

Images, Politicians, and Social Media: Patterns and Effects of Politicians' Image-based Political Communication Strategies on Social Media

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Abstract

Although images have always been part of politics, research on the visual aspects of political communication recently gained momentum, especially with the spread of social media-based political communication. However, there are still several significant research gaps in this field. The aim of this article is to identify and compare the patterns and effects of Hungarian politicians' (N = 51) image-based communication on Facebook (N = 2992) and Instagram (N = 868) during the Hungarian parliamentary election campaign in 2018. By doing so, we shed light on two important dimensions of personalization: individualization and privatization. This work is designed to fill three gaps in the literature. We argue that existing research of visual political communication (1) treats images predominantly as illustrations; (2) is limited to single platform studies, and (3) does not investigate the engagement effects of images. To move beyond these limitations, this study investigates images as objects of interest on their own, it adopts a cross-platform comparative approach and examines the engagement effects of visual cues by applying a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative content analysis. Our results show that images are often used to personalize communication. While on Facebook the individualization dimension of personalization is more common and popular, on Instagram its privatization dimension prevails. Furthermore, on Facebook, users like more politics-related candidate-centered images, but on Instagram we could not find similar effects for more informal visuals.

Keywords: visual political communication, images, social media, user engagement, personalization, Instagram, Facebook

Introduction

We are surrounded by visuals,¹ such as photos and other kinds of images in our daily life. Compared with written or spoken texts, people tend to believe more what they see, and visuals are easier to remember since they can transmit more specific messages that are more difficult to grasp in verbal communication (Grabe and Bucy, 2009). Although “political communication today is built on a visual foundation” (Schill, 2012, p.119), political communication research often ignores the visual aspects of communication, with the primary focus still on texts and text-based methods. Treated as illustration to

textual or verbal communication, images are still rarely objects of interest on their own (Stocchetti, 2011). Over the last few years, visuals have been more at the forefront of political communication research (e.g. Veneti, Jackson & Lilleker, 2019), however, there are still numerous underexplored areas. Our research relates to the increasing scholarly efforts over the last few years that focus on politicians' visual communication strategies on social media.

We argue that from a strategic point of view visuals are strongly connected to the personalization of political communication. While social media-based political communication tends to be a popular research field and is often connected to personalization (e.g. Enli & Skogerbø, 2013), there is a lack of knowledge on its visual aspects. Our article aims to address this gap and highlights visual tools that are applied to personalize political communication. Furthermore, by differentiating between formal and informal personal visual contents, our research focuses on the individualization (i.e. focus on the politicians' political work) and privatization (i.e. focus on politicians' personality and personal background) dimensions of personalization.

At the same time, we intend to bridge three significant gaps in the field of visual political communication. First, our goal is to elaborate an extensive coding scheme that investigates images as objects of interest on their own rather than pure illustration to textual communication and is thus suitable to offer a detailed map of political actors' visual strategies. Second, while existing studies in the field focus on single platforms, we adopt a cross-platform approach as the architectures, affordances and norms of specific sites significantly shape communication strategies (see Bossetta, 2018). And third, no study seems to have investigated the effects of different images on user engagement. While the study of engagement effects of politicians' communicative efforts is an emerging subfield in the study of social media and politics (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019), most work is limited to textual content. To fill these gaps, our aim is to explore cross-platform similarities and differences in the patterns and effects of politicians' visual political communication strategies on Facebook and Instagram during the 2018 Hungarian general election campaign. On the one hand, we hypothesize that personalization is a prevailing and effective strategy of politicians' visual communication. On the other hand, we expect that

on Facebook the individualization dimension of personalization will be more frequently used and stimulate higher user engagement, while on Instagram the privatization dimension is the more popular.

Since research currently lacks a portable and adaptable coding model on visual data (Gerodimos, 2019), we have applied a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative visual content analysis to create categories, and our variables focus specifically on the details of images. By images we refer only to still images, consequently moving images –such as videos or gifs– are excluded from our analysis due to their different visual nature that requires different methods of analysis. Our analysis draws upon a unique dataset that includes each image-based Facebook (N = 2992) and Instagram (N = 868) post of candidates who were active on both platforms during the campaign (N = 51).

Results show that images are often used to personalize communication: while on Facebook the privatization dimension of personalization is more common and popular, on Instagram its individualization dimension prevails. Furthermore, while on Facebook users were more likely to like politics-related candidate-centered images, on Instagram we could not find similar patterns for more informal pictures.

Visual political communication on social media

Visuals have always been part of political communication, they have just become even more important with technological advances: from the printed press to the television, and finally the Internet. Hand (2012) argues that we live in the age of “ubiquitous photography,” which is also underlined by statistics: each day people upload 300 million photos to Facebook, and 95 million photos to Instagram (Stout, 2019). This is not surprising, as it is now faster, easier and more motivating than ever before to take and share pictures on social media platforms. Due to the proliferation of mobile cameras, politicians are more visible than ever (Messaris, 2019). At the same time, visuals on social media have become part of political actors’ strategic toolkit and are employed to influence voters (Russmann, Svensson & Larsson, 2019).

Although many scholars argue (see Veneti et al., 2019) that visuals have a huge importance when politicians communicate with their voters, only over the past few years has more intense academic

attention turned toward them in political communication. However, political communication studies focusing on images have taken a particular approach to visuals and visual communication for a long time. Even though many scholars argue that research on political communication should pay genuine attention on visuals (Graber, 1996; Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012), the real focus is still predominantly on texts.

To understand the visual messages and strategies in social media, we need to move beyond the approach of traditional political communication research that investigates similar categories for visuals and texts, and instead analyze visuals as objects of interest on their own. While our methodology is based on traditional content analysis, to work out categories we rely on a comprehensive inductive visual analysis of the specific details of the images, such as their types or the persons depicted inside the frame, cultural and political references, the sentiment projected by the depiction, and the visual character of the image. Candidates use these visual components as purposeful communication tools to create messages. Hence, we understand them as elements of strategic political communication for achieving candidates' political goals: influencing voters through visual communication. Consequently, our first research question is: What kinds of visual communication strategies are applied by political actors on social media platforms? (RQ1)

Therefore, the first step of our research strategy is to identify visual tools inductively, then to develop a coding scheme based on these tools, and finally to analyze the occurrences of our categories in politicians' visual communication.

