

## **Make Trump Great Again: Communication Strategy of Donald Trump on Instagram in 2020**

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### **Abstract**

One of the essential parts of visual political communication strategies nowadays is the presence on social media platforms, Instagram in particular, to create an image of a politician in the minds of Internet users. At the same time, the strengthening of the populist trend in the modern political landscape is noted in many countries in different parts of the world. Drawing on research about how people present themselves on social media and taking into account the affordances of social media platforms, the study examines the virtual visual strategy of one of the most renowned populist leaders, Donald Trump, on Instagram during his last year of his presidency. Having applied digital methods to Trump's Instagram posts, the key patterns of the visual communication of Donald Trump were detected, the categories of content he published in 2020 were determined, and several differences with his communication strategy during the 2016 election were found.

**Keywords:** Donald Trump, populism, Instagram, visual communication strategy, affordances, digital methods

### **Introduction**

In recent years political communication as a concept has undergone significant changes. Although political figures occasionally adhere to more “traditional” methods, nowadays their communication strategies rely heavily on digital tools. Those who take the most advantage of such tools will be more successful in the political arena.

Digital tools and the evolution of social media platforms make the visual aspect of political communication paramount (Farkas and Bene, 2020). Hundreds of millions of photos are posted on Facebook and Instagram every day (Stout, 2021) and right now, humanity is living through the age of omnipresent photography (Hand, 2012). Since Instagram has already evolved into a crucial tool for politicians to construct a holistic identity (Gordillo-Rodríguez and Bellido-Pérez, 2021), political communication has gradually become based on a visual foundation (Schill, 2012). Politicians and specifically political leaders now include Instagram in their

social media toolkit employing it as a “visual billboard” (Filimonov et al., 2016). Digital tools, in addition to assisting politicians with projecting power, trustworthiness and prestige, essentially establish a more humanized and relatable version of a politician by displaying certain carefully chosen parts of their private life (Lalancette and Raynault, 2019; Page and Duffy, 2016).

The strengthening of the populist trend in the modern political landscape is noted in many studies. The majority of populist leaders and parties attract supporters using two main arguments: 1) that there is a division and a conflict between “true people” and “outsiders” in a country; and 2) that the will of “true people” should not be restricted (Kyle and Meyer, 2020). It is evident that many populist leaders widely use social networks to gain power and mobilize people (Dittrich and the Jacques Delors Institut, 2017). It is happening due to the fact that “social media changes the communication structure of the public sphere” (Spiekermann, 2020).

Donald Trump was specifically chosen as the central focus of the research as he is one of the most well-known political leaders, who has a strong personality that transforms through social media into a strong political image, which was subsequently effectively used for his political campaign. Moreover, Trump is one of the most vivid examples of a populist, always sticking to the strategy of antagonism, constantly criticizing “the deep state” and US democratic institutions. He strives to distinguish himself from the political class and appear as close to the people as possible, at the same time expanding the boundaries of what is possible to say and do in politics. Trump’s constant campaigning, especially prior to the 2016 election, united and mobilized his electorate with him establishing a direct relationship with the voters (Panizza, 2022). The Institute of Global Change characterized Trump as a cultural populist, as for him “true people” are native people of a state and “outsiders” are immigrants and all kinds of minorities whose values and principles may differ from those of “true people” (Kyle and Meyer, 2020). Thus, the analysis of Trump’s communication strategy may be highly advantageous for understanding how populists rise to power and how social media assist them in that.

This study is intended to reveal the dynamics of visual political communication on Donald Trump’s Instagram account (@realdonaldtrump) during the last year of his presidency. Using an explorative approach, which draws on the image management theory, as well as the online self-representation approach from the point of Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, Trump’s communication strategy will be determined and analyzed, taking into account the platform’s constraints, conceptualized by the theory of affordances. The aim is to provide insights into

relevant characteristics and patterns of Trump's Instagram populist communication, using digital methods, more specifically, statistical analysis, text sentiment analysis, and computer vision as the empirical basis of the research.

Although researchers have examined Trump's communication strategy in the past, they mainly focused on his Twitter and his verbal communication (Schertzer and Woods, 2020; Enli, 2017), whereas visual digital communication remains largely understudied, despite the fact that Trump was one of the pioneers of using Instagram effectively for political purposes. It is crucial to mention that the author of the paper realizes that most likely Trump does not post Instagram publications himself, however, this study is written under the assumption that Trump is at least aware of what content is published on his social media profiles and, thus, we may consider it part of his extended political self in the digital world.

It is the first study to perform an analysis of Trump's visual communication strategy on Instagram, using digital methods, as well as the first study to look at his communication strategy during his last year of presidency, 2020, and the reelection campaign. As a result, this work enhances research not only on the extended political self of the American President and his virtual image, but also on visual political communication on social media in general.

This study will address the following research questions:

RQ1. What topics can Trump's content on Instagram be divided into?

RQ2. Has Trump's visual communication strategy online changed in any way since the start of his presidency?

RQ3. What factors influenced the engagement on Trump's Instagram profile in 2020?

RQ 4. What kind of comments does Trump usually receive and under which type of content?

