



Fandom Democracy?

Celebrity Leaders and New Forms of Citizens' Engagement

Edited by
Donatella Campus
Luigi Ceccarini
Marco Mazzoni

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Donatella Campus, Luigi Ceccarini, and Marco Mazzoni

1.1 POLITICAL FANS: A STILL UNEXPLORED PHENOMENON

This book originates from a provocative question: Are contemporary democracies transforming into ‘fan-democracies’, a term introduced by Van Zoonen (2004)? As political identities become more fluid and less ideological, could political belongings and participation increasingly rest on forms of fandom? The decline in party membership and the weakening of partisan loyalties have challenged traditional pathways to the formation of political identities. This book explores fandom as an alternative way of experiencing politics: as an attachment to a political actor (a politician or a leader) and, simultaneously, as a kind of belonging to a community or group.

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The association between politics and the worlds of entertainment and popular culture arises from the observation that political leaders are increasingly represented as celebrities. Contemporary strategies of leaders' image construction and management involve extensive practices of self-exposure through interviews, autobiographies, memoirs, and appearances on entertainment TV, practices not dissimilar to the self-promotion strategies of film, television, or music stars. This phenomenon has been amplified by the advent of social media, which provide a particularly suitable arena for diverse forms of performance, ranging from personal disclosure to the sharing of thoughts and emotions with the public. The integration of media arenas within a hybrid public space (Chadwick, 2013) enables politicians to pursue coherent strategies of authenticity and proximity.

The growing resemblance between politicians and entertainment celebrities has been widely analysed, particularly with regard to who political celebrities are, how they capitalise on celebrity status, and how they are covered by the media (see Chap. 2 for a review of the literature). Less explored, however, is how citizens respond to leaders' celebrity strategies in the digital media era. Similarly, much remains to be understood about the broader impact of celebrity and popular culture on public debate. The primary aim of this book is therefore to contribute to this line of research by examining how citizens respond to political actors who perform celebrity roles. In short, whereas existing research has largely focused on the *supply* side—how celebrity is constructed, who political celebrities are, and how they communicate—this book addresses the *demand* side. In doing so, it seeks to expand knowledge of citizens' attitudes towards celebrity politics in its various forms.

Numerous studies have analysed the performative styles of contemporary leaders, distinguishing among different interpretations of the celebrity role—from 'cool' superstars such as Barack Obama, to tycoon celebrities such as Silvio Berlusconi and Donald Trump, to trendy 'everyday celebrities' (Wood et al., 2016), who emphasise ordinariness, such as Giorgia Meloni (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021). However, far less is known about their fandoms, that is, the individuals who sustain and reinforce their celebrity status. The literature lacks a definitive classification of political fans. Consequently, the extent to which they differ from traditional supporters requires further investigation, and the motivations underlying fan-like support for politicians remain insufficiently understood.

Before outlining the research design and methods, several issues central to this book should be highlighted. First, the book seeks to offer an

innovative contribution that expands understanding of the interplay between political communication and entertainment. Following a line of research initiated by scholars such as Street (2004), Van Zoonen (2005), and Dahlgren (2009), we argue that this dimension should not be overlooked, as it has the potential to reshape public debate about how citizens relate to and bond with politicians. The convergence of popular culture and politics—sometimes referred to as ‘pop politics’ (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009)—engages emotional dynamics in consequential ways. Some outcomes may be evaluated positively, as these practices may increase inclusiveness, particularly among groups traditionally less involved in politics, such as young people. Several studies suggest that civic engagement may emerge from participation in online fandom communities in fields such as cinema or sport, a form of ‘fan-based citizenship’ (Hinck, 2019). Fans may also be mobilised to support political causes, as illustrated by initiatives such as the Harry Potter Alliance (Jenkins, 2015). Pioneering studies (Sandvoss 2016; Dean 2017) postulate the emergence of communities of political fans.

At the same time, potential negative consequences must also be considered. In particular, forms of anti-fandom—communities united by opposition to political actors—may contribute to polarisation and extremism. More investigation is therefore needed into the types of social activities generated by fans of political celebrities and whether such engagement can be understood as a form of political identity and as part of the broader phenomenon of digital citizenship. The work presented in this book seeks to move research in this direction.

Second, we argue that pop culture, combined with the digital revolution, promotes new modes of political followership that reshape the nature of political engagement itself. Celebrity culture tends to elicit emotionally driven identification, resulting in the production of political content and new forms of participation. Supporting a politician in a fan-like manner may therefore function as a mechanism of community inclusion and foster new citizenship practices. Fans often perceive an interpersonal relationship with celebrities; however, as in a typical parasocial relationship (Rojek, 2015; Hills, 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956), the relationship between politicians and their publics can be conceptualised as ‘asymmetrical intimacy at a distance’ (Pels, 2003). This asymmetry is nevertheless accompanied by a degree of horizontality that would have been unconceivable in traditional forms of charismatic leadership. Fans are not believers in the Weberian sense of followers devoted to charismatic authority. Celebrity leaders do

not need to be perceived as possessing exceptional qualities to inspire admiration and affect. On the contrary, they may be appreciated precisely for flaws that make them ‘normal’ rather than shrouded in a supranatural aura. As will be shown, expressions of fandom frequently involve humour and benevolent irony, evident in digital practices such as memes (Dean, 2019). In short, the convergence of politics and popular culture often renders laughter and argument, the real and the surreal, inseparable (Baym, 2007), thereby transforming the nature of political followership.

Third, although political celebrities increasingly resemble entertainment stars, important specificities remain. For this reason, the study of political fandom should be integrated with an examination of individual attitudes towards entertainment fandom more broadly. Such an approach may help determine whether a general propensity towards fandom predisposes some individuals to become fans of various types of celebrities, including political figures. Moreover, analysing differences in mechanisms of personal attraction, patterns of consumption, and fan-community dynamics represents an important area of inquiry.

1.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This book is the outcome of a team project that has benefitted from funding from the European Union—NextGenerationEU, under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, funding call PRIN 2022 D.D. 104, published on February 2, 2022, by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell’Università e della Ricerca).¹ The project, entitled *Fandom democracy? Celebrity and new forms of citizens’ engagement*, aimed to develop a theoretical framework and conduct an original empirical analysis to understand the impact of celebrity politics on the construction of consensus and the formation of political identities. As noted earlier, we focused on the *demand* side, namely citizens’ attitudes towards celebrity politics. We advance the claim that the digital revolution promotes new modes of experiencing political followership. More specifically, our main objectives were to conceptualise and operationalise political fandom and to understand its effects on political participation. In this regard, we sought to

¹The research team represented three Italian academic institutions (University of Bergamo, University of Perugia, and University of Urbino Carlo Bo).

address whether fan-based citizenship could become an alternative route to more traditional forms of participation.