When it comes to visual political communication, one of the major puzzles is what kind of political messages can be transmitted through visuals. Although our investigation is primarily of an explorative nature because most categories under investigation are not pre-determined, some hypotheses can still be formulated.

There are strong reasons to hypothesize that social media-based visual political communication is inseparable from personalization (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Metz, Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2019). Personalization can be described briefly as the process in which "individual political actors have become

more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities” (Karvonen, 2010, p. 4). Although personalization cannot be considered as a new phenomenon (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2015), mediatization (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) and popularization of politics (van Zoonen, 2006), and especially the logic of new media –that highlights candidates instead of parties– have given rise to personalization as a “central feature of democratic politics in the twenty-first century” (McAllister, 2007, p. 585).

The focus of studies on personalization can be divided into three categories: voters’ behavior, media coverage, and politicians’ communication. The present study focuses on the latter aspect and understands personalization as a communication strategy (Hermans & Vergeer, 2012), which means that politicians intentionally highlight their personal characteristics rather than their parties’. Social media sites are ideal platforms for this strategy as they provide an opportunity for candidates to create their own personal profiles and address their followers directly (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). Extensive opportunities for visual communication on these platforms can further intensify personalization: while it may be difficult to express substantial policy messages through pictures, they are especially suitable to present politicians’ personal images. Self-made visual content and images that highlight personal traits (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017) or candidates’ personal backgrounds (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017) are effective tools to foreground politicians while leaving their parties in the background.

In this study, we investigate the degree of personalization in politicians’ visual communication on social media platforms. We argue that politicians are able to personalize their visual presence on these platforms by offering original visual content and images depicting themselves. On the other hand, a non-personalized visual communication would predominantly draw upon imported visual materials and pictures on parties or other political actors. We expect that politicians on social media platforms predominantly use visual communication to personalize their appearance (H1).

As many scholars argue (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019; Ekman & Widholm, 2017), the real question is not about the presence of personalized political communication on social media, rather its prevalence and the way it is produced and shared. However, we have little knowledge on the role of visuals in this matter. Hence, to grasp these less studied aspects, we apply Van Aelst and colleagues’ (2011)

conceptualization that differentiates between two main dimensions of personalization. First, (1) individualization means that instead of parties, individual politicians appear as central actors in the political arena. The second dimension, (2) privatization means that politicians are presented as private individuals, their personal characteristics and lives are at the forefront of communication instead of their professional features. Interestingly, Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw (2018) argue that in social media both dimensions are present as part of the entertaining political communication style, however, individualization is more common than privatization. Small (2016) also found that political leaders' personalization strategies on Twitter primarily rely on individualization, while privatization is rather marginal. These works, however, are focused on personalized textual content, but the visual aspects of personalization are rarely identified. Investigating Instagram posts, Russmann et al. (2019) and Poulakidakos & Giannouli (2019) highlight the presence of personalization on images, and although the visibility of top candidates is a crucial aspect of these studies, the visual differences between "personal and private" aspects are less emphasized.

Thus, to operationalize these two dimensions of personalization in terms of image-based political communication, our paper goes beyond existing research. In general, we expect that both privatization and individualization can be effectively pursued by visual communication on social media.

Based on the conceptualization discussed above, we argue that individualization relates to the more formal political work of the candidates, while privatization has an informal character. Visuals offer great opportunities to add more formal or informal layers to candidates' personalized communication. Hence, we describe (1) individualization in personalized visual communication as application of visual tools that highlight candidates in a rather formal way (e.g. settled image, official clothes etc.), and (2) privatization as employing visual tools that help depict candidates informally (spontaneous images, casual clothes etc.). In this research we will discover to what extent candidates use visual elements that make their communication more formal or informal. Formal and informal elements of visual communication are identified by inductive content analysis discussed in the methods section.

It is important to emphasize that we do not code whether an image is individualized or privatized per se. Instead, we focus on the extent of the use of visual elements that are able to make images more formal or informal. We argue that this approach offers a more nuanced understanding of politicians' personalization strategies. Numerous communication tools can be employed in one image, and a two- or three-category coding scheme that put the particular images into the exclusive categories of 'individualized' or 'privatized' would hide this diversity from our observations. Communication strategy is more complex as it may simultaneously apply several formal and informal visual elements to convey messages. An element-based approach is appropriate to unfold these strategies as it captures them by contrasting the overall level of usage of formal and informal visual elements.

Visuals in context. A cross-platform approach

Another gap in the literature is that existing research is limited to single platforms (Gerodimos, 2019). However, as all communication is context-dependent (e.g. Goffmann, 1956), studies on social media increasingly argue that the architectures (Bossetta, 2018), norms (boyd, 2014) and affordances of platforms (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) can shape the way communication is conducted on them. To understand political actors' visual communication strategies, we specify our RQ1 and adopt a cross-platform approach to explore what features can be considered general characteristics of social media visual communication (RQ1a), and what the platform-specific strategies are (RQ1b).