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Self- representation in a digitalized world**

*"The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life" (Turkle, 1997).*

In this research, online self-representation is seen through the lens of Goffman's dramaturgical theory. His theory suggests that when interacting with other people, an individual always strives to build a favorable self-image, which can be considered a "role" and other people are thought to believe that it represents a real person (Goffman, 1956). One of the ways to create a favorable image is through photographs, which people use to "explore, define, and confirm their idealized self-identities, seeing themselves in the eyes of the media and of others" (Caldeira, 2016). Thus, visual platforms such as Instagram are modern "stages" where people perform a "filtered" version of themselves. The online world allows for a highly controlled "impression management" and, thus, Goffman's theory is exemplified in this context. By consciously choosing only several photographs to share on Instagram, users apply dramaturgic strategies to portray the idealized version of themselves (Caldeira, 2016; Deeb-Swihart et al., 2017). As a result, users, by producing aesthetic work online, create a complete narrative about themselves. However, the incentive to portray the perfect image at all times may essentially lead to an individual being constantly anxious over breaking the built-up façade (Booker, 2013). This can also be applied to public figures, and, once they start to adhere to a particular communication strategy online, it is rather difficult for them to change it as their public image has already been formed.

One of the best ways to "play a role" for a politician is to have social media in their political toolkit. With this toolkit politicians are free to create a different persona of themselves on the Net and it is not clear which persona is more important to voters. However, in order for that tool to be used successfully, a politician's communication strategy should comply with the current trends.

Professionalization of political communication (Maarek, 2014) is accompanied by hyperindividualization and personalization across the whole modern political media landscape (Russmann et al., 2019). For politicians and especially political leaders social media are becoming a vital tool to shape a holistic identity (Gordillo-Rodríguez and Bellido-Pérez, 2021). The share of Instagram usage for political campaigning in the USA rose from 1.7% in the 2012 election to 14.4% in 2016 and its share is constantly rising (Borrell Associates Inc., 2017). Electronic tools, in addition to assisting politicians with projecting power, trustworthiness and prestige, essentially establish a more humanized and relatable version of a politician by displaying certain carefully chosen parts of their private life (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019; Page and Duffy, 2016).

In terms of particular strategies used by politicians on their visual platforms, one can distinguish between 1) the formation of a statesmanship attitude (posting photos with national symbols, an entourage of media professionals or staff, other politicians) (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019); 2) the formation of a compassionate image (photos with children, family associations, religious symbols, physical embraces, etc.) (Munoz and Towner, 2017); 3) the emphasis of mass appeal (photos with large crowds or celebrities (Ekman and Widholm, 2017); 4) the emphasis of ordinariness (photos with a politician engaged in everyday activities, practising sports or interacting with citizens in the street) (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019; Munoz and Towner, 2017). The analysis of such visual content is crucial for understanding political communication strategies as politicians' images can be conceptualized as 'integrated structures of issue perceptions, persona perceptions, and whatever other kinds of perceptions are important to particular voters in particular elections' (Hacker et al., 2000).

### **Instagram as part of political communication and the concept of affordances**

Instagram, a social networking platform, allows its users to upload photos and videos and share them with other people. The majority of social media platforms are designed for self-presentation, however, each of these platforms provides its unique structural affordances to users (Boyd, 2011). These affordances challenge already existing models for understanding self-presentation behavior (DeVito et al., 2017). Social networking websites do not only make one particular activity possible but allow for a variety of communication practices and are, thus, often used to fulfill various communicative goals and needs (Smock et al., 2011). The "affordances" perspective was advanced by Gibson and is based on the idea that humans have different relationships with inanimate objects, depending on their background, experiences, and environment. Objects are perceived in terms of the opportunities for action that they afford (Gibson, 1977). When applying the concept of affordances to social media, they can be defined as "what platforms are actually capable of doing and perceptions of what they enable, along with the actual practices that emerge as people interact with them" (Kreiss et al., 2017). Since affordances determine user behavior, the communication strategy of any given politician is defined not only by their intentions but also by the constraints of those platforms.

It should be noted that research on the application of the "affordances" concept to politicians' digital communication via social media is quite rare. However, while affordances of social networks alone cannot fully explain why some cases of political communication online are so successful, studying the architecture of digital platforms is useful for determining

communication strategies and the concept of “affordances” can serve as a theoretical foundation for research in this field (Bossetta, 2018).

### **Political communication of Donald Trump**

#### *Main features of Trump’s political communication strategy*

The case of Donald Trump’s presence in social media is a crucial case for analyzing modern populist political communication and especially visual communicative strategies. He is arguably one of the most capable and effective users of social media among politicians. Along with his communication team, he was able to create a strong personal image online, which helped him become the President of the United States in 2016 and maintain his influence during his presidency.