Most previous research on political fandom has focused on specific cases and individual countries. From the outset, our ambition was to fill this gap by conducting a cross-national analysis including a diverse set of European countries. We employed a mixed-methods approach combining survey research and social media content analysis. Accordingly, the project was organised into two main parts, which also structure the book's chapters.

The first part of the research focused on citizens and their relationship with politics, with particular attention to political celebrities. To this end, we conducted a multi-country survey based on representative national samples of the voting-age population in seven European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK). This selection was motivated by the aim to include countries that, following Hallin and Mancini (2004), represent different patterns of inter-relationship between political and media systems. The UK represents the North Atlantic model. Germany exemplifies the North/Central model and, above all, a national context in which attention to politicians' personal lives is less pronounced than in other countries (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014). Italy, France, and Spain represent the Mediterranean model. Finally, Poland and Bulgaria were included to develop an East–West comparative axis.

Data collection was conducted during the first year of the research programme, specifically in July/August 2024, using the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) technique (see the Note on Method in the Appendix.). Within each country, cases were selected to reproduce quotas for the main socio-demographic variables: gender, age group, level of educational attainment, and geographical area.

Representative samples comprised 1000 respondents per country. A post-stratification weighting procedure was applied to adjust the data after collection, aligning sample distributions with known population parameters and thereby reducing non-response bias while improving the precision of survey estimates. The weighting procedure also accounted for the relative population size of each country, ensuring that aggregated figures accurately represent all seven countries when total values are presented in the analyses.

This phase of the empirical research aimed to explore how the personalisation, mediatisation, and intimisation of politics shape citizens'

perspectives, blurring the boundaries between political culture and popular culture. The survey collected evidence on citizens' political involvement and their engagement with both political leaders and celebrities or influencers from different domains, alongside traditional measures used to identify political constituencies (e.g. party identification and ideological position). Following fieldwork, the data were analysed to identify different patterns and levels of engagement with political leaders and to investigate the mechanisms underlying practices of political fandom.

As noted earlier, the central aim of the study is to focus on the demand side as a key analytical dimension, exploring citizens' attitudes towards celebrity politics in its various forms. A questionnaire was therefore constructed and structured into several sections: (a) standard socio-demographic variables, (b) respondents' media consumption patterns, (c) socio-political behaviours and core values, and (d) political and electoral preferences.

In line with the primary objectives of the research programme, the questionnaire further explored (e) affective engagement in political fandom and related consumption and production practices, (f) anti-fandom, and (g) entertainment celebrity fandom attitudes and practices.

The data collection phase produced the dataset used for information processing and the production of charts and tables. Univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted, followed by multivariate procedures using logistic regression models to address the research questions and test causal relationships. The relevant analyses are presented in Chaps. 3, 4, and 5.

The second part of the research focused on the analysis of social media content. As we examined political fandom on social media, it became clear that a multi-layered methodological framework was required to analyse phenomena occurring in volatile and fragmented digital information spaces. Preliminary research phases showed that monitoring structured communities—such as dedicated Facebook groups and Instagram accounts (e.g. *Le bimbe di Giuseppe Conte*)—using tools such as CrowdTangle, often captured only snapshots of political fandom, failing to provide the longitudinal perspective and structural comparability necessary for comprehensive cross-national analysis. In contemporary digital ecosystems, political fandom and anti-fandom are frequently contingent, time-based, and highly informal. Consequently, the project's methodological focus shifted from top-down managed groups and fan accounts towards the analysis of digital practices, specifically content produced around hashtags, conceptualised here as primary 'info-spaces'.

By conceptualising specific hashtags (e.g. #GiorgiaMeloni, #EmmanuelMacron, #PedroSanchez) as networked publics, the research captured a broader and more continuous flow of interactions. This approach enabled a form of digital ethnography focused on the role of affect in constituents' online practices. To investigate these dynamics, the research design adopted here follows a mixed-methods comparative approach across Italy, France, and Spain during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign (May 1 to June 10). This timeframe was selected to capture the peak of affective mobilisation preceding the vote. The sample included 12 highly visible political leaders—four per country—ensuring ideological diversity and gender balance. Briefly, the mixed-methods approach combined frequency-based analysis of collected content with theory-driven qualitative in-depth examination of selected examples of fan-like digital practices identified through those frequencies.

To achieve this objective, the information provided by CrowdTangle proved insufficient. The empirical phase therefore began with data acquisition using the licensed software 4kDownload. Once the corpus had been assembled, the research proceeded to a frequency-based content analysis, allowing the identification of recurring narrative and stylistic elements.

Operationally, the quantitative part of the study required the development of a codebook grounded in established literature on political fandom (primarily Dean's, 2017 framework). After a pilot study and the successful completion of an intercoder reliability test, trained coders analysed textual captions and visual components—such as memes and selfies—in tandem. This approach aimed to reconstruct the complex meanings encoded by both citizens and political elites, providing a comprehensive mapping of how digital fandoms contribute to contemporary affective polarisation across Europe. All relevant analyses are presented in Chaps. 6 and 7.

1.3 THE OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book opens with an overview of the main strands of existing research and of the theoretical foundations on which our analysis is grounded. Chapter 2, by Donatella Campus, Alberta Giorgi, and Giovanni Starita, begins with a discussion of political leaders as celebrities and offers a review of the principal studies in the field. As celebrity politics is closely connected to the disclosure of personal details by politicians and the media, the chapter discusses phenomena such as privatisation, emotionalisation, and the intimisation of politics. It then proceeds to illustrate the concept

of political fandom by focusing exclusively on fans of political leaders. The authors review pioneering studies on this subject and seek to distinguish among different types of leaders' fan communities, ranging from the most politicised to those most decontextualised from politics itself. Several core dimensions common to all forms of political fandom are identified: (1) entertainment, reflected in fans' playful attitudes, (2) the preponderant role of social media, and (3) affect as the constitutive fabric of fandom.