In Hungary, politicians use two platforms intensively: Facebook and Instagram (Bene & Farkas, 2018). Therefore, our cross-platform investigation compares visual communication tools employed on these sites. Both platforms enable users to connect to each other, to post visual and textual content and to see their connections' posts on a news feed. However, there are several differences between the sites that may shape communication on them. Facebook is the most popular social media site in Hungary as 85 per cent of the online population use it, and 62 per cent of them consume news they receive from it. Instagram has a smaller, but still significant user base with 26 per cent of the online population registered on it, but only 7 per cent of them receive news from it (Newman et al., 2019). While demographically Facebook is a highly diverse platform, the user base of Instagram is more specific, as it mostly attracts

younger people (see Perrin & Anderson, 2019). On Facebook, creating a connection between ordinary users requires reciprocity by default, while on Instagram one-sided following is the way to connect with someone. Due to this fact and the norms prevailing on these platforms, Facebook networks are more offline-anchored (Zhao et al., 2008) even if weak ties proliferate here, while on Instagram it is more common to follow users who are not known in person. Political actors' status also differs between Facebook and Instagram. On Facebook, there is a distinction between ordinary users and pages. The pages usually represent public actors (actual or fictional persons, organizations, causes, etc.) who can be one-sidedly followed. Political actors usually create public Facebook pages that are visually separated from ordinary users. On Instagram, political actors appear in the same way as ordinary users (Bossetta, 2018).

As for the role of visual communication, on Facebook it is a widely used tool, although it is only one of several forms of communication. When text is added to the post, visuals appear below it, suggesting it is more of an illustration to the textual message. In contrast, Instagram is built upon visual communication, since all posts must contain some visual content. Text can be added to them, but it appears below the pictures, and visuals still dominate the posts with their size. Further, on Instagram there is no option to share posts or publish hyperlinks. This fact relates to one more important difference between the platforms. The dissemination logic of Facebook is virality, as user engagement with posts is able to extend their visibility beyond direct followers (Bene, 2017). On the other hand, on Instagram user engagement cannot distribute messages; the only non-paid way to make posts visible beyond followers is to use hashtags (Bossetta, 2018). Finally, it is to be stressed that in public discourse Instagram is strongly associated with celebrities and influencers, who visualize intimate details of their personal life for their followers.

The literature demonstrates that politicians use images to pursue personalization strategies on both platforms. Visuals have important added value to politicians' Facebook posts with their more personal and emotional features, and the presence of personalization is higher in the case of politicians' Facebook posts that contain visuals than those without visuals (Metz, Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2019). Communication on Instagram is predominantly based on self-branding snapshots that typically aim to

convey “immediacy, mobility and intimacy” (Ekman & Widholm, 2017, p.18). Since all these studies focus on single platforms, we have no knowledge regarding cross-platform differences and similarities in personalized visual communication.

While we expect that on both platforms visuals are primarily used for candidate personalization, based on the differences discussed above, we assume that visual political communication on Instagram is more informal and thereby more focused on the privatization dimension of personalization than on Facebook (H2), while on Instagram images should be used to display more informal aspects of candidates’ life, relevant to the individualization dimension of personalization (H3). On Facebook, political actors are distinguished from ordinary users, as they appear as public figures; news consumption is common on the site; and politicians can draw upon textual cues more intensively to express political messages. Thereby Facebook is more suitable to highlight the candidate’s formal, political self. In contrast, on Instagram politicians do not differ from ordinary users; political content rarely appears in the news feed; and due to the fact that users can rely less on textual or – because they are less likely to follow people they interact with offline – personal cues, visuals are extensively used to express something of the individual’s personal character, similarly to the way highly followed celebrities and influencers represent themselves there. For these reasons, on Instagram politicians are under stronger pressure to exhibit their personal life and background rather than their political work.

The effects of visual tools on user engagement

Invariably, political actors’ purpose is to influence voters through political communication. Hence, it is highly important to investigate how voters respond to candidates’ visual communication on social media. There is a growing body of work that investigates the effects of different communicative elements of political actors’ social media posts on user engagement (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019). User engagement is a proper outcome to measure the success of communication on both platforms, even if the reasons for engagement are different. On Facebook, triggering user engagement is a strategic goal in itself, as reactions, comments and shares can significantly increase the visibility of a particular post due to both the virality-based dissemination logic of the platform (Bene, 2017) and the engagement-

centric operation of the filtering algorithm (Bucher, 2012). On Instagram, considering the lack of virality and the less invasive use of algorithmic filtering (Bossetta, 2018), the strategic relevance of user engagement is more limited, but it can still be perceived as a proxy of the popularity and success of a post. However, all previous research has focused on the content of the posts in general without a distinct attention on the effects of different visual cues. Therefore, we do not know what kind of images perform well on social media platforms. This is the third gap our research aims to address. Thus, we also focus on the questions of what types of visual tools trigger ‘likes’ as the most widely used and comparable reaction form (RQ2a) and what cross-platform similarities and differences we can identify in the liking response to politicians’ visual communication (RQ2b).

Existing work extensively demonstrates that content that focuses on politicians’ personal character and activity is more frequently liked on Facebook (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019; Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). In line with these findings, we expect that personalized images will be more liked on both platforms (H4), but based on the above discussion of cross-platform differences, we also hypothesize that on Facebook, users may be more open to formal, political work-related individualized images (H5), while on Instagram, privatized pictures should be more likely to be liked (H6).

Methods

Data

This research draws upon a unique dataset that includes all social media activities and several individual characteristics (gender, incumbency, etc.) of candidates who either reached at least 1 per cent of the votes in any of the 106 single-member districts or were named in any of the first 30 places of a party list that received at least 0.5 per cent of votes (8 party lists) ($N = 633$)². While the level of Facebook adoption was extremely high across Hungarian politicians (82%), Instagram use was at an early development phase (10%). Of this dataset, this project considers those candidates who owned both Facebook and Instagram accounts at the time of the election ($N = 51$). Oppositional politicians (72%) and men (79%), are overrepresented among politicians who use both platforms, whose median age is 41. Our research focuses on all Facebook posts ($N = 2925$) and Instagram posts ($N = 858$) containing pictures posted

from the official starting day of the 2018 Hungarian general election campaign to polling day (17th February to 8th April, 2018).³ On Facebook, 51 per cent of all posts included pictures, while on Instagram that proportion was 93 per cent (the remaining 7% was video content). The visual content and context of pictures were coded by undergraduates. As coding visual material may allow more space to subjective judgments than textual data, each post was coded by three independent coders, and we accept only those codes that were recorded by at least two coders. Figure 1 shows the activity distribution of politicians' image posting on both platforms.