Donald Trump’s communication can be characterized by several distinctive and unique features (Morini, 2020). He usually communicates directly to the audience, without other agents. That is why he can be called “a *disintermediator-in-Chief*”, referring to the political strategy of “disintermediation”, which means to address the public directly via personal social media pages (Chadwick, 2014). Moreover, the elements of his communication have not changed significantly since 2015, when he announced his candidacy. The way he communicates with citizens has not become truly “presidential” because even after being declared the winner of the election, he has not stopped the attacks towards his political opponents. He behaves as “a *permanent campaigner*”, who started his reelection campaign right after his victory in 2016. In addition, Donald Trump has a true talent of a showman, which helped him to not only get an enormous number of votes, but also to constantly maintain a high level of media visibility. Due to his humor, appearance, and memes online Trump’s behavior can be characterized as a behavior of “a *clowning performer*”. However, it should be noted that his rhetoric is far from positive, he extensively uses metaphors of war, confrontation, and demonization of certain groups of people. In this sense his communication is quite “*populist*”. Finally, the image of Donald Trump could not be as it is without *the media ecosystem itself*, which enriches his image and helps him be more visible.

#### *Trump’s communication strategy during the 2016 election*

Trump’s victory in 2016 is usually considered a victory of communication and without his presence on social media it would be impossible. During primaries, Trump used social media, especially Twitter, to briefly state his opinion on different issues and sometimes attack Republican opponents (Phillips, 2015). Many people in the USA were learning about the presidential

election from social media and its share was greater than both local and national print newspapers, therefore, after Trump's victory at the primary elections he continued to be an active social media user and trendsetter (Pew Research Center, 2020). The three candidates (Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and Bernie Sanders), posted on their Facebook and Twitter accounts at similar rates but the focus of their posts was different, with Trump's posts getting far more attention. In general, the content of all three accounts was well-tailored and only messages and topics that were beneficial to their campaigns were selected. At the same time, Clinton's communication was more campaign-oriented, while Trump's main goal was to reach out to news outlets and the public; Sanders used a mix of these two strategies. As for Trump's specific communication strategies, «gaslighting», «defamation», «otherization», «media intimidation», «lack of transparency», and «the fake apology» were widely used during that election campaign and all of them were quite effective (Tisch and de L'Auteur(E), 2021).

Trump's digital rhetoric (which he conveyed via his tweets and description to the Instagram posts) was mainly focused on criticizing globalization, integration, and establishment policies (Mudde, 2016). Moreover, he attacked immigrants, refugees, and the Muslim culture (Wodak, 2015), thus, representing worldwide populism. Nationalist ideas were in the core of Trump's election campaign, which was founded on "long-standing myths and symbols of an ethnic conception of American identity" (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2021). In his tweets Trump depicted "a virtuous white majority being threatened by several groups of immoral outsiders, who were identified by their foreignness, their religion, and their self-interestedness" (Schertzer and Woods, 2020). That is why the mission of coming back to a mysterious golden age was suggested by Trump, and this mission was formulated as "To Make America Great Again."

As for his visual communication strategy during the 2016 election, this topic is much less studied than his verbal digital communication, but it is crucial because Trump decided to follow the approach "the words don't matter anymore; the pictures matter" (Gingrich, 2017). It was found that Donald Trump often framed himself as the ideal candidate, unlike his opponents; he frequently used patriotic symbols as flags and was usually dressed in a suit (Steffan, 2020). Thus, he strived to show that he was capable of being a statesman and fulfilling his promises.

*Trump's communication strategy during his first 100 days of presidency*

Having been elected in office, Donald Trump continued using his established communication strategy and proved himself to be a violator of both informal and formal norms (Weinschenk et al., 2021). Ryan T. Strand and Dan Schill analyzed the political image-making of Donald Trump during his first hundred days of presidency (Strand and Schill, 2019). Firstly, the official White House social media accounts were used for promoting success (Shaw, 2017) and the “identification, authority, and legitimacy of Donald Trump as president”. At the same time, only the idealized version of Trump was presented via his social media. Visual communication of Donald Trump during that period can be summarized by several repeating patterns: “President Trump seated at a desk/table, text overlaid across an image, signing a document, foreign leaders, people clapping, “Make America Great Again,” Trump alone with a quote, direct Twitter repost, and military/veterans”. When Donald Trump is surrounded by other people, he is usually the central figure due to the rule of linear perspective. Moreover, around 40% of his posts included text; sometimes there were Twitter screenshots, which were used to maintain consistency of Trump's personal brand across his different social media accounts. Photos of Trump with his family or in an informal environment were quite rare at that time. The final insight is that, unlike the previous US President, Donald Trump published numerous “unprofessional” photos (Chun, 2018), which supported his “amateurish yet authentic style in social media” (Enli, 2017). To sum up, all posts of the first hundred days of presidency served two main goals: to show how successful and powerful Trump was as a president and legitimize his presidency and administration.

## **Empirical research**

*Visual Protocol and Data Collection*

The initial dataset consisted of a total of 459 Instagram posts (posts of the type video and IGTV, as well as stories were not included in the data collection) from the Instagram account of Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump), ranging from the 1st of January of 2020 until the 31st of December of 2020, comprising 459 image *files* because only the first picture in the carousel was chosen for the analysis with the use of PhantomBuster.

Each of the 459 images was processed through Google Cloud Vision API and Microsoft Azure Computer Vision API with Memespector in order to identify GV\_Label\_Descriptions, GV\_Web\_Entity\_Descriptions, GV\_Web\_BestGuessLabels, MA\_Tags and MA\_Description\_Captions, MA\_Objects, which were used for further analysis.