The chapter then examines how the concept of political fandom has been operationalised and which dimensions may be empirically analysed, with a view to identifying the theoretical sources that inform the empirical analysis presented in the subsequent chapters. Four dimensions are discussed: consumption, production, affect, and sense of community. Finally, based on the literature review and discussion, the chapter argues that the distinctive nature of political fandom—situated at the crossroads of political communication, political behaviour, and cultural sociology—offers a valuable vantage point from which to explore contemporary political dynamics, particularly with regard to political participation, representation, and communication. The authors conclude by highlighting issues that have only been partially explored in the literature and that warrant further attention.

As illustrated in the previous section, our research design was organised along two lines of empirical research. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present analyses based on survey data, while Chaps. 6 and 7 focus on the analysis of social media.

Chapter 3, by Giovanni Barbieri, Fabio Bordignon, and Donatella Campus, begins by discussing how political fans may be defined and how this concept can be operationalised. Drawing on insights from the existing literature and emphasising the centrality of affect as the principal driving force of fandom, the authors proposed a baseline typology of fans based on measures of closeness and emotionality, allowing a distinction between moderate and strong fans. The chapter then examines how this categorisation relates to fandom practices and to the sense of belonging to a fan community, in order to outline a broader picture of fans' experience and activities. Finally, the chapter analyses the socio-demographic and political characteristics typically associated with fans, with the aim of delineating a clearer fan profile.

In Chap. 4, Fabio Bordignon, Luigi Ceccarini, and Giacomo Salvarani examine the dynamics characterising political fan communities. Specifically, they investigate the extent to which the leader–follower relationship in

politics mirrors the logic underlying the celebrity–fan bond in other spheres. By comparing political leaders’ fandoms with those surrounding entertainment celebrities through indicators of affect, as well as practices of consumption and production developed primarily within digital media environments, the chapter seeks to determine whether a ‘latent predisposition towards fandom’ transcends these distinct fields, thereby bridging the political and celebrity systems.

After formulating a set of research questions, ‘leader fandom’ and ‘star fandom’ were operationalised through comparable measures of closeness and emotionality. The research questions guiding the analyses in Chap. 4 may be summarised as follows: Do individuals who are fans of entertainment celebrities demonstrate a greater propensity to develop analogous forms of followership towards political leaders? Is it possible to identify an underlying transversal bond connecting the political and celebrity systems?

In addressing these questions—encapsulated in the chapter’s title, ‘Fans Will Be Fans’—the authors provide empirical evidence through the examination of three issues. First, they analyse the overlap between entertainment celebrity fandom and political fandom. Second, they assess the extent to which the internal dynamics of political fandom resemble those of showbusiness fandom, in terms of mechanisms of personal attraction, modes of consumption, and community logics. Third, they compare the socio-demographic profiles of the two groups.

Survey results indicate an overlap between the two communities: Individuals who form affective bonds with entertainment celebrities are also likely to develop attachments to political leaders. This pattern is consistent across all seven countries surveyed. Those involved in both domains constitute a substantial proportion of the overall fandom sub-sample. Even with regard to consumption patterns, fandoms in the two spheres display similar behaviours. Thus, these findings suggest the existence of an underlying disposition towards fan engagement, regardless of whether public figures belong to the political sphere or the entertainment industry.

However, elements of discontinuity also emerge. The key difference lies in the motivational foundations of affective engagement. Returning to the chapter’s starting point, although political fans appropriate certain practices and symbolic elements from celebrity and popular culture, they remain distinguished by their connections to political and civic implications.

Chapter 5, by Luigi Ceccarini, Rosanna De Rosa, Alberta Giorgi, and Giacomo Salvarani, examines the socio-demographic profiles of political leaders’ followers. Specifically, it addresses the influence and dynamics

associated with two key axes of social stratification: gender and age. These variables have long been recognised as significant explanatory factors in social and political behaviour and are therefore examined in detail. Women have historically demonstrated lower levels of participation in conventional political activities; accordingly, gender-based disparities in political fandom are also analysed. Furthermore, empirical research on age-related patterns indicates that younger cohorts could display greater interest in non-conventional and emerging forms of political engagement, making age another central variable in this chapter.

Examining the interaction effects of these two socio-demographic variables is essential for enhancing our understanding of the specific form of political involvement analysed in this volume. This analysis is particularly significant because it captures ongoing transformations in citizenship norms while illuminating evolving forms of political engagement and civic participation. Moreover, the data analysis explores geographical variations in political fandom across the seven countries surveyed, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of patterns emerging within diverse European societies and political systems.

To this end, a comparative perspective is adopted throughout the chapter to investigate how gender and age shape political fandom as a form of civic and political engagement, which constitutes the study's principal objective. Chapter 5 opens by asking whether gender and age influence the development of strong attachment to political leaders and participation in affective activities celebrating these figures at a distance. The main finding indicates that men are more strongly associated with this form of political involvement, a pattern that appears consistently across all countries examined. In contrast, the relationship between age and political fandom is less straightforward. When additional variables—such as identity and political-culture orientations—are considered, the picture becomes clearer, as these factors foster deeper engagement in political fandom.

Chapter 6, authored by Giovanni Barbieri and Sara Consonni, offers a nuanced exploration of the emotional topographies that shaped political engagement on Instagram during the 2024 European Parliament elections. By situating their analysis within the evolving frameworks of fandom and anti-fandom, the authors seek to understand how digital environments may be recalibrating political participation, moving it away from purely deliberative models towards a sphere increasingly characterised by affective resonance and symbolic identification. Drawing upon a

comparative study of Italy, France, and Spain, the chapter maps the ways in which both citizens and political actors navigate their identities through a diverse spectrum of emotions, ranging from admiration to indignation. Rather than asserting definitive shifts, the research invites readers to consider how the ‘affective public’ on Instagram reflects broader socio-political tensions and national polarisation. Through this lens, the authors examine the performative nature of attachment and emerging patterns of digital resistance, ultimately offering a nuanced contribution to our understanding of how emotional circulation informs contemporary democratic belonging.

