Research Handbook in Visual Politics

Depictions of Authenticity

Me, Myself and I: Selfies as vehicles of personalised politics in social media era
Maja Šimunjak

It is likely one of the first things that students of political communication, and in particular those focusing on electoral campaigning, learn in their course. The 1960 Kennedy – Nixon debate, the first televised presidential debate in history. The story is as old as the debate. It says, one, that Kennedy, in the words of the CBS's president at the time 'was bronzed beautifully... Nixon looked like death.' And two, that those watching the debate on television thought Kennedy won the debate, while those who listened to it on the radio said Nixon won. The argument goes that it was the *visual* that made the difference – while Kennedy is widely considered to have looked fresh, tanned, and confident, Nixon was sweaty, tired and nervous, wearing ill-fitting clothes – which contributed to those watching the debate on television to consider Kennedy as having been more successful. And while the evidence from the 1960s is largely anecdotal, with some, but problematic scientific evidence from a survey done at the time of the debate (Vancil & Pendell, 1987), the revisited, more robust research confirmed the political communication tale told for decades. Specifically, Druckman (2003) retested the hypothesis in an experiment and found that visuals indeed matter in evaluation of politicians. His study concluded that: 'television primes its audience to rely more on their perceptions of candidate image (e.g., integrity), whereas audio alone primes an increasing reliance on issues' (Druckman, 2003, p. 567), even when controlling for political predispositions and demographics. The key lesson taken from this political event was that *visuals* matter in politicians' image management and branding. The fact that the discussion was framed as a debate between the two candidates already told us that *leaders* matter. Nowadays, following,

among other things, the rise of modernism and decrease of trust in political institutions, we need to also add *authenticity* to the mix. Specifically, it is widely claimed that politicians nowadays need to be seen as authentic, and tied to this, trustworthy and honest, to be successful in media-saturated democracies.

Consequently, this chapter examines the ways in which political actors *perform authenticity* by *personalising politics* (i.e., practicing self-personalisation) in their *visual communication*. Theoretically, the chapter discusses three key concepts: personalisation of politics, visual political communication, and performed authenticity. The interplay of the three is examined with reference to past research, and in particular that concerned with politicians' use of visuals on social media, including their sharing of selfies, self-portrait digital photographs taken by themselves. As the literature review will show, there is a growing scholarship concerned with politicians' use of visuals on social media, but there is scant discussion of how visuals are used to communicate authenticity, one of the indispensable qualities that contemporary politicians are considered to need to exhibit in societies characterised with the rise of modernism and self-reflexivity. The chapter addresses this gap in the literature and contributes to literature on politicians' use of visuals by investigating selfies as tools for performing authenticity. Specifically, selfies are discussed as a visual communication practice that enables politicians to meet key elements of performed authenticity through communication of personalised content. Two case studies are presented to examine this, namely social media practice of posting selfies on Instagram, the key visual social network for political communication, by two heads of the executive whose selfie practice has been widely discussed by the media: Canada's Justin Trudeau and UK's Boris Johnson. The chapter concludes with the summary of main arguments and suggestions for future research.

Personalised politics in visual communication

Personalisation of politics, or personalisation of political communication as some refer to it, is a widely discussed and researched phenomenon in political communication. In general terms, it refers to the increased focus on politicians at the expense of political collectives and/or issues. And while there has historically been a lack of consensus about how the phenomenon should be conceptualised, more recently there seem to be a growing agreement about, one, fields in which it can be observed, and two, the dimensions it can be manifested in. Regarding the former, personalised politics are often researched in three key areas:

political actors' behaviour, media output, and voters' behaviour (for an overview of research see Maier & Adam, 2010). As to the latter, scholars most commonly differentiate between the increased visibility of individuals at the expense of collectives, which has been termed individualisation or presidentialization (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2011); and the increased focus on politicians' private lives and qualities, which has been referred to as intimisation, privatisation of politics or politicisation of private persona (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Langer, 2011; Stanyer, 2013). In this chapter, the focus will be put on the first area of inquiry, i.e., the personalisation of political actors' behaviour, also at times termed self-personalisation (Lindholm, Carlson, & Högväg, 2021; Peng, 2021), and the ways in which visual communication allows politicians to put themselves as individuals, including their private personae, at the forefront of political communication, hence examining both mentioned dimensions of personalisation.