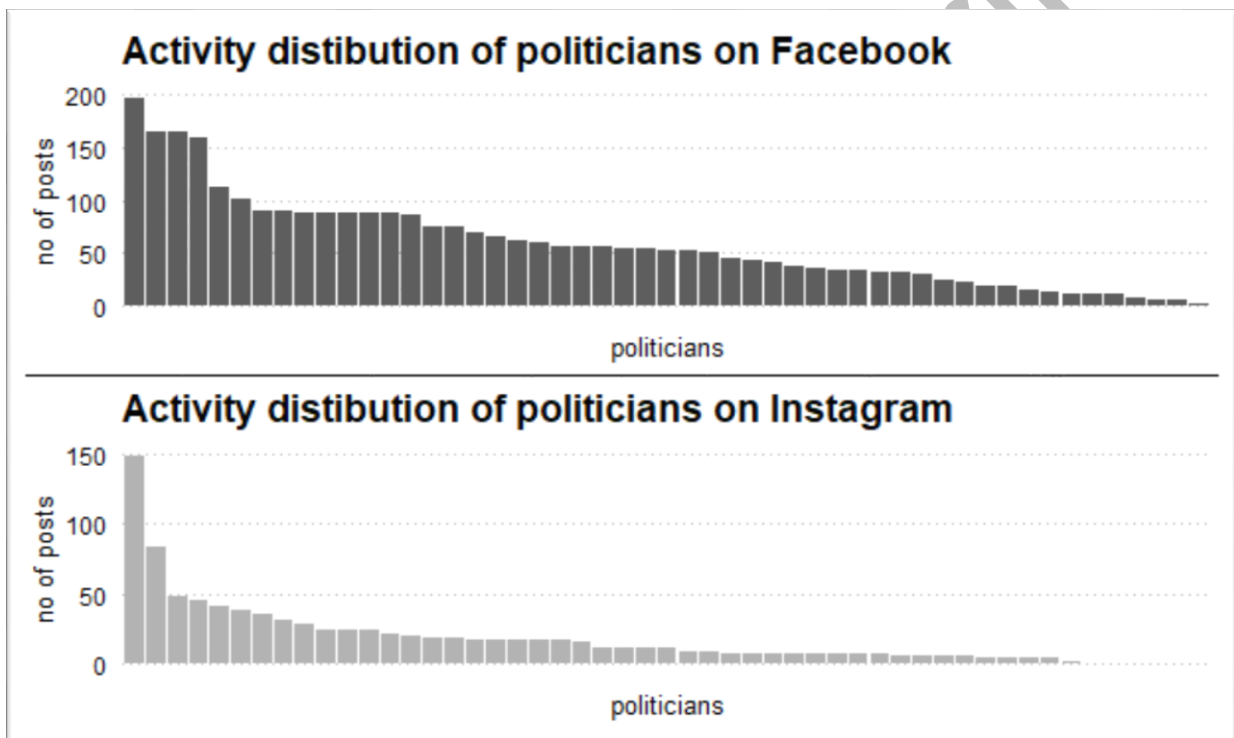


Figure 1. Activity distribution of politicians' image posting

Variables

Since there is a lack of studies that ensure portable and adaptable analysis on visual data (Gerodimos, 2019), we have applied a combination of inductive and deductive qualitative visual content analysis. Inductive content analysis is useful when there is a gap in the existing literature on the topic (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). We employed it on a random 10 percent of the images (N = 386) that were first open coded to create categories that focus specifically on the details of images, then these categories were grouped into higher categories. The aim of the inductive analysis was to formulate categories that describe the images in a detailed way and find the most appropriate groups of categories that help investigate as many aspects of the image as possible. After formulating a detailed and exhaustive coding scheme that covers the most evident characteristics of politicians' visual communication, we identified elements that made images more formal or informal. For this, we drew upon the experiences of the inductive analysis. Categories that we could not assign to the formal/informal dimensions are not removed from our investigation, as they still represent important indicators of visual political communication strategy, and they function as crucial control variables during the analysis. It is important to note that most categories are treated as non-mutually exclusive elements, and we coded them if they appeared in the pictures. Table 1 notes categories that are mutually exclusive.

Table 1. Conceptualization of categories

Groups of categories	Category	Interpretation	Indicat or of ^a	Connection
Type	Photo	still image taken by a camera	G	mutually exclusive categories
	Screenshot	snapshot of a display	G	
	Image macro	image with text, without party symbol	G	
	Campaign flyer	image with text and separately indicated party symbol	F	
	Only text	although uploaded as an image, only text is visible	G	
	Cartoon	drawing/animation	G	
	Montage	an image consisting several photos separated by a frame	G	
	Album ⁶	more photos per post	G	
	Selfie	a picture that someone has taken of oneself	I	
	Own content	a picture taken by the candidate or his/her staff	P	
	Meaningful capture	additional information in the caption	G	
Content	Official	official environment	F	
	Campaign	campaign event	F	
	Policy	visual representation of policies	F	

	Non-political	without political message and personal information	I	
	Personal	personal life	I	
People in pictures	Candidate		P	
	Other politician		F	
	Family member		I	
	Ordinary citizens		G	
Candidate in the picture	Official clothing	e.g. suit, shirt, tie	F	mutually exclusive categories
	Casual clothing	casual clothes, e.g. jeans, t-shirt	I	
	Campaign clothing	e.g. t-shirt, coat or cap with party logo	F	
Cultural/ political reference	Popular culture	e.g. movies, pop music, sport	I	
	Party symbol	official logo of candidate's party	F	
	Party colors	official colors of candidate's party	F	
	Hungarian flag	any appearance of the Hungarian flag	G	
Feature	Spontaneous	not pre-planned	I	mutually exclusive categories
	Settled	pre-planned	F	
Sentiment	Positive	optimistic tone, successes	G	mutually exclusive categories
	Negative	pessimistic tone, conflicts, criticisms	G	
	Neutral	neither positive nor negative	G	
	Mixed	both positive and negative	G	

Note: ^a= general visual communication feature (G), personalization in general (P), formal feature of personalization (F), and informal feature of personalization (I).