Chapter 7, by Marco Mazzoni and Giovanni Daniele Starita, provides an in-depth analysis of Italian political fandom centred on the leadership of Giorgia Meloni. The chapter introduces the concept of *fandomesque* to identify fan-like content produced and disseminated online by political actors. Existing literature has offered several perspectives that help explain the mechanisms underpinning bottom-up practices through which political fandoms are constructed. In contrast, the study of how political actors themselves employ fan-like performances to build consensus has so far remained marginal within the relevant fields. Chapter 7 therefore proposes *fandomesque* as a useful concept for bridging the gap between bottom-up fan performances and top-down expressions of fan-like support for political leaders, and it provides empirical evidence supporting this initial conceptualisation. Most importantly, the chapter opens a discussion on the potential exploitation of bottom-up practices by political actors. Specifically, politicians may replicate constituents’ digital practices to blur the boundaries between organised campaigning and seemingly spontaneous expressions of support—or opposition—towards a political leader. In doing so, politicians and parties may benefit from increased relatability in their digital personae and may also reinforce the perceived legitimacy of leaders in the eyes of potential supporters.

Finally, the concluding chapter summarises and discusses a selection of findings emerging from the empirical analyses. Particular emphasis is placed on results that appear especially salient and, in some cases, provocative. We argue that the outcomes of this research not only advance knowledge of political fandom but also provide a solid foundation for further investigation. The chapter therefore concludes by outlining a research agenda that identifies key issues that, in our view, merit more detailed exploration.

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Theoretical Foundations of Political Fandom

*Donatella Campus, Alberta Giorgi,
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2.1 LEADERS AS FAN OBJECTS

The focus of this book is on the relationship between a leader and a group of followers whose behaviour and practices resemble those of a fan community. Scholars such as Liesbet Van Zoonen (2005) and John Street (2020) have argued that political supporters and fans share important similarities. It is worth stressing that this line of reasoning—that

In the framework of the research project, the article “*Politici celebrities e cittadini fans: come si crea coinvolgimento politico attraverso il fandom*”, published by D. Campus and A. Giorgi on Quaderni di Teoria Sociale, 1–2, 2025, pp.8–30, contains a preliminary work that has been subsequently developed and expanded in this chapter.

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supporters may be regarded as fans—presupposes that leaders are approached by their followers as if they were celebrities. For this reason, this chapter begins by illustrating the phenomenon of political celebrities, a concept that has been extensively investigated in recent years and that provides a compelling starting point for our analysis of political fandom.

The interaction between politics and popular culture (Marshall, 2014; Mazzoleni & Sfondini, 2009; Van Zoonen, 2005) has contributed to the transformation of politicians into celebrities (Street, 2004; t'Hart & Tindall, 2009; Wheeler, 2013; Wood et al., 2016). In his groundbreaking contribution, Street (2004) argued that a form of celebrity politics emerges when politicians use formats and codes of popular culture to promote their careers.¹ t'Hart and Tindall (2009, p. 258) distinguish between politicians who enter politics with visibility and popularity acquired in non-political fields and office-holders 'whose public behaviour, purposeful association with celebrities, and/or private life' project them 'into the celebrity sphere'. Both types may establish a clear celebrity–fan relationship with the public; the difference lies in the fact that politicians of the first type already possess a pre-existing fandom on which they can capitalise to develop a political fandom.

Mass media interest in private and intimate life fuels the transformation of politicians into celebrities. Celebrity is therefore closely connected to processes such as privatisation, emotionalisation, and intimisation (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Stanyer, 2013; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010), through which either media or politicians publicly discuss personal details. Both actors have an interest in circulating more 'personal' information within the mediated public sphere. On the one hand, the media seek to attract audiences' attention and curiosity, constantly searching for new protagonists and emotionally engaging stories. Politicians' private lives and personal experiences often meet these demands.

On the other hand, politicians strive to appear authentic. This occurs when a leader offers a convincing performance of being 'true to the inner self'—a real and coherent individual (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018)—without discrepancies between the private and public spheres (Luebke, 2021). To this end, displaying emotions, disclosing passions, and sharing past experience can be highly effective. In particular, political leaders may pursue three goals: (1) appearing as human beings exposed to joy and sufferings like everyone else; (2) presenting themselves as 'men and women of the people' in contrast to élites and the establishment; and (3) softening an

¹ Street (2004) identified another form of celebrity politics, where famous people belonging to the star system support political issues or candidates.

image perceived as too harsh or detached. This latter strategy is often adopted by politicians with radical views or outspoken styles who wish to project a more friendly and approachable image (Bentivegna et al., 2024, pp. 218–221).

Overall, media coverage of political leaders increasingly resembles that devoted to entertainment celebrities. Personal information circulates not only through soft news outlets, such as entertainment TV, tabloids, and photo-news magazines, but also through mainstream media, which have increasingly incorporated *soft* content (Esser, 1999; Johansson, 2020). The ‘celebrification’ of political leaders is further amplified by social media. Politicians use their social media accounts to foster an ‘intimate’ relationship with followers, sharing pictures of family members, holidays, and even meals (Starita & Trillò, 2022). In so doing, they seek to elicit and sustain a ‘parasocial relationship’ (Rojek, 2015), becoming ‘intimate strangers’ (Stanyer, 2007, p. 72): figures whom followers have never met in person but perceive as acquaintances or even friends, to whom they feel affection and emotional attachment.

Beyond leaders’ direct control, the online circulation of diverse visual materials—such as memes and videos—by other actors further enhances leaders’ celebrity status. Even a single meme can have remarkable effects. This was the case with Giorgia Meloni’s video ‘Io sono Giorgia’, a dance music remix of excerpts from one of her speeches. Initially created to mock her conservative views on traditional families, the video went viral and generated widespread online engagement. Meloni herself, then leader of an opposition party, publicly stated that she appreciated it, likely recognising its role in making her a ‘popular’ figure (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021, p. 166). In the next section, we focus on the celebrity–fan relationship from the perspective of supporters, examining how they establish connections with popular culture that sustain the construction and functioning of political celebrities.