Indeed, not only has it been claimed that 'visual symbols have long been a central component of political communication' (Schill, 2012, p. 118; see also Bucy & Joo, 2021), but also that visual political communication is particularly conducive to personalisation of politics (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Metz, Kruikemeier, & Lecheler, 2020; Schill, 2012). Specifically, two visual communication channels, television and social media, are most often mentioned in this regard. While scholarship acknowledges that conditions contributing to personalisation are multi-faceted and complex, the political communication scholarship most frequently connects personalisation with the rise of television (Meyrowitz, 1985; Poguntke & Webb, 2005), and more recently with the rise of social media (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Metz et al., 2020). A frequent hypothesis is that the affordances of television and social media, and their focus on visuals in particular, centre the attention on individuals, and especially their personae (Karvonen, 2010; Metz et al., 2020; Meyrowitz, 1985), through which they enhance, in some cases already present, personalisation trends. Regarding self-personalisation, there are multiple benefits for politicians of communicating political information in a personalised, visual form, as these media channels are said to require and promote. In particular, visuals are considered to be able to communicate complex ideas in a quick and memorable way, and audiences/voters are able to process them more quickly and efficiently than other forms of communication (Schill, 2012). If we couple this with the fact that personalised politics, i.e., that focused on the person(a) of a politician, are by some considered to aid voters to efficiently and rationally learn about politics and make electoral decisions by using political leaders as 'information shortcuts' (Garzia, 2011; Needham, 2005), and have the potential to democratize politics by

making it more understandable and attractive to wider public[1] (Curran, 2002; Langer, 2011), then politicians' self-personalisation in visual communications seems like a sensible political communication strategy.

Research into politicians' self-personalisation in visual communications has traditionally focused on the analysis of visual campaign materials, such as posters and television/video ads (Filimonov, Russmann, & Svensson, 2016). Nowadays, there is a growing field of research examining politicians' visual self-personalisation on social media (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019). This body of research increasingly examines routine political periods, i.e., those outside of electoral campaigns, recognising the state of permanent campaigning that is said to characterise many media-saturated democracies and the role that social media is seen to play in everyday communication between the political elites and other political communication actors (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Larsson, 2019; Metz et al., 2020; Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019). In general, it can be said that the research into self-personalisation in visual communication has become quite prolific in the past few years, particularly with the increasing use of Instagram, the social network based on visuals, by political actors, which has consequently also captured scholars' attention. Indeed, while only recently it was common to see arguments about the lack of research into visual political communication (Cöster & Dahlberg, 2018; Schill, 2012), including personalisation in visual political communication (Metz et al., 2020); there now seems to be notable, and growing, body of evidence on how politicians use visuals to offer personalised political narratives, as well as build and manage their image, particularly on social media. There seem to be two key strands of research in this regard. Firstly, studies focusing on the type of content that politicians share on social media, most commonly examining the presence or absence of visual references to their professional and private personae (e.g. Cöster & Dahlberg, 2018; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Filimonov et al., 2016; Metz et al., 2020; Peng, 2021; Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019). And secondly, research addressing the effects of politicians' sharing of personalised visual content on social media, that is, examining voters' reactions to it (e.g., Larsson, 2019; Lindholm et al., 2020; Peng, 2021).

Personalised politics & performed authenticity

Many of these studies make reference to politicians' *authenticity* – either as performed by politicians or perceived by users/voters – which has increasingly come to be seen as an

indispensable characteristic that contemporary politicians should exhibit (Helms, 2012; Valgarðsson, Clarke, Jennings, & Stoker, 2020), given it is one of the key evaluation criteria that voters apply when making judgements about politicians, and consequently perhaps electoral decisions (Enli, 2015; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Shane, 2018). Scholars note that the importance of authenticity in political communication has been elevated with the wider changes in the society, such as the decline in political trust, the rise of anti-politics sentiments, as well as modernism and self-reflexivity (Enli, 2015; Stiers et al., 2019). And while exact definitions of authenticity in politics vary somewhat, there seems to be some consensus about three of its key dimensions. One, it is inherently tied to an individual, a politician, and hence, authenticity can be seen as inseparable from personalised politics (Helms, 2012; Shane, 2018). Two, it is a complex trait that encompasses several others, most notably conviction, consistency, truthfulness and honesty (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Luebke, 2020; Stiers et al., 2019). And three, political authenticity is a 'social construction which is created and negotiated in complex communication processes among politicians, the media, and the audience' (Luebke, 2020, p. 1), implying it does not tie to sincerity and politicians' revelations of their 'true selves', but rather how politicians *perform* it, the media *mediates* it, and the audiences *perceive* it. Consequently, the literature distinguishes between performed, mediated, and perceived authenticity. This chapter focuses on *performed authenticity*, that is, 'a social performance in which politicians seek to construct an authentic self in the public sphere' (Luebke, 2020, p. 4).