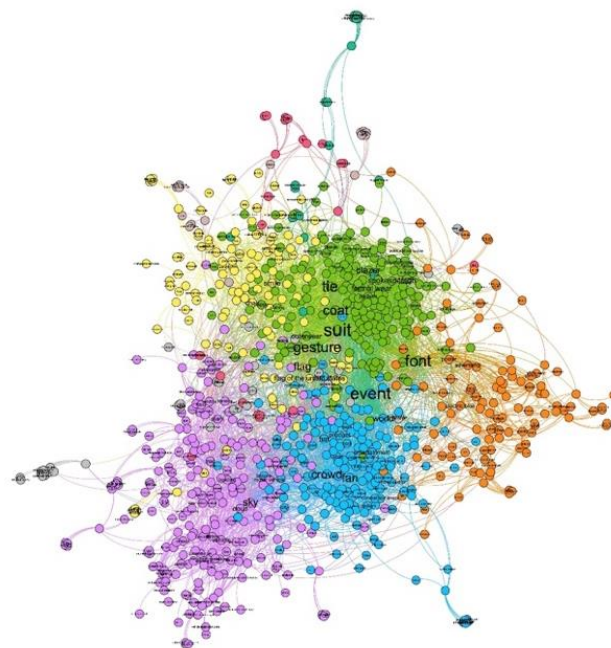
### *Clustered graphs by type of content*

A bipartite graph was used to assess which visual content was posted by Donald Trump in 2020. The analysis focused on the labels assigned to images on Trump's Instagram by Google Vision API. The network was rendered by Gephi, displaying images and their assigned labels as nodes and the edges as relations between images and labels, corresponding to them. To categorize the labels and the interconnected photos, clusters were built by applying the algorithm ForceAtlas2 to spatially organize the nodes and the Modularity Class was used to split the clusters by color, as shown in Figure 1.

In the graph below one can notice several clusters of images that are split by labels, which describe what is depicted on them. Different colors correspond to different types of content. The larger the label, the more often Google Vision API recognized it on a picture.

**Figure 1**

*The network of labels, assigned by Google Vision API, to Trump's Instagram photos in 2020*



The visual content of each cluster was qualitatively interpreted. The five biggest clusters are described below and presented in detail in Figure 2.

### **I. Outdoor activities – purple color – 24.8% of posts.**

The most often used labels to describe photos in this cluster are: vehicle, aircraft, sky, tree, plant. Photos usually feature Trump outdoors in two environments: 1) either in front of the White House or in some natural landscape; 2) beside vehicles, automobiles and especially military technology. These pictures help Mr. Trump to maintain his image of a successful and powerful president.

### **II. President Trump, running his reelection campaign – green color – 21% of posts.**

The most often used labels to describe photos in this cluster are: tie, coat, suit, gesture, font. On the images of this group Trump is always in a suit with a tie (he almost never deviates from this outfit) and they can be divided into subclusters of: 1) Trump's individual and group portraits in an official environment; 2) Trump running his reelection campaign as well as dozens of election posters with his quotes on them. These pictures are devoted to showing his presidential image and to sharing his thoughts and ideas with his supporters.

### **III. Crowds of supporters – blue color – 18.7% of posts.**

The most often used labels to describe photos in this cluster are: event, crowds, fan, world, hat. In this cluster are the photos which Trump posted in order to show how big of a following he actually has; thus, they usually depict thousands of Trump supporters at stadiums and campaign rallies.

### **IV. Smiling patriot and family man – yellow color – 13.2% of posts.**

The most often used labels to describe photos in this cluster are: smile, flag, chair, table. This cluster is the most varied one in terms of content but there is logic among how all of those labels and images ended up being in one cluster. Here, Trump is either with his family members and small children or with military personnel. What is compelling is that Trump smiles on almost all of these photos and, equally as important, is beside the flag of the United States. In addition, there are some photos of his family members in informal environments. All of this can be conveyed through the title of this cluster 'smiling patriot and family man' and this is the exact image that Republican supporters would love.

#### IV. Posters, quotes, hand-outs – orange color – 12.2% of posts.

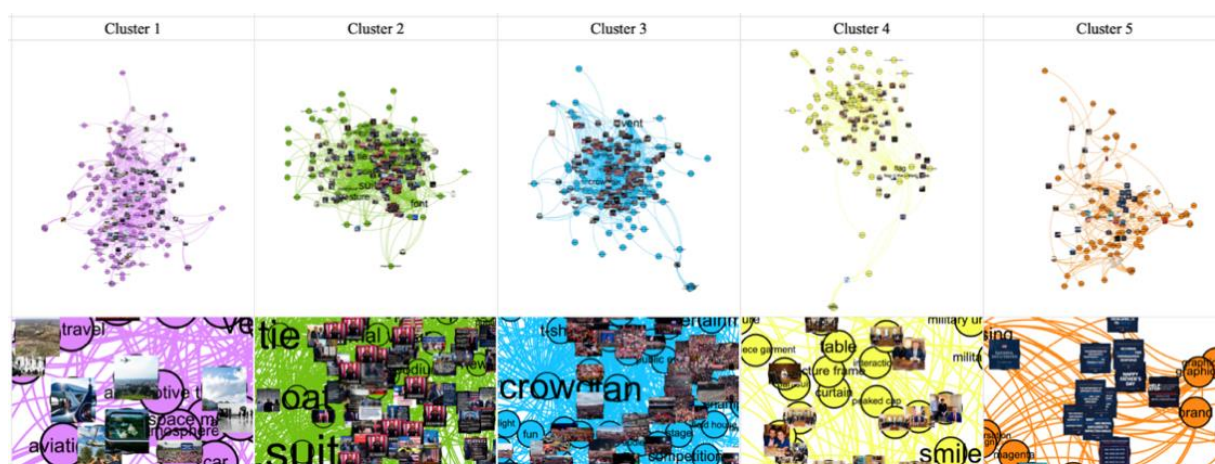
The most often used labels to describe photos in this cluster are: poster, advertising, electric blue, brand, screenshot. This cluster represents posts with mainly text on the images: those can be screenshots of tweets, holiday cards, or significant achievements of the Trump administration written on the electric blue background.