The aim of the first three groups of categories is to identify basic visual tools and their broader context. We identified the *type* of images to reveal their visual nature. First, we distinguished between different types of visual images, such as photo, screenshot, image macro, campaign flyer, only-text images, cartoon, montage, albums, and selfies. While most of these categories can be used both as formal or informal tools, selfies have a more informal nature, and campaign flyers are generally related to formal political objects. Second, we investigated whether the particular image is the candidate's own content.⁴ In our conceptualization this is one of the two indicators of personalization: if politicians distribute their own self-made visuals on their own personal pages to their own followers, the visual communication is regarded as highly personal. By introducing the category of 'meaningful caption' we can investigate the role of images in the posts. As we are interested only in the effects of visual elements on user engagement, this variable is also used to remove from the multivariate analysis those pictures where the caption makes a significant contribution to the post. Regarding *content*, we concentrated on what the images are about: 'official' political context, 'campaign', 'policy' issues, 'non-political topic' or the

candidate's 'personal' background. While official, campaign and policy-related content are used to present formal political objects, images of non-political and personal topics make posts more informal.

The category *people in pictures* shows the subjects of images. Furthermore, it refers to "connectivity" (Ekman & Widholm, 2017) through depicting 'candidates' on their own, with 'other politicians', 'family members', or 'ordinary citizens'. Our second crucial indicator of personalization is whether candidates appear in the images. Pictures of the politicians who own the social media profile are considered as personalized content in themselves. Images depicting politicians' family members are considered as informal, while pictures depicting other politicians are related to formal political work. It would be difficult to assess whether showing ordinary citizens in pictures contributes to convey a formal or informal image. However, as politicians are keen to apply this element in their visual communication, it is important for our coding scheme to be able to capture it. *Clothes* can also create connections: official and campaign clothing highlight the candidate's political role, while casual clothes create more informal impressions.

Cultural and political references help understand the cultural and political object of messages: through 'popular-cultural' references politicians can show their human face and create a more informal and ordinary atmosphere. 'Party symbols' such as colors and logos refer to the importance of the party, and thereby relate to the formal dimension. The use of the 'Hungarian flag' or its colors may aim to arouse national sentiments, but in itself this element cannot be connected to the formal or informal dimensions.

Features and *sentiments* of the images are indicators of the overall nature of pictures. 'Spontaneous' pictures typically convey a more informal image than set-piece visuals. *Sentiment* is always an important aspect of any content analysis of politicians' communication. In order to identify 'sentiment', textual cues were also taken into account.

To investigate what features can be considered as general characteristics of social media visual communication (RQ1a) and what are the platform-specific strategies (RQ1b) employed by candidates on Facebook and Instagram, the shares of the presence of these categories are compared on the two platforms. To answer the second research question, namely what types of visual tools trigger 'likes' as

the most widely used and comparable user reaction form (RQ2a), and what cross-platform similarities and differences can be identified in the liking activity (RQ2b), these categories serve as independent variables in multivariate models where the number of likes ($M_{\text{FACEBOOK}}=219$; $SD_{\text{FB}}=734$; $M_{\text{INSTAGRAM}}=85$ $SD_{\text{I}}=226$) are the outcomes. The meaning of liking content on social media is not straightforward at all, but its name and visual appearance (a thumbs-up icon on FB and a heart icon on Instagram) indicate that liking is designed to express some sort of agreement with the content. This is an instant, easily available and widely used form of reaction on both platforms, but an important difference beyond their visual design is that on Facebook five other instant reaction buttons representing different emotions are at the users' disposal, while on Instagram a 'like' is the only possible prompt reaction. Despite the wider choice available to users, 'like' remained the dominant form of reaction on Facebook, as during the Hungarian campaign, 88 per cent of all reactions entailed liking (Bene & Farkas, 2018).

To account for other potential confounding factors, several control variables are entered into the models that are summarized in Table 2. As our dependent variables are over-dispersed count data and they are nested in the level of pages, we ran multilevel negative binomial regression models with a random intercept on the level of candidates.⁵

Table 2. Descriptives on the post- page- and candidate-level control variables.

level	control variable	code	Facebook		Instagram	
			Mean (SD)	Share (of all posts)	Mean (SD)	Share (of all posts)
post level	day of the post		mode = 51		mode = 51	
	Length of the text		141 (388)		103 (134)	
	No. of hashtags		0.6 (1.64)		3.47 (3.86)	
page level	No. of followers		26515 (82972)		956 (1634)	
	No of posts		91 (51)		51 (48)	
candidate level	Gender	0=male 1 =female		female = 16%		female = 32%

	Party affiliation	0= opp. party 1 = gov party		gov.party = 40%		gov.party = 18%
	Incumbency	0 = not incumbent 1 = incumbent		incumbent = 33%		incumbent = 23%
	Local political position	0 = not have 1 = major or local rep.		local politician = 45%		local politician = 41%

Findings

Table 3 shows the extent to which our categories are present in the visual communication of each platform. To estimate the significance of differences between platforms, chi-squared tests are calculated for each category. As a robustness check, chi-squared tests are also performed on sub-samples without the posts of the three most active politicians by platform. Findings indicate that while the general patterns of visual communication are similar on the two platforms, significant variations exist in almost all categories. It is important to note that there is some overlap between the sites: 9 per cent of pictures posted on Facebook are also shared on Instagram, conversely, 30 per cent of Instagram pictures also appear on Facebook. The last column of Table 3 shows the characteristics of images that were present on both platforms.