Performing authenticity is seen to be a technique of politicians' image management (Enli, 2015), closely tied to another technique in this regard, self-personalisation. Often, the two are connected or even inseparable, particularly when it comes to the aims and practices of revelations of politicians' personae, which are often used by politicians to showcase authenticity. To do this, Luebke (2020) argues that the presented output needs to show four key characteristics. One, *consistency*, between a politician's actions and convictions, across time, space and mediums, as well as between their professional and private personae. For example, the most commonly perceived issue with revelations of a politician's infidelity are the questions that this will raise about their honesty and loyalty in the political sphere. In other words, it may be difficult to convince voters that betrayal of trust in private life does not transfer to a possible betrayal of trust in political life. The lack of consistency between the private and political personae would likely be disturbing to some voters. Two, *intimacy*, achieved by disclosing information from the private sphere, appearing in non-political contexts, using confessional rhetoric etc. By communicating 'intimate' content, politicians

are allowing access to their 'backstage persona,' perceivably less manufactured, packaged and scripted, which voters demand in order to get a glimpse of politicians 'as they really are' (Shane, 2018, p. 2). This can be achieved by communicating visual content from private life, such as images from a family vacation, birthday celebrations, attending non-political events in private capacity, such as a football game, etc. Three, *ordinariness*, demonstrated by revealing imperfections, showing amateurism, and revealing they do the same things as other people do, such as playing sports, walking pets, taking children to school, and so on. Finally, *immediacy*, performed by instantly sharing information, including replying to others on social media, which contributes to communicated content appearing less planned or supervised, i.e., scripted and staged. The notion of immediacy can be achieved by sharing content during events and activities, achieving the sense of 'liveness', as well as by appearing spontaneous, say in the use of language. For example, many political leaders have taken to recording short videos for social media from events they attend by using informal language to send seemingly immediate and spontaneous messages. In sum, authenticity is a complex trait that requires effort to be performed. As we have already established, visuals are able to communicate complex information in a quick and memorable way, so it is reasonable to expect that politicians would use them as tools to perform authenticity in an effective manner. For example, a single image of a Green party politician cycling to work posted on social media would arguably do more to position them as authentic, i.e., concerned with environmental causes privately as is consistent with their political convictions, and 'in touch' with 'ordinary' people who commute and communicate in the same way, than a lengthy verbal or written declaration of their convictions and actions.

What these characteristics or indicators of authenticity also reveal are their inseparability from personalised politics. In other words, the persona of the politician is at the centre of each attribute, meaning that in order to perform authenticity, a politician needs to employ self-personalisation, and often not only focus on their professional personae, but also private. Hence, it does not surprise that studies of personalised politics in visual communication often make reference to performed authenticity, albeit they rarely focus on it. The next section reviews the scholarship on performed authenticity in visual self-personalised politicians' communication, particularly as it pertains to one of the key areas of research - social media output.

Performing authenticity in social media visuals

The establishment of social media as a conventional tool in political communication allowed political actors to control their messaging and employ image management, including performance of authenticity, on a daily basis. Scholarship looking at the self-personalisation in visual communication on social media, outlined earlier, rarely focuses on the ways in which politicians perform authenticity, but many studies make indirect references to the established indicators of authenticity, primarily *intimacy* and *ordinariness*, and to a lesser extent *consistency* and *immediacy*.

For example, *intimacy* is often signposted in politicians' social media communication by sharing visuals depicting their private lives and qualities. While studies often find that this disclosure of information from private sphere is far less common than the portrayal of professional personae, most studies have found that politicians communicate private information on social media, and in particular on Instagram, at least to some extent (Cöster & Dahlberg, 2018; Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Farkas & Bene, 2021; Peng, 2021; Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019). Further, another commonly found feature of their social media communication is the portrayal of *ordinariness*, through which politicians aim to present themselves as ordinary people, close to their voters. To illustrate, it was suggested that Dutch politician Wilders 'projects persona 'in touch' with the concerns of Dutch citizens' by 'employing national auto-images' (Franssen & Rock, 2020, p. 11), while the Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau occasionally shares images on Instagram which show him in casual attire, signposting that he is approachable and close to the public (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). The same strategy of using casual dress to portray ordinariness was found in the analysis of Hungarian politicians' Instagram visuals (Farkas & Bene, 2021), as well as the analysis of Facebook posts of political actors competing in the 2019 European parliament elections (Novelli & Johansson, 2019). Similarly, Mendonça & Caetano's (2021) analysis of Brazilian President Bolsonaro's visual communication on Instagram revealed that he is at times pictured in casual attire, and performing everyday activities, both signposting his ordinariness.