#### VI. Other images – 10.1% of posts.

The other 10% of images are outliers and could not be exactly attributed to any of the clusters described above. Their analysis did not prove to be useful for the objectives of the current paper.

**Figure 2**

*Clusters of labels, assigned by Google Vision API, and the corresponding images*



What is also fascinating to look at is how the content of Trump's images changed since the start of his presidency by the end of his presidency. Based on the findings from Strand & Shill (2019), certain labels were examined by Google Vision API to see whether the patterns remained consistent in Trump's posts. The results of that analysis are presented in Table 1, Figures 3 and 4.

**Figure 3**

*Images from Trump's Instagram posts in 2020 that fit the same labels which were prevalent in Trump's 2016 visual communication strategy*

table					
text					
with a foreign leader					
people					
linear perspective					
with a quote					
Trump's tweets					
military					
with a family					
unprofessional photos					



**Figure 4**

*Images from Trump's Instagram posts in 2020 under new frequently occurring labels*

flag					
with a microphone					
reelection campaign					
"Trump" as a text					

The number of tables, Trump signing documents, and military personnel decreased over the years and those can be found in less than 10% of Trump's Instagram posts in 2020. At the same time, there are still a lot of photos where text takes up a considerable amount of space (44% of posts have it) as well as images with many people in them (45%). The pictures of Trump with foreign leaders and screenshots of his tweets are quite rare in 2020 (2 and 3 pictures respectively). Two new objects emerged as frequent sightings, those are the flag of the USA (23%) and a microphone (12%). The official symbols of the USA, such as a flag, are used widely on his pictures as a symbol of an ethnic conception of American identity, which is considered by Trump as a core value.

**Table 1**

*Shares of images with specific labels, assigned by Google Vision API, to Trump's Instagram photos in 2020*

Label	Desk/table	Text as the main focus	Document	People	Military/veterans	Flag	Microphone
Share of images with that label	9%	44%	1%	45%	7%	23%	12%

Furthermore, as seen from Table 2, 84% of pictures contained some sort of text on them that may or may not have been the main focus of the image and in at least 53% of such posts the string 'Trump' was a part of that text. This is another peculiarity that had not been seen at the beginning of Trump's presidency. Moreover, Donald Trump himself was in *at least* 60% of the images. It is a sign that Donald Trump uses his Instagram more as a personal diary, than as an institutionalized account.

**Table 2**

*Shares of images with Donald Trump on them or the word "Trump" written in some form on Trump's Instagram photos in 2020*

Label	Donald Trump	"Trump" written	Any text written
Share of images with that label	60%	53%	84%

*The influence of Donald Trump's portrait*

One of the research questions also concerned finding out whether Trump's portrait in a post increased the engagement or not. To prove that, log-linear regression models were built with Trump's presence being the regressor in them and the logarithm of the number of likes and comments being the target variables.

Summaries of the two regression models are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Following the results, we obtain the following regressions:

$$\ln(com) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * D_{Trump} + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

$$\ln(likes) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * D_{Trump} + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

The results of both models state that, if Donald Trump is present in a photo, then this particular photo has more likes and comments under it (p-value for coefficients in both models is less than 0.01). Moreover, it is possible to determine the overall effect of Trump on the post's engagement. The needed calculations are provided below:

(1):

$$\text{No Trump on a photo } (D = 0): \ln(com_{NT}) = 8.97 + \epsilon_i$$

$$\text{Trump on a photo } (D = 1): \ln(com_T) = 8.97 + 0.34 + \epsilon_i$$

$$\ln(com_T) - \ln(com_{NT}) = 0.34$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{com_T}{com_{NT}}\right) = 0.34$$

$$\frac{com_T}{com_{NT}} = e^{0.34} = 1.405$$

(2):

$$\text{No Trump on a photo } (D = 0): \ln(likes_{NT}) = 13.07 + \epsilon_i$$

$$\text{Trump on a photo } (D = 1): \ln(likes_T) = 13.07 + 0.22 + \epsilon_i$$

$$\ln(likes_T) - \ln(likes_{NT}) = 0.22$$

$$\ln\left(\frac{likes_T}{likes_{NT}}\right) = 0.22$$

$$\frac{likes_T}{likes_{NT}} = e^{0.22} = 1.246$$

It turns out the presence of Trump in a photo, other things being equal, increases the number of comments under a publication by 40.5% and the number of likes by 24.6%.