Personalization in Politicians' Visual Communication

The findings show that the visual communication on both platforms is highly personalized, so our first hypothesis is supported. The majority of visuals on both platforms are self-made pictures depicting the candidates. However, visual communication on Instagram is much more personalized than on Facebook. While on Facebook only little more than 50% of images are self-made and depict the candidate, on Instagram 9 out of 10 visuals are original content, and two-thirds of them show the politicians who own the profile. Overall, on Facebook 66% of images can be considered personalized in terms of containing self-made and/or candidate-focused pictures, while on Instagram this is true for 95% of the posts. Visuals that were posted on both platforms are also extremely personalized, with very similar

distributions as in Instagram posts. It seems that while candidates post numerous non-personalized visuals on Facebook, only the personalized ones are cross-posted on Instagram.

Another major difference between the platforms is evident when we turn to the informal and formal elements of visual communication. Beyond the overall distribution, we calculated the share of our elements for personalized posts separately (6th and 7th column in Table 3), but the main patterns are the same as in the total sample. With the exception of campaign clothing, each formal element is significantly more employed on Facebook than Instagram, while the informal elements are presented in larger degree on Instagram than Facebook. Therefore, our second and third hypotheses are supported. Visuals on Facebook are predominantly about the campaign, they are taken in official settings and the candidates usually appear in official clothes. Many of them are campaign flyers, they often show official contexts or transmit policy messages, and other politicians, logos and party colors are also frequently depicted. On Instagram, the pictures are more often spontaneous and candidates are as often shown in casual as in official dress. A large number of images show family members, convey non-political or personal messages, and are frequently taken as selfies. However, it is important to stress that formal elements are also largely present on Instagram. Most posts are campaign-related, and even if their shares are lower than on Facebook, official clothing, other politicians, logos, party colors and settled design are still frequently employed on Instagram. It seems that while individualization has a strong presence on both platforms, it is dominant on Facebook, while on Instagram it is mingled with privatization. This conclusion indicates that beyond the common patterns, on Instagram visual communication is more of a tool to exhibit the ‘human’ sides of politicians, while on Facebook it is used to provide insights into candidates’ political work. As for cross-posted images, the characteristics of these are more similar to Instagram than Facebook visuals, as they generally feature more informal and fewer formal elements.

Beyond Personalization: General features of Politicians’ Visual Communication

Beyond the patterns of personalized communication, our results show several interesting characteristics of visual communication in general. Turning to the formal features, the large majority of pictures are photos on both platforms, but their percentage is much higher on Instagram. While pictures are usually

posted separately, uploading several photos as an album is quite usual on Facebook, while exceptional on Instagram. Although texts are usually added to pictures (91 per cent on Instagram, and 88 per cent on Facebook), their function differs on the two sites. Text carries additional information beyond the pictures in almost half of the posts on Facebook, while on Instagram it usually only accompanies pictures without any meaningful contribution. Also, politicians are eager to post visuals of ordinary citizens on both platforms, and in about a third of these posts (39% on Facebook and 33% on Instagram) they are presented in the company of the candidates. Further, while national symbols frequently feature in pictures, cultural references are equally exceptional on both sites.

The sentiment of posts with pictures is predominantly positive, while content with negative or mixed sentiments is an exception. This is true for both platforms, but visual communication on Instagram seems to be somewhat more positive.

Table 3. Patterns of visual communication on Facebook and Instagram. (Occurrences in percentages) (significant deviations are in bold)

Groups of categories	Category	% Facebook (N)	% Instagram (N)	P (Chi-Squared test)	% in personalized posts (FB)	% in personalized posts (I)	Cross-posted
Type	Photo	57.4% (2925)	91.6% (858)	<.001	78.3% (1934)	95.9% (816)	89% (283)
	Screenshot	2.2% (2925)	0.5% (858)	<.001	0.7% (1934)	0.4% (816)	0.1% (283)
	Image macro	6.3% (2925)	2.1% (858)	<.001	1.2% (1934)	1.4% (816)	2.8% (283)
	Campaign flyer	31.7% (2925)	5.5% (858)	<.001	19.2% (1934)	2.3% (816)	7.5% (283)
	Only text	1.1% (2925)	0.0% (858)	<.01 ^a	0% (1934)	0.0% (816)	0% (283)
	Cartoon	1.3% (2925)	0.3% (858)	<.05	0.2% (1934)	0.0% (816)	0% (283)
	Montage	2% (2893)	2.1% (858)	>.05	2.6% (1934)	2.2% (816)	2.5% (283)
	Album	31.1% (2893)	5.9% (858)	<.001	43.7% (1934)	6.1% (816)	23.5% (283)
	Selfie	3% (2893)	11.1% (858)	<.001	4.4% (1934)	11.8% (816)	13.2% (283)