Consistency and *immediacy* are less often referred to in studies of politicians' visual communication on social media. Regarding consistency, Franssen and Rock's (2020, p. 12) claim that Dutch politician Wilders 'authenticates his persona by presenting his political attitude as flowing naturally from his character traits' indicates that Wilders aims to signpost consistency between his personal and professional persona via his social media. Similarly, Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) suggest that Canadian PM Trudeau via his Instagram visuals portrays his values and policies. For example, an image he posted of himself participating in

a gay pride parade shows consistency with his presentation as an open and liberal politician. Finally, Farkas and Bene (2021) have analysed spontaneity, which is a feature of *immediacy*, in Hungarian politicians' Instagram visuals, concluding that it is signposted in almost every other post featuring politicians on Facebook and Instagram, primarily due to a large number of posted selfies, i.e., self-portrait digital photographs taken by politicians themselves. Indeed, an argument can be put forward that selfies are a type of visual which can be particularly useful in performing authenticity, as it allows politicians to signpost all four indicators of authenticity.

Selfies

The practice of posting selfies has often been viewed as narcissistic, self-indulgent, and attention-seeking (Barker & Rodriguez, 2019). However, research on the topic suggests that the issue is more complex and nuanced, as, for example, selfie posting has also been found to be a form of empowerment through creation, negotiation and representation of personal and social identities (Barker & Rodriguez, 2019). Selfies can also be seen as vehicles of 'performing connectivity' when the format is used to showcase relationships with others (Ekman & Widholm, 2017). Alongside representations of self and social connections, it has been suggested that selfies which include visuals of places can be used strategically to enhance the significance of the place by association, but also that the represented self could be embellished by the association to the place (Koliska & Roberts, 2021). All of these ideas are relevant when considering political selfies, which Karadimitriou and Veneti (2016) argue allow politicians to display less traditional aspects of themselves in a popular format and intimate manner. Yet, the aims appear to be very much the same as in other forms of political representation – creating a favourable impression or brand and gaining media attention (ibid.). And while there seems to be much to gain with posting selfies, they do not come without risks for politicians, as their reception by other actors can be unpredictable. For example, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has been accused of being self-indulgent, even branded 'Elsie McSelfie,' due to the number of selfies she posted with COP26 attendees in 2021 (Allardyce, Boothman, & Glackin, 2021), while it was suggested that then US President Barack Obama undermined his political authority by using a selfie stick in a video that featured on Buzzfeed (Enli, 2015).

As mentioned, selfies can be seen to be particularly useful in performing authenticity. Two of its indicators, *intimacy* and *ordinariness*, seem to be inherent to the practice of selfies, due to their affordances. The visual's framing and composition can be seen to

communicate *intimacy* given selfies are often close-up or medium frames which give a glimpse into a politician's private, intimate space and communicate emotion more effectively than other shot sizes (Hudson & Rowlands, 2012). Of course, selfies can also be used to perform intimacy when their content is related to a politician's private personae, e.g., visuals with their family and friends, in which case there is an added layer of intimacy as the viewer can be seen as invited to share a personal moment with the political actor sharing it.

Also, selfies can be seen to be particularly effective in communicating *ordinariness*, as the sole action of taking and posting a selfie is something that 'ordinary' people do on social media. However, there are also other affordances of selfies that can portray ordinariness, such as the imperfections of the visual, which often has issues with framing, light and composition, while a close-up frame can reveal imperfections in political actor's appearance. Also, similarly to how politicians' gaffes on social media can make them appear more authentic (Sheinheit & Bogard, 2016), it might be expected that the less a selfie meets good photography/videography standards and those associated with political image management, that is, the more it appears amateurish, the more authentic a politician posting it may be perceived. Further, as they are usually taken at a time when an activity or event is taking place, they showcase the *immediacy* of the communication – the visual portrays the liveness of the output as it is taken 'on the spot,' and given the visual's framing and composition, it can also signpost spontaneity, i.e., the visual not being (too) staged or packaged. The content of the visual can also be used to communicate *consistency*, for example, to portray a politician's values, practices and/or policies.

Two case studies are presented in the next section to examine in more depth how selfies posted by political actors on Instagram, considered to be the most political visual social network, meet the above discussed indicators of authenticity. Analysis focuses on selfies of two heads of the executive whose selfie practice has been widely discussed by the media - Canada's Justin Trudeau and UK's Boris Johnson.

Case Studies

Justin Trudeau

Trudeau joined Instagram in December 2012 as he was competing in the Canadian Liberal party leadership contest, which he eventually won. At the start of 2021, he has been in power as Canada's Prime Minister for over five years, having won the federal elections in 2015 and 2019. Trudeau's personal brand is considered to be based on his youth, positivity, athleticism,

good looks, open-mindedness, and communication skills, so it does not surprise that he uses social media extensively in his image management and is considered to be quite effective in doing so (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Trudeau is said to pay particular attention to his visual portrayal, evidenced, among other things, in his official photographer having reportedly unprecedented access to the PM (Andrew-Gee, 2016). Also, Trudeau is seen as rarely shying away from participating in a selfie, which caused some to call him 'The Selfie King of Canada' (Francis, 2015) and the 'selfie Prime Minister' (Pontefract, 2019).