**Table 3**

*Summary of a log-linear regression between the number of comments and the presence of Donald Trump on a photo*

<b>Log-linear regression</b>	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	ln_com
photo	0.34*** (0.08)
Constant	8.97*** (0.07)
Observations	459
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.03
Residual Std. Error	0.88 (df = 457)
F Statistic	16.01*** (df = 1; 457)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01



**Table 4**

*Summary of a log-linear regression between the number of likes and the presence of Donald Trump on a photo*

<b>Log-linear regression</b>	
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	ln_like
photo	0.22*** (0.05)
Constant	13.07*** (0.04)
Observations	459
R <sup>2</sup>	0.04
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.03
Residual Std. Error	0.54 (df = 457)
F Statistic	17.44*** (df = 1; 457)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01



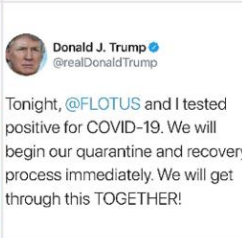


*Description of images with maximum likes and comments*

While analyzing the level of engagement of Instagram posts, which was calculated as the sum of likes and comments, presented in Tables 5 and 6, several insights were found.

1. The event sometimes can be more important than its visual representation. Thus, the post of Trump about the death of Kobe Bryant, the American professional basketball player, was surprisingly the most engaging in 2020.
2. Despite the fact that Donald Trump does not publish a lot of ‘unprofessional’ pictures nowadays, they are quite popular. It can be explained by the fact that people are tired of election campaigns and professional pictures that are aimed at attracting their attention to the election. They like and comment on a photo with Trump having his meal because they see an ‘ordinary American’ there. It is worth noting that he celebrates Cinco de Mayo on that picture, a traditional Mexican annual celebration, which is important, taking into account his attitude towards Mexico.
3. COVID-19 was an important topic in 2020 and people showed their support when Donald Trump and his wife tested positive, and Donald Trump shared this information via Twitter and then reposted it on Instagram (picture 3) as well as when they left the hospital (picture 4).
4. There were many interactions with his post (picture 5) devoted to his political opponent, Joe Biden, with a catchy slogan “Biden for resident”.






**Table 5**

*Photos with the most engagement on Trump’s Instagram profile in 2020*

				
2423K	2306 K	2114 K	1979 K	1940 K
<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B7zY02lBsZK/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B7zY02lBsZK/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B_0JuYbAk3w/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B_0JuYbAk3w/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CF1Dhz8MKR7/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CF1Dhz8MKR7/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-Unc7MJQI/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-Unc7MJQI/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CGTmSLis7bW/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CGTmSLis7bW/</a>

**Table 6**

*Photos with the least engagement on Trump's Instagram profile in 2020*

				
174 K	167 K	166 K	132 K	92 K
<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B7hfpkwhqjc/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B7hfpkwhqjc/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B6wdOuYBbKO/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B6wdOuYBbKO/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B7l9w5Vhwcw/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B7l9w5Vhwcw/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B9pLkc1hmfxf/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B9pLkc1hmfxf/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/BVC_C2hUZZT/">https://www.instagram.com/p/BVC_C2hUZZT/</a>



The visuals of the least popular posts of Donald Trump's Instagram in 2020 show that when a politician publishes professional press photos from a high-level meeting people do not find it engaging (pictures 1-3). Moreover, official posters about COVID-19 did not seem compelling to people (pictures 4-5).

#### *Post description sentiment analysis*

Currently APIs which were used in the current paper do not support image sentiment analysis, hence, the text that is attached to each post was used for sentiment analysis, using Python and library *nltk* (Bird et al., 2009). The description of each of Trump's posts was given a score from -1 to +1 where -1 is a post which is highly negative and +1 – a post which is highly positive. Posts without a description received 0 which stands for a neutral score. Examples of positive and negative posts are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Examples of posts with a highly positive and a highly negative sentiment score*

<b>Image</b>		
<b>Post description</b>	The brave men and women of our Armed Forces represent the very best of our great Nation, matched only by the families who walk beside them in their service. It is our sacred duty to recognize the unending and immeasurable sacrifices our military families make in support of their loved ones and for our country, and we are cognizant of the fortitude they show enduring the anguish of knowing that their hero may never return home...	On November 3rd, Michigan will decide whether we will quickly return to record prosperity—or whether we allow Sleepy Joe Biden to impose a \$4 TRILLION DOLLAR TAX HIKE, ban American Energy, confiscate your guns, shutdown the economy, shutdown auto production, delay the vaccine, destroy the suburbs, erase your borders, and indoctrinate your children with poisonous anti-American lies!
<b>Sentiment score</b>	0.9983	-0.95
<b>Post URL</b>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CFpq2OsMNZL/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CFpq2OsMNZL/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CE-xms-WMdpq/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CE-xms-WMdpq/</a>

In total the following statistics were determined: 276 out of 459 posts (60%) had a more positive sentiment, 97 posts (21%) - a more negative sentiment and 86 posts (19%) - no text at all, only an image.