2.2 THE FANDOM OF POLITICAL LEADERS

The literature on leaders’ fan communities reveals the existence of different attitudes among political fans (Campus et al., 2025; Dean, 2017; Dean & Andrews, 2021; Sandvoss, 2012, 2013). One prominent example is the fanbase of Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the UK Labour Party between 2015 and 2020. Corbyn, a middle-aged politician with a long career and clear left-wing positions, became a heroic figure for groups of leftist activists who supported his rise to the party leadership and backed him

enthusiastically thereafter. According to Cornel Sandvoss,² Corbyn's large following comprised a variety of fan groups, ranging from traditional Labour supporters to the passionate activists of the Momentum organisation. Between these groups were individuals who felt a personal bond with Corbyn himself (rather than with the Labour party) and were integrated into both offline and online networks. Together, these groups gave rise to what became known as *Corbynmania*, a phenomenon characterised by practices such as chanting at Corbyn's rallies, participating in speeches, and, above all, producing and circulating memes featuring the leader online (Dean, 2017, 2019). Fans also displayed strong affection for Corbyn and acted protectively towards him, responding to attacks against him in a highly personal manner, as exemplified by the hashtag *#whatyoudotojeremyyoudotome*.³

A similar intertwining of enthusiasm for a leader's personality and ideological commitment can be observed in the case of Bernie Sanders, the US senator who ran in the Democratic presidential primaries in 2016 and 2020. Sanders' candidacy was supported by what amounted to a social movement, which Penny (2017, p. 4) described as follows:

...a crowdsourced connective action that flows from the grassroots participatory culture of online fancommunities. At the same time as the formal Sanders campaign organization built "official" applications that transformed supporters into a tightly coordinated social media distribution network for its policy-oriented messaging, it also benefited from looser digital networks that created and circulated pro-Sanders content that was more informal and culturally oriented in nature.

As Chadwick and Stromer-Gally (2016, p. 288) observed, Sanders' campaign can be seen as 'a reassertion of the power of the grassroots-netroots'.

Like Corbyn, Sanders also became a celebrity. His strong social media presence contributed to his popularity, but he was also familiar with more traditional forms of celebrity politics. He appeared on magazine covers,

² <https://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2019/section-8-personality-politics-and-popular-culture/last-fan-standing-jeremy-corbyn-supporters-in-the-2019-general-election/>

³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/corbyn-mania-cult-of-personality-or-political-movement/>

was featured on Saturday Night Live,⁴ and received endorsements from actors such as Mark Ruffalo, Susan Sarandon, and Tim Robbins, as well as from rappers and artists in the hip-hop world (Tomaszewsky, 2017). Sanders' appeal was linked not only to his character but also to his left-wing positions and openly anti-establishment stance. While some observers argued that support for Sanders stemmed more from sympathy for his outsider status⁵ than from his ideological commitment, other studies suggest that his supporters valued his progressive agenda: 'By and large, Sanders' voters believed in his unique and moral vision' (Altamura & Oliver, 2022). Accordingly, Sanders' political fandom can be described as 'politicised', following Dean's definition (2017), as representative claims were constitutive of the fan community for many supporters.

Not all instances of political fandom display the same ideological depth. Dean (2017) examined fans of Ed Miliband, leader of the UK Labour Party in the early 2010s. The so-called *Milifandom* was a fan community created online that emerged through hashtags such as #CoolEdMiliband and #Milifandom. Dean (2017, p. 416) described Milifandom as follows:

As it gained a degree of momentum and visibility, Milifandom became a genuine, if perhaps rather transient and often tongue-in-cheek, community of girls and young women who, for the most part, genuinely admired Miliband and were committed to contesting unfavourable media portrayals of him.

In the absence of broader representative claims, the political content of Milifandom largely consisted of defending Miliband against media attacks (Dean, 2017, p. 420).

Even more decontextualised from the political context is the case of @lebibedigiuseppeconte, an Instagram fan page dedicated to Giuseppe Conte during his tenure as Italian prime minister during the COVID-19 pandemic (Campus et al., 2025). The posts on the page expressed playful admiration for Conte's persona, portraying him as a confident and handsome Prince Charming. Especially during the early stages of the pandemic, the content was entirely apolitical. Over time, as Conte resigned from government and became leader of the Five Star Movement, the page

⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL2dGTDQXVo>

⁵Achen C., & Bartels L. (2016, May 23). Do Sanders supporters favor his policies? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/23/opinion/campaign-stops/do-sanders-supporters-favor-his-policies.html>

began to represent him more explicitly as a political figure and in more realistic terms. Nevertheless, the tone and language of the posts remained strongly influenced by the conventions of romance fiction.

In sum, the fandom of political leaders can take different forms, characterised by varying degrees of political engagement. Nevertheless, several common features are worth highlighting. The first is the entertaining dimension: political fans appear to be motivated by playfulness and a desire to have fun. A typical manifestation of this is the creation and circulation of memes. Among Labour supporters, memes featuring Jeremy Corbyn ‘were circulated ad infinitum’ (Dean, 2019). Corbyn was compared to well-known fictional characters—most notably Star Wars’ Obi Wan Kenobi—and was often teased in an affectionate manner. Similarly, Sanders became the fan object of a *Bernie Sanders Meme Page* on Facebook, which was initially created as a space for sharing pop culture content about Sanders and soon evolved into ‘a fully crowdsourced online political community’ with over 400,000 members (Penney, 2017, p. 15). The dimension of fun and entertainment is also central in the cases of Miliband and Conte. Dean (2017, 418) commented on the former:

...there was more than a hint of playfulness and irony. It thus existed in an ambiguous liminal space between genuine political and personal support for Miliband, and at times ironic replication of the textual and visual tropes of more traditional fandom. [...] Milifandom thus combined sincere political commitment with, perhaps, a certain kind of transgressive pleasure.

In the case of @lebimbedigiuseppeconte, the core theme of the Instagram account was ‘the adoring support’, with Conte celebrated primarily as a person, with his appearance and character at the centre of attention. At the same time, fans displayed a strong sense of humour, referring to Conte as ‘Daddy’ and joking about their affectionate feelings towards him (Campus et al., 2025).

As Dean (2019) noted, these practices may appear frivolous, but they actively foster the formation of political communities. The circulation of playful content can generate enjoyment while also facilitating connections among politically engaged citizens. Moreover, the entertaining dimension may attract less engaged individuals who approach political fandom out of curiosity. Importantly, entertainment presupposes a horizontal relationship between leaders and their fans. Irreverent content such as memes, often characterised by irony or mockery, would have been unlikely—or

even inappropriate—within traditional relationships between charismatic leaders and loyal followers. In contemporary politics, however, such content contributes positively to leaders' public images (Penny, 2017, p. 15). In particular, this horizontality enhances leaders' perceived accessibility, resonating with populist narratives that emphasise the closeness and similarity between leaders and 'the people'.