However, while Trudeau appears more than happy to take a selfie with others (Remillard, Bertrand, & Fisher, 2020), the analysis of his Instagram account from 2015 to 2020 reveals that he himself posts selfies very rarely – only four still selfies and one video selfie were found posted on his Instagram account in that period. Interestingly, all four still image selfies are portraying his private persona, indicating consistency in the use of selfies as a tool to share aspects of his private personae, and perhaps also suggesting that he does not see selfies as an appropriate tool to communicate information about his political, professional persona, which previous research has found is the key self-personalisation strategy he uses on Instagram (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). The four selfies all feature members of his family, children and/or wife, in informal, everyday settings and clothes, doing 'ordinary' things, such as walking to school and enjoying days out. Given this, they can be seen as showcasing *intimacy* and *ordinariness*. Further, these selfies (all but one) contain signs indicating that they visually capture the action/event referred to in captions, and have been posted shortly thereafter, so they can also be seen to signpost *immediacy*. For example, the selfie posted on 7 October 2019 in which Trudeau is pictured with his two children on a residential street is captioned 'The best kind of debate prep: walking these two to school this morning!' The immediacy of the image is signposted with the lexical choice of 'this morning' and posting the image on the day of the leaders' debate in 2019 elections. The only photo which may be seen to lack the immediacy indicator is the selfie with wife Sophie, in which the two are pictured in nature wearing casual clothes, and Sophie Trudeau is seen kissing her husband's cheek. Trudeau posted the selfie with the caption 'Happy Birthday Sophie!' but there is no indication that the selfie was taken on the day of the birthday/post. Finally, all these selfies could be seen as signposting the *consistency* between the Trudeau's brand and his actions. The selfies communicate that he is an active and loving father and husband, enjoying nature and sports, being positive and enthusiastic about life.

[Figure 3.1.1 around here]

Figure 3.1.1 Selfie posted by Justin Trudeau to Instagram on 7 October 2019

The only selfie video posted on the account is from September 2017 in which Trudeau invites youth to join his Youth Council. He appears to be speaking in an official, professional capacity, yet he is pictured in semi-formal clothes in an informal setting, which makes the message somewhat confusing. The selfie's authenticity is further impeded by the caption referring to a meeting that took place on the day the video was posted, but there is nothing in the visual signposting the meeting. Hence, the semi-casual clothes and informal setting, together with a close-up frame, could signpost ordinariness and intimacy; there are indictors of immediacy; and the message is consistent with his policies. However, the inconsistency among its different elements causes confusion, and may be perceived as less authentic than intended. Also, while the less formal aspects of the selfie are consistent with how Trudeau in general seems to be communicating with selfies, the formal, political message is inconsistent with how these are usually communicated on his Instagram account. It may be hypothesised that a selfie format with indicators of intimacy and ordinariness was seen as preferable in trying to reach a younger audience, who the message was intended for, but the inconsistency in many of its elements may have hindered the communication goal in this case.

Boris Johnson

Johnson joined Instagram in January 2018, but he did not really use it before the 2019 contest for the leadership of the British Conservative Party, although he was serving as the Secretary of State until July 2018. By winning the leadership contest in July 2019, he also replaced the former leader of British Conservatives, Theresa May, as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Pich (2020) suggests that Johnson has two distinct brands, one positioning him as 'Boris the comic' and the other as 'Boris the commander.' 'Boris the comic' is perhaps a longer standing and more familiar brand, focused on his dishevelled appearance and eccentric character, which led to him being perceived as entertaining, humorous, but also confident (Friedman, 2019; Pich, 2020). His visual portrayal over the years often fuelled this image (Friedman, 2019), and the British public seemed to have accepted it as such. At the time he came to power, a survey of British citizens showed that they perceived him as charismatic, eccentric, and flamboyant, but also as a buffoon, idiot, and a liar (Curtis, 2019). Perhaps due to the issues with trustworthiness, Pich (2020) argues that Johnson started developing a new brand at the time of coming to power – Boris the commander – trying to position himself as 'a strong, decisive leader, eye-for-detail, in-touch, prime ministerial, honest and accountable.'

Yougov's trackers show that Johnson did not make any headway among the public on the issue of trustworthiness and competence since coming to power, but the data suggests that more people were finding him 'likeable' in early 2021 than they did when he first came to power.