Firstly, a connection between the post engagement and the sentiment of the post was examined. As seen from Table 8, the corresponding coefficient by the variable *sentiment* in the log-linear regression where the target variable is the number of comments is significant (p-value < 0.01). The regression evaluated is:

$$\log(\text{commentCount}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{sentiment} + \epsilon_i \quad (3)$$

It means that if a post's sentiment increases by 1 (it means that the posts will become more positive), then the number of comments will fall by approximately 25%. Since the sentiment is a value between -1 and 1, we cannot interpret the coefficient exactly in this way. However, what we can definitely conclude is that the more negative Trump's post is, the more comments it attracts.

**Table 8**

*Summary of a log-linear regression model between the number of comments and the sentiment of the posts*

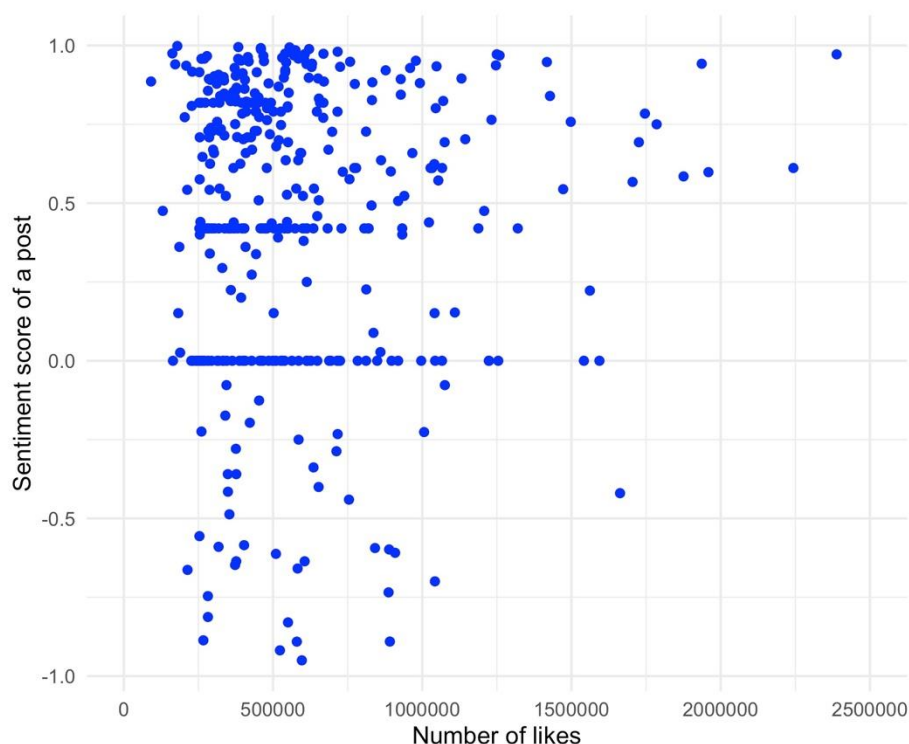
<b>Log-linear regression</b>	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	log(commentCount)
sentiment	-0.25*** (0.09)
Constant	9.19*** (0.06)
Observations	373
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.02
Residual Std. Error	0.85 (df = 371)
F Statistic	7.00*** (df = 1; 371)
<i>Note:</i>	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Besides, the following observation can be made when considering a scatter plot in Figure 5: the most liked among Trump's posts are exceedingly positive while negative posts do not do well in terms of likes. Plenty of posts without any text, containing just images, have more likes

than a post with negative content, and, if a post has more than 1.5 million likes, then it is most likely accompanied by a text with positive sentiment.

**Figure 5**

*Scatter plot, depicting the dependencies between the sentiment of the post description and the number of likes*



In terms of topics covered in Trump's posts, the top ten most positive posts on Trump's account concentrate on: holiday wishes, peace agreements, military and armed forces, words of condolence for his friends, who are also public figures, and birthday congratulations to his wife and children.

The top ten most negative posts on Trump's account relate to: criticizing Joe Biden and his suggested policies, criticizing Democrats and advocating to vote against them to prevent fraud, criticizing China as well as accusing media outlets of providing fake news.

To conclude, the sentiment analysis shows that Trump receives more engagement on his posts if the content is positive. It may be due to people liking the content when it goes beyond ideological beliefs and creates unity and peace rather than division and disagreements.

### *Comments sentiment analysis*

Additionally, the sentiment analysis of comments was conducted to understand how Instagram users respond to Trump's posts. Comments from the top five most commented posts were extracted using PhantomBuster and analyzed using Python and the NLTK library. As comments frequently have plenty of emojis, these emojis were transformed into their word description form. Besides, as a result of the analysis, a significant part of the comments was characterized as neutral, hence, the shares presented in Table 9 are shares among all non-neutral comments.

The current section about the sentiment analysis of the comments is the one where the concept of affordances is crucial. From Tables 9 and 10 it is evident that only 1 out of the 5 most liked posts is also among the 5 most commented publications. That is the post with a screenshot of Trump's tweet about COVID-19 which is also the post from Table 9 with the biggest share of positive comments. The 4 remaining most commented posts have a considerable share of negative comments, and, compared to Table 10, people did not necessarily "like" them, using the special affordance of Instagram. Thus, taking into account that Instagram as a platform does not have such an affordance as a possibility to "dislike" posts, the negative comments are perceived by users as a way to dislike a post without actually clicking any special buttons under the image. This idea is further supported by the fact that more effort is needed to write a comment than for the one-click activity of "liking" a post, so users are indeed taking their time to let Trump know that they are not satisfied with him or the content he publishes.