	OWN CONTENT	53.9% (2893)	91.6% (858)	<.001	80.6% (1934)	96.3% (816)	86.5% (283)
	Meaningful caption	47.4% (2893)	20.3% (858)	<.001	52% (1934)	20.6% (816)	45.2% (283)
Content	Official	9.5% (2893)	6% (858)	<.01	13.5% (1934)	6.4% (816)	7.8% (283)
	Campaign	69.4% (2893)	60.5% (858)	<.001	66.9% (1934)	59.9% (816)	60.9% (283)
	Policy	11.7 % (2893)	3.5% (858)	<.001	10.3% (1934)	3.3% (816)	5.7% (283)
	Non-political	8.5% (2893)	12.5% (858)	<.001	8% (1934)	11.4% (816)	10.7% (283)
	Personal	3.9% (2893)	16.6% (858)	<.001	5.7% (1934)	17.4% (816)	13.2% (283)
People in pictures	CANDIDATE	51.9% (2893)	67.8% (858)	<.001	77.7% (1934)	71.3% (816)	77.9% (283)
	Other politician	24.4% (2893)	15.6% (858)	<.001	22.3% (1934)	15.9% (816)	21.7% (283)
	Family member	1.7% (2893)	6.1% (858)	<.001	2.5% (1934)	6.4% (816)	5.3% (283)
	Ordinary citizens	30.5% (2893)	27.5% (858)	>.05 ^b	38.2% (1934)	27.9% (816)	31% (283)
Candidate in the picture	Official clothing	73.1% (1477)	47.8% (563)	<.001	73.1% (1477)	47.8% (563)	57.7% (215)
	Casual clothing	23.7% (1477)	46.4% (563)	<.001	23.7% (1477)	46.4% (563)	35.8% (215)
	Campaign clothing	2.8% (1477)	5% (563)	<.05 ^a	2.8% (1477)	5% (563)	5.1% (215)
Cultural/political reference	Popular culture	1.5% (2893)	1.7% (858)	>.05	1.4% (1934)	1.6% (816)	1.4% (283)
	Logo	34% (2893)	29.6% (858)	<.05	32.9% (1934)	28.9% (816)	24.6% (283)
	Party colors	34.2% (2893)	28.9% (858)	<.01	27.6% (1934)	28.1% (816)	16.3% (283)
	Hungarian flag	12.1% (2893)	7.2% (858)	<.001 ^a	73.% (1934)	5.9% (816)	8.9% (283)
Feature	Spontaneous	43.6% (2777)	50.2% (858)	<.001 ^a	48.5% (1911)	52.1% (816)	38.7% (283)
	Settled	56.4% (2777)	49.8% (858)	<.001 ^a	51.5% (1911)	47.9% (816)	61.3% (283)
Sentiment	Positive	57.1% (2604)	64.4% (825)	<.001 ^a	63.7% (1805)	64.9% (774)	70% (266)
	Negative	6.1% (2604)	1.2% (825)	<.001	2% (1805)	1% (774)	1.5% (266)
	Neutral	28.6% (2604)	31% (825)	>.05 ^b	29.5% (1805)	31.1% (774)	22.2% (266)

	Mixed	8.2% (2604)	3.4% (825)	<.001	4.8% (1805)	3% (774)	6% (266)
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Notes: Formal elements are highlighted with dark gray and informal elements with light gray. Elements defining personalization is bolded and uppercased. The fluctuation of sample size across categories is due to the fact that for multiple choice items cases were removed where all three coders marked different values. ^a = it is not significant ($p>0.05$) when the three most active politicians for each platform are removed from the analysis. ^b = it is significant ($p<0.05$) when the three most active politicians for each platform are removed from the analysis.

Visual communication and user engagement

Turning to the engagement patterns associated with different visual communication tools, the results of multilevel negative binomial regression models are shown in Table 4. In order to avoid bias due to captions, the analyses have been limited to posts where textual content does not carry any additional information. This means that 47.4% of Facebook (N=1371), and 20.3% of Instagram (N=174) posts were removed from the original dataset for this analysis.

Results provide mixed support to our hypotheses. On both platforms, users are more likely to like pictures where the candidates are featured. Consequently H4, claiming that personalized images will be more liked on both platforms, is supported. On Facebook, where politicians use many imported pictures, candidates' own images are more popular. No significant relationship can be found on Instagram, but this may be due to the fact that on this platform almost all pictures are self-made, so the variance of this variable is low. Turning to the formal and informal elements, it seems that on Facebook people particularly like visuals where political work is more at the forefront, such as policy content and posts where logos appear, while on Instagram, these visual tools do not trigger more reactions. Further, campaign flyers are also significantly less frequently liked on Instagram. However, several results contradict our expectations, such as the higher popularity of non-political content on Facebook. Also, in some cases we found similar patterns on both platforms. Some informal elements exhibit the same patterns on both platforms. Depiction of family members is popular, while spontaneous pictures are unpopular among users on both platforms. Further, selfies, personal content and references to popular cultural objects show no significant relationship with likes on either platform. Overall, findings support H5, as formal elements are rather favored on Facebook but not on Instagram. However, this does not mean that informal elements are more popular on Instagram: actually, only one informal communication

tool, the appearance of family members, seems to provoke more likes from Instagram followers, but this is also true for Facebook. Consequently, we need to reject our H6 as privatized images are not more popular on Instagram.

Table 4. Random-intercept (candidate-level) negative binomial regression estimates for the number of likes on candidates' posts

Groups	Category	Facebook	Instagram
Type	Campaign flyer ^a	-.10 (.09)	-.34 (.09)***
	Image macro ^a	.33 (.11)**	-.18 (.12)
	Montage ^a	-.28 (.17)	.05 (.14)
	Album	-.33 (.07)***	-.00 (.08)
	Selfie	-.08 (.13)	-.08 (.05)
	OWN CONTENT	.48 (.08)***	-.11 (.08)
Content	Official	-.01 (.13)	-.03 (.09)
	Campaign	.18 (.10)	.05 (.06)
	Policy	.24 (.11)*	-.14 (.16)
	Non-political	.43 (.12)***	-.12 (.07)
	Personal	.04 (.15)	.01 (.06)
People in pictures	CANDIDATE	.32 (.06)***	.23 (.04)***
	Other politician	.03 (.05)	.01 (.04)
	Family member	.64 (.18)***	.26 (.06)***
	Ordinary citizens	-.06 (.06)	-.16 (.03)***
Cultural/political reference	Popular culture	.27 (.19)	.17 (.11)
	Logo	.15 (.06)*	-.01 (.05)
	Party colors	-.17 (.06)**	-.02 (.05)
	Hungarian flag	-.17 (.07)*	.08 (.06)
Feature	Spontaneous ^b	-.21 (.06)***	-.11 (.04)**
Sentiment	Positive ^c	.18 (.06)**	.16 (.04)***
	Negative ^c	-.43 (.12)***	-.11 (.16)
	Mixed ^c	-.07 (.10)	-.03 (.11)
Controls	Day	.01 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***
	Length of text	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
	Number of hashtags	-.01 (.02)	.01 (.01)
	Number of followers	.00 (.00)***	.00 (.00)***
	Number of posts	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
	Party	1.70 (.54)**	.27 (.33)