Studying Johnson's use of Instagram, it is notable that he posts selfies quite often, these being mostly in a form of self-recorded short videos. Only two still image selfies were noted, both portraying primarily Johnson's political persona, and both posted during the 2019 election campaign. In one, he offers a 'behind the scenes' look into a recording of ITV This Morning show in which he was a guest, posing with the two hosts. In the other, he is surrounded by his campaign team, all smiling into the camera, with the campaign slogan in the caption saying, 'Let's get Brexit done.' These 'on the spot', seemingly spontaneous images communicate *immediacy*, as well as *intimacy* as Johnson can be seen as inviting the viewer into his intimate, private space due to the frame of the shot. The *ordinariness* of the images can be seen as signposted by the sole act of taking a selfie in these situations, which is something 'ordinary' people might do. Finally, both images and accompanying captions are *consistent* with the narrative of the campaign during which they've been posted – they showcase a party leader at work, promoting the key campaign issue - Brexit.

More often Johnson posts selfie videos, most notable of which were those published while he was self-isolating in March/April 2020 after testing positive for coronavirus. There is a sense of *intimacy* created by the medium close-up frames, but also Johnson's sharing of information about his health condition. The setting remains formal (office), and Johnson is either in formal or semi-formal dress. Hence, it is again the act itself of recording and posting the selfie videos that contributes to communicating *ordinariness*. While he does reveal some intimate health information, and in the video posted on 3 April the visual communicates information about the illness as well, most of the content Johnson speaks about is related to government's activities in fighting coronavirus, ensuring *consistency* of messaging between his government and his own communications. Although, given that Johnson looks poorly in the visual, at least more so than in the first few videos, his verbal claims he is 'feeling better' seem at odds with the visual, creating issues in consistency, and consequently, his authenticity. The inconsistency did not go unnoticed by the media (see, e.g., Sabbagh & Mason, 2020). The *immediacy* is signposted with the setting in which the recording is done, as the public knew that Johnson was self-isolating in prime minister's residence, but also Johnson's use of present tense and signifiers of present time (e.g., 'Hi folks, I want to bring you up to speed with something that's happening today…').

[Figure 3.1.2 around here]

Figure 3.1.2 Selfie posted by Boris Johnson to Instagram on 11 August 2020

Very much similar practices of communicating authenticity are present in other selfie videos as well, which are mostly recorded by Johnson on site of events he visits and activities he is participating in. For example, there are selfie videos from his visits to Hereford County Hospital, Milton Keynes Hospital, RAF Lossiemouth, a pizza place, a school reopening following relaxation of coronavirus-related lockdowns, and so on. The *immediacy* is evident both by Johnson taking the video 'on site' and through his use of language which signposts that the event/activity is taking place as he speaks. While Johnson is often in formal or at least semi-formal attire, and in settings in which he's performing his political, professional role, the selfie videos can still be seen to portray *ordinariness* due to the amateurish recording style with often shaky shots, or issues with light and framing. Again, while Johnson primarily in visuals portrays his professional persona, there are indications of *intimacy* through the medium close-up frame that selfie often warrants, giving viewers access to Johnson's personal space. Finally, Johnson seems to mostly use these videos to reiterate and promote government's policies and activities, staying 'on message', that is, ensuring consistency between his social media communications and government's agenda.

In summary, the two case studies presented here offer insights into two quite distinct uses of selfies in performing authenticity. Specifically, the Canadian PM Trudeau can be seen as using selfies to reinforce his political brand by showcasing his private personae, while the British PM Johnson appears to draw upon selfie's inherent indicators of authenticity, rather than revealing aspects of his private persona, to support his (new) political brand of an in-touch, accountable statesman.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that since the rise of the importance of social media in political communication, there is a developing body of research into visual self-personalisation, particularly as it is practiced by politicians on Instagram. And while the existing studies provide a growing insight into the extent and forms of self-personalisation in visual communication on social media, political actors' *performed authenticity*, which has been claimed has become an important image management and electoral strategy in media-saturated democracies, is rarely touched upon. Hence, more in-depth examinations of how

political actors perform authenticity, particularly on social media, is needed. This chapter contributes to this discussion by positioning and examining the use of *selfies* as tools through which politicians can perform authenticity in personalised visual communication on social media.

It can be suggested that scholars in future work may want to pay more attention to politicians' practice of taking and posting selfies, which, it has been argued, are a communication tool that might be particularly effective in performing authenticity. The case studies of British PM Johnson's and Canadian PM Trudeau's use of selfies, presented in this chapter, have outlined two disparate uses of selfies in performing authenticity. It is to be expected that there are more models of the selfie use to be uncovered and contextualised. Further, it may also be worthwhile examining the reluctance of the use of selfies among politicians, especially in the light of often critical comments of the mainstream media on the practice, who have paid more attention to it than academic scholarship.

And while the media has often been critical of politicians' use of selfies, going as far as to suggest they undermine political authority (Enli, 2015), we know little, if anything, about what the arguably intended audience thinks of them. Indeed, future research should also shed light onto how social media users, i.e., voters, perceive this practice, and consequently, how it affects a politician's perceived authenticity and potentially also voters' political behaviour.

