populist style on Facebook using a coding instrument that operationalizes Moffitt's (2016) notions of populist style using a bi-modal measurement system. Conclusions may be drawn about how well Moffitt's populist approach can describe the image-based social media communication of one of the leading European populist actors.

To answer the first and second research questions, the dimension of Appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite' captured by far the most instances of the populist style. Crisis, breakdown, and threat categories are used to a lesser extent, while Bad Manners categories are rare. It should also be emphasized that in the Appeal to 'the people' versus 'the

elite' dimension, 'the elite' is highlighted more than 'the people.' In addition, the depiction of the elites is more positive than negative. This strong emphasis on the elites can also be observed in the situational elements, as settings signifying wealth are more visible in the posts than those in a rural environment. Compared to the frequent presence of the elites, 'the people' as actors are relatively rarely depicted in the Hungarian Prime Minister's posts. Nevertheless, the people-centric style is prominent in his self-presentation, as closeness and ordinariness play an important role in his communication. While these elements are often presented fragmentarily, it is not uncommon that the people-centric elements are directly contrasted with negative elite portrayals. Accordingly, our expectations based on verbal research were not justified, as two of the three dimensions rarely appear in Orbán's communication.

Turning to the third research question: given that the distribution of image posts within the sample is not uniform across the major events, the likelihood of inclusion in the sample is reduced for categories that occur less frequently during periods with lower content volume. Still, Orbán's bimodal social media communication seems to be fairly consistent, with minimal differences between the different periods. The depiction of the people-centric closeness increased during the campaign period, while extraordinariness increased during the COVID-19 period. However, the differences between the modalities are more pronounced: The most frequently used populist elements are more pronounced in visual communication than in verbal communication. Ordinariness and elites are mostly presented visually, and the visual depiction of extraordinariness is also more prevalent than its verbal counterpart. These results underline the need to examine visuals in populist communication. On the other hand, closeness is predominantly conveyed through verbal cues.

In general, the results show that Orbán's social media-based populist style does not really fit Moffitt's (2016) definition – his "populist toolbox" is narrower. Orbán's populism is essentially based on the 'the-people-versus-the elite' dimension, in particular, people-centric self-representation and the mostly positive depiction of elites. The latter may be an important strategy, as Orbán has to represent an anti-elite position from an elite position with more than a decade of governance. Therefore, this mixed narrative can be seen as a strategic tool that, in some ways, contradicts the general anti-elitist characteristics of populists. The Prime Minister's image as a verbal "streetfighter" may also be refuted by examining his bimodal messages.

The stability and consistency of communication across different time periods suggest that Orbán has already developed a populist style on Facebook that does not require adaptation to current events. However, our results suggest that the seemingly general populist people-centric feature is less important when the leader is not campaigning. Finally, an important finding is that the populist style can be better grasped in visual messages, which shows that populism research that focuses only on texts may provide an incomplete picture.

Considering the previous findings on visual populism, our study has provided a broader understanding of the topic by applying the populist style approach. Although the frequent depiction of the leader and the demonstration of both his ordinariness and extraordinariness are consistent with previous findings (Herkman, 2019; Mendonça & Caetano, 2020), our results indicate several differences. First, negative emotions are less frequently depicted in Orbán's Facebook communication than the use of positive valence.

Moreover, unlike what is shown in other studies (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017; Wodak & Forchtner, 2014), neither the depiction of enemies nor threats is common in our case. Finally, the depiction of elites is anything but negative, which also emphasizes the visual and verbal differences in populist communication.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the results of the present study can be perceived as relating to a continuum, as the populist communication style and its elements can be applied by all political actors (populists and non-populists) and to varying degrees from period to period. Moreover, as Moffitt (2022b) argues, exploring the visual aspects of populism can reveal the connections and differences between the communicative and ideological dimensions of populism. Accordingly, the visual and verbal analysis of Orbán's communication style on Facebook described in this study identifies fewer populist elements than in his speeches examined through discourse analysis (Lamour & Varga, 2020) or the study of his foreign policy rhetoric (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). The contrasts between the content of communication and discourse or policy shed light on the fact that politicians who are perceived as populists may not be so different from their non-populist counterparts, but the few striking differences, such as the more frequent use of national symbols, draw attention to the essential elements of populist communication.

Consequently, the primary significance of our study lies in the ability of the codebook we created to reveal messages that differ from those of previous research based on verbal communication. Further, from a broader perspective, due to the contagious nature of populism (Järvinemi, 2022), these communication characteristics may spread more widely in the political sphere. With our results, this study contributes to the literature on the communication strategies of populist actors (see Bucy et al., 2020; Mendonça and Caetano, 2020; Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 2023).

To make a generalizable contribution to the literature, we have also created categories that can capture not only Orbán's but the broadest spectrum of populist styles worldwide. Accordingly, most of the codebook's categories do not focus specifically on Orbán's communication, but on populist communication in general, except for some country-specific variables, such as the Hungarian Prime Minister's famous backpack and his enemies, as known from his verbal communication. This also results in the fact that some categories did not occur at all or only rarely in the Hungarian case, which does not call into question the applicability of the codebook. On the contrary, the absence of certain variables highlights the differences between the expected and actual results, for example, in the case of missing negative references to elites or Brussels. The detailed coding instrument might produce different results when applied to other leaders worldwide, and, as Moffitt (2022b) argues in his latest theoretical article, not all populists can be expected to use the same images, but common aspects might emerge. The results of this study are consistent with this position.

A future research direction may therefore be the extension of the application of the coding instrument to other populist leaders. To do this, only some country-specific variables, such as some enemies and special clothing, need to be changed. For example, Viktor Orbán's famous backpack could be changed to a soccer jersey in the case of Jair Bolsonaro (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020) or a red baseball cap in the case of Donald Trump (Bleakley, 2018).

Nevertheless, the study has its limitations. The research only focused on social media, but it is possible that Orbán communicates differently via other channels (e.g., more or less crisis communication or bad manners), which would be better captured on other communication platforms. Future research could examine other channels and platforms by applying the coding instrument. Also, we ignored moving images, which Viktor Orbán frequently uses as a tool of communication on Facebook. It may be that certain populist elements, such as enemies or threats, are more predominantly discussed in edited video content.

Overall, the coding instrument presented in this study may be a useful tool in the study of populism worldwide, as it operationalizes Moffitt's (2016) theory into flexible verbal and visual frames. For the application of the instrument in other contexts, cultural differences can easily be adapted to by changing the specific enemies or clothes.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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