	Gender	.41 (.34)	.22 (.23)
	Incumbent	.92 (.37)*	.18 (.23)
	Local position	-1.03 (.44)*	-.12 (.31)
	Constant	2.69 (.30)***	3.21 (.17)***
	Variance of random intercept	.81 (.90)	.30 (.55)
	Log-likelihood	-6806	-2631
	Disp. Parameter	1.919 (.076)	12.207 (.89)
	AIC	13682	5333
	N Level 1/Level 2	1277/49	629/46

Note: Formal elements are highlighted with dark gray and informal elements with light gray. Elements defining personalization is bolded and uppercased. Standard errors are in parentheses. #p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. ^a Photo is the reference category. ^b Settled is the reference category. ^c Neutral is the reference category.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has investigated Hungarian politicians' visual communication on Facebook and Instagram. The research was designed to bridge three gaps in the literature: (1) it investigates images as objects of interest on their own; (2) moves beyond the single-platform approach; and (3) explores the engagement patterns associated with the use of different visual tools. Although the primary purpose of the study is explorative, it has also tested hypotheses regarding the personalized nature of visual communication and its cross-platform variations.

Our findings on political actors' visual communication strategies on social media are in line with those of text-based research (see Enli & Skogerbø, 2013): the presence of personalization in visual tools is highly significant, as politicians often upload images that depict themselves and their own visual content, and these images are also popular among their followers on both Facebook and Instagram. Thus, personalization can be considered as a general feature of social media visual communication. However, there are major differences in the level of personalization of visual communication between the two platforms, as images are much more personalized on Instagram than Facebook.

When it comes to the type of personalization employed by candidates, the results show further differences between the two platforms. Findings suggest that Instagram has a more informal character with more spontaneous, non-political and casual images, while on Facebook more formal, settled and 'political' visuals are used by politicians. As for the effects of visual cues, it seems that formal visual

elements are more popular on Facebook than Instagram, however informal elements are not more likely to be liked by Instagram users. It can be said that visual communication on Instagram is related more to the privatization dimension of personalization, while on Facebook the individualization component is more frequently displayed.

Interestingly, images that were posted on both platforms are closer to a typical Instagram than Facebook post. It seems that politicians post their Instagram-compatible Facebook images on Instagram, too. This indicates that politicians strategically use visual communication on these platforms, based on a more or less definite notion about the types of visuals that conform to the norms and demands of the users of these social media sites. However, this notion does not seem to be particularly reflective to users' observable preferences: according to our findings, there is only a minor overlap between the visual elements preferred by politicians and users. Nonetheless, Instagram is a truly new phenomenon in political communication in Hungary. This was the first election when politicians intensively used it, therefore they may have lacked the relevant expertise needed to run an effective campaign on it. Future studies that specifically focus on temporal dynamics of the supply and demand of visual elements could confirm this preliminary observation.

An important further step could be the investigation of differences in visual communication depending on party affiliation. Furthermore, it would be interesting to understand how politicians run their pages. An important question is if they draw upon external experts and their parties' guidelines or their social media strategy is shaped only by themselves in a more amateur or intuitive trial-and-error way. It would also be important to assess gender-specific differences in visual communication. Additionally, this study suggests that it is necessary to adopt a cross-platform approach when investigating visual communication, as specific features of the particular platforms have different effects on usage patterns (Bossetta, 2018). Future studies should expand the investigation to platforms that we cannot explore here, because in the Hungarian context they are not extensively used for political communication. Also, while this is a first attempt to measure the engagement patterns associated with different forms of visual communication, it would be useful to combine visual and text-based methods in future research on user engagement. While some studies take into account both textual and visual elements of social media

posts when investigating effects on user engagement (Bene, 2017; Heiss et al., 2019), their conceptual framework and category system does not distinguish between visuals and texts. It could be a major move forward in the study of user engagement if visual and textual elements were distinctly categorized. We hope that our coding scheme can contribute to this endeavor.

This study has several limitations. First, we have ignored a crucial type of visual communication, i.e. videos. The reason is that we do not think that the same coding scheme can be applied for images and videos. However, as videos may be an even more neglected topic in political communication than images, it would be vitally important to focus on its role and usage in political communication. Second, we are aware that content analysis carried out by multiple coders cannot cover the wide array of visual elements and meanings conveyed by images. Third, this method cannot handle the connections between the elements of the images that shape the meaning and message of the image. Future application of qualitative approaches should help bridge these gaps.

Notes

1. Defining what visuals are is challenging, since authors from different visual research fields highlight different aspects of the notion (see Rose, 2001; Kenney, 2008). Our investigation is limited to images uploaded to social media platforms: photos, screenshots, drawings, campaign flyers, and image macros, while moving images are excluded from the analysis.
2. Data were collected by the authors and undergraduates from the University of Szeged under the administration of Norbert Merkovity.
3. Facebook posts were collected by using the Python-based facebook-page-post-scraper package (see <https://github.com/minimaxir/facebook-page-post-scraper>), while for downloading Instagram content we used the instagram-scraper package (see <https://github.com/rarcega/instagram-scraper>) via Facebook API. At the time of the data collection, the access to collect data from public Facebook pages were not limited or restricted.

4. An image is the candidate's own content if it has been taken by the candidate or his/her staff, and the candidate shares it as his/her own content that is usually related to the campaign or the candidate's weekdays. The originality of the image has been decided by paying attention to the whole post and the caption as well: if the candidate did not indicate that the image was shared from another source, e.g. other political actors, citizens or media, or it was not an obviously re-used image (widely-circulated photos about political actors, imported illustrations etc.), we coded it as an own content.
5. For the analysis, we used glmmADMB R package.
6. In the case of albums, only the opening pictures were coded.

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