References

Allardyce, J., Boothman, J., & Glackin, M. (2021). Nicola Sturgeon in sharp focus for 'fortnight of selfies' at Cop26. Retrieved February 15, 2022, from https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/nicola-sturgeon-in-sharp-focus-for-fortnight-of-selfies-at-cop26-d6ftcpp7t

Andrew-Gee, E. (2016). The unmediated photo is the message. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/the-unmediated-photo-is-themessage/article31389091/

Barker, V., & Rodriguez, N. S. (2019). This is who I am: The selfie as a personal and social identity marker. *International Journal of Communication*, *13*(24), 1143–1166.

Bucy, E. P., & Joo, J. (2021). Editors' Introduction: Visual Politics, Grand Collaborative Programs, and the Opportunity to Think Big. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*(1), 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220970361

Cöster, A., & Dahlberg, V. (2018). *Personalisation on Instagram: A quantitative content analysis of prominent Swedish politicians' Instagram posts*. Lund Univeristy.

Curran, J. (2002). *Media and Power*. Routledge.

Curtis, C. (2019). Everything we know about what the public think of Boris Johnson. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/07/23/everything-we-know-about-what-public-think-boris-j Page

Druckman, J. N. (2003). The power of television images: The first Kennedy-Nixon debate revisited. *Journal of Politics*, *65*(2), 559–571. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.t01-1-00015

Ekman, M., & Widholm, A. (2017). Political communication in an age of visual connectivity: Exploring instagram practices among Swedish politicians. *Northern Lights*, *15*(1), 15–32. https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.15.15-1

Enli, G. (2015). "Trust Me, I am authentic!": Authenticity Illusions in social media politics. In A. Bruns, G. Enli, E. Skogerbø, A. O. Larsson, & C. Christensen (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* (pp. 121–136). New York: Routledge.

Enli, G., & Rosenberg, L. T. (2018). Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic. *Social Media and Society*, *4*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764430

Farkas, X., & Bene, M. (2021). Images, Politicians, and Social Media: Patterns and Effects of Politicians' Image-Based Political Communication Strategies on Social Media. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*(1), 119–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220959553

Filimonov, K., Russmann, U., & Svensson, J. (2016). Picturing the Party: Instagram and Party Campaigning in the 2014 Swedish Elections. *Social Media + Society Society*, *2*(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116662179

Francis, A. (2015). Prime Minister Justin Trudeau Is Also The Selfie King Of Canada. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2015/11/06/justin-trudeau-selfie_n_8482946.html

Franklin, B. (2004). *Packaging politics: Political communications in Britain's Media Democracy* (2nd ed). Edward Arnold.

Franssen, G., & Rock, J. (2020). The Dutch star on the flag of Europe: the personalisation of national identity in Geert Wilders' celebrity politics. *Celebrity Studies*, *11*(3), 287–304. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1800673

Friedman, V. (2019). Boris Johnson and the Rise of Silly Style. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/23/style/boris-johnson-and-the-rise-of-silly-style.html

Garzia, D. (2011). The personalization of politics in Western democracies: Causes and consequences on leader–follower relationships. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *22*(4), 697–709. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.05.010

Helms, L. (2012). Democratic Political Leadership in the New Media Age: A Farewell to Excellence? *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *14*(4), 651–670. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2011.00495.x

Holtz-Bacha, C. (2004). Germany: How the private life of politicians got into the media. *Parliamentary Affairs*, *57*(1), 41–52. https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsh004

Hudson, G., & Rowlands, S. (2012). *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

Karadimitriou, A., & Veneti, A. (2016). Political Selfies: Image Events in the New Media Field. In A. Karatzogianni, D. Nguyen, & E. Serafinelli (Eds.), *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere: Conflict, Migration, Crisis and Culture in Digital Networks* (pp. 321–340). Palgrave Macmillan.

Karvonen, L. (2010). Introduction. In L. Karvonen (Ed.), *The Personalisation of Politics: A study of parliamentary democracies*. ECPR Press.

Koliska, M., & Roberts, J. (2021). Space, Place, and the Self: Reimagining Selfies as Thirdspace. *Social Media and Society*, *7*(2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211027213

Lalancette, M., & Raynauld, V. (2019). The Power of Political Image: Justin Trudeau, Instagram, and Celebrity Politics. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *63*(7), 888–924. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217744838

Langer, A. I. (2011). *The personalisation of politics in the UK: mediated leadership from Attlee to Cameron*. Manchester University Press.