A second feature common to most forms of political fandom is the central role of social media in the formation of fan communities. While fan activities are not exclusively online—a point to which we return later—digitally mediated politics constitutes a defining characteristic of contemporary fandom. As Penny (2017) argued, it is useful to distinguish two forms of 'cool politics'. The first, introduced by Street (2003) in his seminal work, is top-down and occurs when leaders construct their celebrity status through traditional means, primarily through legacy media. This includes appearances on talk shows and entertainment programmes, features on magazine covers, and associations with celebrity endorsers. Social media may also play a role in this form of self-promotion, although it is typically carefully managed by politicians and their communication teams. The second form, in contrast, is bottom-up 'cool politics'. Penny (2017, p. 16) described this as follows:

In such cases, supporters take it upon themselves to build these culturally grounded associations by emulating patterns of effusive hero worship (and ridicule of perceived enemies) that are familiar in online fan communities. The result of this crowdsourced cultural production and circulation is a form of participatory campaign promotion that positions supporters not as message conduits, but rather as autonomous 'grassroots intermediaries' for political brands (Jenkins et al., 2013).

In this sense, contemporary political fandom is inseparable from the grassroots participatory culture of online fan communities.

A third defining feature of political fandom is the central role of affect in shaping the relationship between fans and leaders (Dean & Andrews, 2021). The concept of affect originated in psychology to describe emotionally driven mechanisms that shape individuals' responses to others and to events in the external world (Tomkins, 2014). More recently, affect and emotionality have been widely employed to explain contemporary political phenomena (e.g. Gervais, 2015; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Van Zoonen, 2004). In line with this literature, and given the focus of this

book on political fandoms, we adopt an analytical perspective that conceptualises an ‘affective turn’ in politics, particularly evident in phenomena that blur online and offline boundaries. Moreover, the analytical lens of affect has become an essential part of the study of contemporary political phenomena, as relevant discourses are increasingly unfolding in online spaces. Given the affective nature of social media interactions, it is unsurprising that digital political phenomena have been conceptualised as ‘affective publics’ (Papacharissi, 2015), in which expressions of sentiment are central to mobilisation, aggregation, and organisation of consensus in online spaces. Political fandoms, as well as anti-fandoms—communities formed around shared disdain for specific political figures—have thus flourished alongside the widespread adoption of social media in Western democracies.

In essence, constituents become fans when their engagement with a politician is better understood through the lens of their emotional attachment rather than ideological alignment. In other words, political supporters turn into fans when they develop parasocial relationships with leaders, relating to political figures as if they were their friends or adversaries. Once such personalised bond emerges, the conditions for political fandom are established. Conversely, affect may also take negative forms when emotional responses are driven by intense disapproval that extends beyond ideological disagreement into personal hostility (Sandvoss, 2019). As Ahmed (2014) argued, negative sentiment can be a powerful force, fostering collective expressions of disapproval or even hatred among individuals who might otherwise remain politically disengaged. In such cases, constituents become anti-fan, defining their relationship with political leaders through adversity and antagonism.

2.3 PRACTICES OF POLITICAL FANDOM

Having introduced the phenomenon of political fandom and discussed several illustrated cases, this section examines fan practices in greater detail. What, concretely, do fans do that allows them to be identified as such? And what distinguishes fans from more conventional political followers?

The literature on fandom, and political fandom in particular, consistently revolves around several key dimensions: consumption, production, affect, and a sense of community (Dean, 2017; Sandvoss, 2013). Some scholars also consider the degree of support for political ideas and values embodied by the leader. For instance, in defining ‘politicised fandom’,

Dean (2017) introduced the concept of *contestation*, whereby political fandom is rooted in a series of representative claims that are generated and consolidated through interactions between leaders and their fan communities. As noted before, however, this dimension does not apply to all forms of fandom, which may exist independently of broader political agendas or movement-like structures.

Consumption is widely regarded as a foundational dimension of fandom, with pleasure derived from consumption constituting a central element of the fan experience (Heinich, 2011; Turner, 2014). Individuals can scarcely be considered fans if they are not engaged in at least some of the following activities: collecting information about the fan object, including details of private life, hobbies, and interests; attending performances or events, either in person (e.g. political rallies or speeches) or through media mediation (e.g. TV appearances, press interviews, and live-streamed events). All media platforms are implicated in leaders' efforts to maintain supporter engagement. While entertainment and gossip media are key sources of information about politicians' private lives, mainstream media increasingly contribute to the circulation of soft news. Crucially, a substantial portion of fan consumption now takes place via social media. As discussed earlier, contemporary celebrity politicians often invest significant time and effort in cultivating and sustaining their online presence. Consequently, following a leader's social media accounts provides supporters with a steady stream of personal information, much of it voluntarily disclosed by the leaders themselves.

Social media also facilitate distinctive fan experiences, such as direct and personalised interactions with the fan object. Leaders may respond to posts, exchange comments, or engage in humorous exchanges with supporters. In more extreme cases, leaders may incorporate themselves directly into promotional activities, offering themselves as a prize. For instance, the leader of the Italian party Lega, Matteo Salvini, launched a contest titled 'Vinci Salvini' ('Win Salvini'), in which participants could enter by liking a post on his Facebook page, with the prize being a personal conversation with him (Campus & Mazzoni, 2021, p. 165).

Not all followers of politicians' social media accounts should be categorised as fans, particularly when engagement is sporadic or minimal. Fans are more readily identifiable among those who actively respond to leaders' posts. Nevertheless, there may also be 'engaged listeners', described by Barnes (2022) as assiduous followers who rarely express opinions publicly, but nonetheless develop a fan identity. More broadly, consumption alone

is insufficient to define fandom. Citizens may consume political content out of curiosity or incidental interest. Therefore, it can be argued that while all fans are consumers, other behaviours are better indicators of fandom. This observation directs attention to the second key dimension: production.

For some scholars, consumption and production should not be analysed as separate dimensions but rather as points along a continuum (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). In that vein, Sandvoss (2013) and Dean (2017) conceptualised fandom as occupying the space between consumption and production. Regardless of the theoretical approach adopted, it is incontrovertible that the production of content and materials represents a stronger indicator of engagement than consumption alone and thus provides a useful criterion for distinguishing fans from weak supporters or merely curious citizens. Production can take many forms. For instance, fans may create and sell merchandise, organise gatherings or themed events, or write books and graphic novels featuring political leaders as protagonists. According to Sandvoss (2013, p. 261), fans may engage in textual productivity, understood as the creation of new texts related to the fan object, such as fan fiction, music remixes, or fanzines. In particular, the most dedicated fans are ‘those to whom the focal point of their fandom shifts to their own textual activity and who are frequent bloggers themselves’ (ibidem). One notable form of textual production is political fan fiction, hosted on platforms such as Wattpad or Archive of Our Own, in which political leaders are portrayed as central characters in a variety of narrative genres, including romance.