**Table 9**

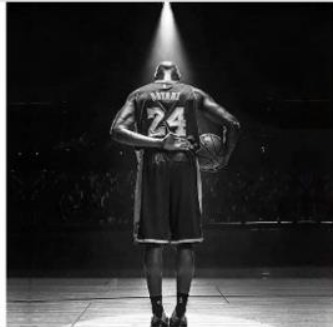




*Descriptions of five most commented posts along with the comments' sentiment*

	Post №1	Post №2	Post №3	Post №4	Post №5
<b>Image</b>		 <p>Tonight, @FLOTUS and I tested positive for COVID-19. We will begin our quarantine and recovery process immediately. We will get through this TOGETHER!</p>			
	328506	155487	132499	112168	99994
<b>Text</b>	-	Tonight, @FLOTUS and I tested positive for COVID-19. We will begin our quarantine and recovery process immediately. We will	Happy Birthday @EricTrump!	<b>In Persian:</b>  Iran must allow human rights groups to monitor and report on the current reality of the protests in Iran. We should not	-

		get through this TOGETHER!		see the peaceful killing of peaceful protesters again or the disconnection of the Internet. The world is watching.	
<b>Comment count</b>	328506	155487	132499	112168	99994
<b>Share of positive comments</b>	47%	88%	63%	66%	37%
<b>Share of negative comments</b>	53%	12%	37%	34%	63%
<b>Post URL</b>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B610eKLB3aL/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B610eKLB3aL/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CF1Dhz8MKR7/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CF1Dhz8MKR7/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B6_UYAJBKUb/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B6_UYAJBKUb/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B7Mtg6Hh-vC/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B7Mtg6Hh-vC/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B64vLXohZfg/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B64vLXohZfg/</a>

**Table 10**

*Photos with the largest amount of likes on Trump's Instagram profile in 2020*

				
2388 K	2243 K	1958 K	1936 K	1877 K
<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B7zY02lBszK">https://www.instagram.com/p/B7zY02lBszK</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B_0JuY-bAk3w/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B_0JuY-bAk3w/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CF1Dhz8MKR7/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CF1Dhz8MKR7/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-Unc7MJQl/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CF-Unc7MJQl/</a>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/CGTm-SLis7bW/">https://www.instagram.com/p/CGTm-SLis7bW/</a>

## **Discussion & conclusion**

The number of populists rising to power and staying in power is increasing around the world and that is largely due to their highly effective communication strategies. This research is intended to study the digital visual communication strategy of one of the most prominent populists in the world. This paper explains what topics Donald Trump brought up on Instagram in 2020 and how he did so. His example may be insightful in terms of revealing the communication patterns of populist leaders.

Trump presents an idealized version of himself on visual platforms such as Instagram, highlighting how powerful and legitimate a president he is, and will be when reelected. In terms of the roles Trump strives to portray, they are: 1) a powerful president, 2) an American patriot and 3) a family man. These roles are directly linked to the visual communication strategies he implements, among them: 1) the formation of a statesmanship attitude; 2) the formation of a compassionate image and 3) the emphasis on mass appeal. Yet a possible strategy of the emphasis of ordinariness, which is frequently used by other politicians, cannot be detected in Trump's Instagram posts. Trump is often in the center of all photographs as if their goal is to show how exceptional he is.

Results of the empirical part of the research, conducted, using digital methods, can be presented as the following insights. All of Trump's Instagram content was divided into five categories, which corresponded to some of his strategies listed above: 1) outdoor activities; 2) President Trump, running his reelection campaign; 3) crowds of supporters; 4) a smiling patriot and family man; 5) posters, quotes, hand-outs. Some of the image patterns from 2016, which were previously detected by researchers (table, a lot of text overlaid across an image, military, linear perspective, etc.) were also found in Trump's 2020 content, in addition to several new patterns being added to the list (flag, microphone, etc.). Furthermore, it was found that the presence of Trump on a photo increases the post's engagement and Trump's most engaging posts in 2020 were mostly not related to politics, while professional press photos and posters were among the least engaging content. Besides, textual sentiment analysis was conducted and it was determined that Trump's posts with more positive descriptions resulted in more engagement both in terms of likes and dislikes, with people preferring content which unites them rather than divides them. Finally, more personal content in Trump's publications results in more positive comments, whereas controversial political content results in more negative comments and

significantly fewer likes, as users make full use of Instagram's affordances and use the comment section in order to show their negative attitude towards Trump or/and his content.

This study has the following limitations. Firstly, no Instagram stories and IG TV content were analyzed due to stories being deleted every 24 hours and no sufficient APIs for video analysis being available, even though those are also part of the visual strategy. Secondly, no comparison has been made between Trump's Instagram and his visual content on other social media platforms. Finally, more comparative analysis is possible in terms of comparing Trump's content across all years as well as with the content of his direct opponents and other world leaders. All of these themes may become the foundation for future studies.

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