Larsson, A. O. (2019). Skiing all the way to the polls: Exploring the popularity of personalized posts on political Instagram accounts. *Convergence*, *25*(5–6), 1096–1110. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517741132

Liebhart, K., & Bernhardt, P. (2017). Political storytelling on instagram: Key aspects of Alexander van der Bellen's successful 2016 presidential election campaign. *Media and Communication*, *5*(4), 15–25. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v5i4.1062

Lindholm, J., Carlson, T., & Högväg, J. (2021). See Me, Like Me! Exploring Viewers'

Visual Attention to and Trait Perceptions of Party Leaders on Instagram. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*(1), 167–187. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220937239

Luebke, S. M. (2020). Political Authenticity: Conceptualization of a Popular Term. *International Journal of Press/Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220948013

Maier, M., & Adam, S. (2010). Personalisation of Politics: A Critical Review and Agenda for Future Research. In C. T. Salmon (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 34* (pp. 212–257). Routledge.

Mendonça, R. F., & Duarte Caetano, R. (2021). Populism as Parody: The Visual Self-Presentation of Jair Bolsonaro on Instagram. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*(1), 210–235. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220970118

Metz, M., Kruikemeier, S., & Lecheler, S. (2020). Personalization of politics on Facebook: examining the content and effects of professional, emotional and private self-personalization. *Information, Communication & Society Communication and Society*, *23*(10), 1481–1498. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1581244

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No Sense Of Place*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Needham, C. (2005). Brand Leaders: Clinton, Blair and the Limitations of the Permanent Campaign. *Political Studies*, *53*(1), 343–361. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00532.x

Novelli, E., & Johansson, B. (2019). *2019 European Elections Campaign: Images, Topics, Media in the 28 Member States*. Brussels.

Peng, Y. (2021). What Makes Politicians' Instagram Posts Popular? Analyzing Social Media Strategies of Candidates and Office Holders with Computer Vision. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *26*(1), 143–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220964769

Pich, C. (2020). Boris Johnson's political brand is in deep trouble. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://theconversation.com/boris-johnsons-political-brand-is-in-deep-trouble-141214

Poguntke, T., & Webb, P. (Eds.). (2005). *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford University Press.

Pontefract, D. (2019). Justin Trudeau Proves You Can't Lead Through Selfies. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/danpontefract/2019/03/01/justin-trudeau-proves-you-cant-lead-through-selfies/

Poulakidakos, S., & Giannouli, I. (2019). Greek Political Leaders on Instagram: Between "Soft" and "Hard" Personalization. In A. Veneti, D. Jackson, & Darren Lilleker (Eds.), *Visual Political Communication* (pp. 187–206). Palgrave Macmillan.

Remillard, C., Bertrand, L. M., & Fisher, A. (2020). The visually viral prime minister: Justin Trudeau, selfies, and Instagram. In D. Taras & R. Davis (Eds.), *Power Shift? Political Leadership and Social Media*. Routledge.

Sabbagh, D., & Mason, R. (2020). The strange lead-up to Boris Johnson's admission to hospital. Retrieved April 27, 2021, from https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/06/the-strange-lead-up-to-boris-johnsons-admission-to-hospital

Schill, D. (2012). The visual image and the political image: A review of visual communication research in the field of political communication. *Review of Communication*, *12*(2), 118–142. https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2011.653504

Shane, T. (2018). The Semiotics of Authenticity: Indexicality in Donald Trump's Tweets. *Social Media + Society*, *4*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118800315

Sheinheit, I., & Bogard, C. J. (2016). Authenticity and Carrier Agents: The Social Construction of Political Gaffes. *Sociological Forum*, *31*(4), 970–993. https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12292

Stanyer, J. (2013). *Intimate politics*. Polity.

Stiers, D., Larner, J., Kenny, J., Breitenstein, S., Vallée-Dubois, F., & Lewis-Beck, M. (2019). Candidate Authenticity: 'To thine own self be true' Dieter. *Political Behavior*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09589-y

Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J. (2019). Selfies, Policies, or Votes? Political Party Use of Instagram in the 2015 and 2016 Spanish General Elections. *Social Media + Society*, *5*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119826129

Valgarðsson, V. O., Clarke, N., Jennings, W., & Stoker, G. (2020). The Good Politician and Political Trust: An Authenticity Gap in British Politics? *Political Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720928257

Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2011). The personalization of mediated political communication: A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, *13*(2), 203–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884911427802

Vancil, D. L., & Pendell, S. D. (1987). The Myth of Viewer-Listener Dosagreement in the First Kennedy-Nixon Debate. *Central States Speech Journal*, *38*(1), 16–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510978709368226

---

[1] Of course, there are more pessimistic views on the effects of personalised politics. For example, it has been argued that the increased focus on individuals at the expense of political collectives weakens political institutions and can lead to a crisis of representative democracy (Poguntke & Webb, 2005). Further, the focus on a leader's persona has raised concerns that 'image has supplanted substance' which has led to the trivialization of public discourse and decreased the quality of public debate (Franklin, 2004, p. 11).