While textual production is significant, the predominance of visual digital media in contemporary political engagement means that a substantial proportion of fan production takes the form of memes and GIFs, which convey feelings and opinions (Dean, 2019). As Dean (2019, p. 6) observed, ‘Their playful character renders them profoundly affective insofar as they can be sources of pleasure, fun, connection or anger and irritation, depending on the context’.

A more advanced form of online production is the creation of fan pages dedicated to celebrating political leaders. Supportive fan pages for political leaders can take various forms. Some adopt a more formal tone and primarily express political support. Others, such as @lebimbedigiuseppeconte, focus on celebrating the leader as a person, with particular attention to physical appearance and character; still others function mainly as spaces for sharing memes, cartoons, and ironic jokes for entertainment

purposes.⁶ This is the case of the previously mentioned ‘Bernie Sanders Meme Page’ on Facebook (Penney, 2017).

The third dimension of fandom addressed in literature is affect, whose centrality is widely acknowledged (Dean, 2017; Sandvoss, 2013). As discussed in the previous section, the relationship between fans and their favoured—or antagonised—leader is fundamentally affective. An emotional bond with a leader appears to be a necessary condition for fandom. In cases of supportive fandom, this bond is typically accompanied by genuine care for the leader, such that attacks or criticism directed at them are experienced personally by fans. A clear illustration of this dynamic is the #whatyoudotojeremyoudotome movement, whose uncritical support for the then Labour leader became an object of debate and mockery.⁷ Conversely, anti-fans perceive their antagonistic expressions as necessary actions to expose what they regard as legitimate reasons for opposing a particular leader. Hatred or hostility is often articulated in relation to support for an alternative political figure, as demonstrated by the fierce attacks launched by some Sanders supporters against Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren during the 2020 primary elections.⁸ As Lee and Moon (2021, p. 3) noted, ‘Fans are likely to show closer *identification* with the figures, which leads to higher emotional engagement, even taking evaluation, criticism, or praise directed toward the politician as their own’. More broadly, fans can act as valuable ‘influencers’, particularly in times of crisis, by mobilising support and disseminating enthusiasm that contributes to surrounding the leader with a positive aura (Lee & Moon, 2021, p. 8).

It is through this analytical lens of affectively charged, parasocial relationships with political celebrities that we can better understand emerging forms of political contention across many Western democracies. One example is the increasing polarisation of political debate between Democrats and Republicans in the United States. Within this context, supporters of figures such as Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have taken it upon themselves to promote her agenda, effectively becoming virtual volunteers in her campaigning efforts (Rodriguez & Goretti,

⁶The distinction between different fan pages is based on the classification in Campus et al. (2025).

⁷See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/12/labour-leadership-nec-jeremy-corbyn>

⁸See, respectively, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/bernie-sanders-apologizes-negative-joe-biden-op-ed/story?id=68422468> and <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/07/politics/bernie-sanders-social-media-attacks-invs>

2022). On the opposing side, the Tea Party (Sandvoss, 2019) and MAGA (Miller, 2020) constitute emblematic cases of political mobilisation with a strong anti-fandom component. These movements repurpose opposition to progressive policies into active support for reactionary positions. In a similar manner to Sanders' supporters' attacks on his opponents, detractors of a political leader may be driven to support rival figures. That dynamic is also evident in the Australian context, where Julia Gillard's speech went viral among constituents seeking to express dissent towards the conservative politicians she criticised (Macnaughtan & Trott, 2024).

The fourth dimension of political fandom is the sense of community, which refers to practices that presuppose the existence of interconnected networks of individuals. Fans not only share beliefs and behaviours related to the fan object but also have opportunities to interact with one another. As Lee and Moon (2021, p. 10) suggested, fan community engagement can be operationalised through practices such as discussing the politician with other fans, meeting in person or online, and participating in fan-oriented events.

Political fan communities can vary considerably in structure and organisation. Some are sustained by formal organisation, such as Momentum, a grass-roots and networked movement of supporters. In other cases, the community context is more fluid and loosely articulated. Sanders' supporters, for example, formed 'unofficial grassroots networks that circulated more informal and culturally oriented appeals' (Penny, 2017, p. 1), 'each playing a unique role in supplementing the formal campaign's top-down digital outreach with the culturally grounded appeal of amateur user-generated content like humorous memes and viral videos' (p. 4). In some cases, it is more difficult to speak of a clearly defined community. For instance, the followers of @lebimbedigiuseppeconte may initially appear to be united primarily by a shared desire for entertainment during a challenging period, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as Campus et al. (2025, p. 159) observed, 'some clues indicate that they perceive themselves as a sort of community. As an example, when a reportage on TV talked about the success of the fanpage, "Le Bimbe" made proud comments by showing a sense of belonging'. At least for the most enthusiastic followers, Le Bimbe thus became a group whose collective identity was shaped by a shared devotion to Conte.

Communities also vary in duration, ranging from loosely connected networks of fans who mobilise temporarily around specific events—such as the use of a shared hashtag or the circulation of a meme—to more stable

and enduring groups characterised by sustained interaction and identification. The amount of time invested in fandom practices of production and consumption influences not only the perceived sense of community but also the nature of the practices themselves. Long-term participation in fan communities entails the internalisation of group norms, including those that define ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fandom practices, as well as the rules governing emotional expression. Fan communities actively monitor and police these feeling and expression rules, and not all forms of expression are treated as legitimate, and not all modes of expressing them are deemed appropriate.

In conclusion, analysing political fandom requires, first, identifying who qualifies as a fan and, second, distinguishing different types of fans on the basis of their practices. These practices can be further differentiated according to whether they occur online or offline—although the former now clearly predominate—and according to varying levels of involvement. Finally, the study of political fandom must account for the reciprocal dynamics between fans and the fan object, as fans, particularly when organised into fanbases, can play a distinctly active and influential role in contemporary politics.

2.4 POLITICAL FANDOM: FURTHER ISSUES FOR DEBATE

In this chapter, we have analysed how existing studies have sought to conceptualise political fandom and to identify its key traits and dimensions. What clearly emerges is that political fandom—a phenomenon located at the intersection of political communication, political behaviour, and cultural sociology—offers a valuable vantage point from which to explore contemporary political dynamics, particularly in relation to political participation, representation, and communication.

Political fandom practices encompass both online and offline forms of consumption and production—such as attending rallies or producing and circulating memes—that are charged with emotion. These emotions, whether negative or positive (including resentment, hostility, contempt, enthusiasm, affection, and hope) drive forms of political expression that manifest as fandom or anti-fandom. Such forms of engagement expand the repertoire of political participation by incorporating expressive, identity-based, and affective modalities of consumption and production. Non-political or apolitical fandom practices, enabled (and amplified) by digital media logics, can foster modes of political participation that

combine playfulness and ironic detachment with emotional attachment. In this context, rather than issue- or ideologically grounded engagement, it is often the sense of belonging and the social validation provided by the fan community that play a decisive role in political fandom.

Before moving on to the description of our research design and the presentation of our findings in the following chapters, it is worth highlighting several issues that have only been partially addressed in the existing literature and therefore warrant further scholarly attention.

First, emerging empirical evidence raises questions about the interconnections between political fandom and celebrity politics. This relationship calls for an intersectional approach that examines the uneven likelihood of politicians eliciting fan-like performances. For example, one might ask whether female politicians are more frequently the targets of anti-fandom than fandom or whether left-wing or younger politicians are more likely to cultivate dedicated fanbases. Additional questions concern the relational dimension of political fandom. Political fandom both presupposes and amplifies the logic of celebrity politics: by becoming fan objects, political leaders are transformed into symbolic figures whose meaning is co-constructed by supporters through practices of re-presentation, satire, and cultural remixing. This co-construction introduces a novel form of audience interaction in political representation. Fans amplify favourable narratives, defend the leader, and at times enforce loyalty norms. Conversely, anti-fans weaponise antagonism to attack political figures, thereby contributing to an adversarial communicative climate that fuels polarisation.

Although fan-leader relationships may appear to be characterised by playful or tongue-in-cheek adoration, political fans may nonetheless exert influence over the objects of their fandom. The same fan communities that can amplify a politician's visibility and popularity can also rapidly coordinate punitive actions, including forms of cancellation. Consequently, politicians who attract fanbases may be subject to new, audience-driven types of accountability. While these dynamics are unlikely to overturn formal power relations, they complicate the traditional mechanisms of political representation and thus provide a valuable perspective from which to analyse contemporary transformations of democratic politics. In this respect, the relationship between political fandom and electoral behaviour constitutes an additional area of inquiry. Political fandom does not necessarily translate into electoral support for the admired politician or party, making it important to examine the factors that mediate or inhibit this conversion.

Second, the theoretical interconnections between political fandom and populism merit particular attention. Political fandom exemplifies both dis-intermediation and a form of re-mediation, as illustrated by the community dimension of fandom, which also performs normative and regulatory functions with respect to fan behaviour. Immediacy, parasocial relationships, affect, and the performative role of emotions are key features shared by both fandom and populism. This raises the question of whether political fandom is more likely to emerge in populist contexts. As Juárez Miro (2021) demonstrated in a study of the Spanish populist far right, the analytical tools of fandom studies can help elucidate the community-building processes of populist supporters. Since belonging to a community is central to populist movements, fan studies offer a useful lens through which to interpret populist claims to represent the ‘true people’. Moreover, the circulation of ideas through networked digital infrastructures—a defining feature of fan practices—closely resembles the organisational dynamics of many populist movements. As Juárez Miro (2021, p. 64) argued, ‘research on populism using a fan studies lens could help clarify the social affective facet of populist bases, the importance of belonging in a community, and its influence on their social identity’.

Finally, it is important to note that fan participation varies substantially over time. It may be highly volatile and short-lived, or it may take the form of long-term, sustained practices. In this sense, the study of political fandom addresses a dimension that is particularly relevant to contemporary politics: the continuity of support for a political project or appreciation for a political leader. Since the 1990s, numerous studies have documented a steady decline in political party membership and highlighted the link between distrust in politics and electoral volatility. At the same time, more recent analyses suggest that strong political polarisation and the presence of stable populist parties may reduce volatility. On the one hand, populist parties benefit from protest voting; on the other, they inspire forms of loyalty that promote electoral stability. From this perspective, it would be valuable to explore the relationship between volatility in political participation—expressed through voting, fandom, and other forms of engagement—and emotional attachment to political actors or projects.

Overall, the analysis of political fandom foregrounds novel forms and mechanisms of political engagement that reshape the relationship between citizens and political representatives. By focusing on affective attachments, playful participatory practices, and culturally and digitally mediated modes

of mobilisation, research on political fandom illuminates processes of political loyalty formation and collective identity construction that operate alongside, and sometimes in tension with, traditional institutional politics. In doing so, the study of political fandom sheds light on the intertwining of digital and political grammars—most notably the central role of irony in political fandom—and provides a valuable analytical lens for understanding how democratic participation is being reconfigured in contemporary digital environments.

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Identifying Political Fans

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the framework of our research project, the main goal is to carry out a deep exploration of the feelings, activities and practices of citizens who can be regarded as fans. Drawing on the theoretical background discussed in the previous chapter, we advance the view that the most essential feature of being a fan is to feel closeness and affection towards a fan-object. Looking at the four dimensions that have been identified as recurring most in the literature on political fandom—consumption, production, affect and sense of community—we argue that affect should be regarded either as the precondition of any consumption and production practice or as a predisposing factor for the development of a sense of community. The presence of the attachment elicited by affect allows us to distinguish real

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practices of fandom from similar behaviours based on curiosity or party alignment. In looking at, for instance, consumption practices, it should first be stressed that an effect of contemporary mediated politics has been the production of a new aesthetics of politics (Pels, 2003). As Stanyer observed (2013, p. 19), contemporary politicians are embedded in a culture that is ‘increasingly voyeuristic’, in which ‘strong pressures exist on individuals to display emotions in public’. This explains the existence of ‘a growing global secondary-media industry, which is financially dependent on exposing the private lives of public figures, including politicians’ (Stanyer, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, non-fans may also perform the act of consuming ‘intimate’ information about political leaders, whose peccadilloes and scandals are the object of great curiosity by all citizens, not only supporters. However, even uncontroversial ‘soft’ information is not less newsworthy since it appeals to a large part of the public, regardless of their political preferences. For instance, an avid reader of gossip magazines may long to know the details of the divorce of a political leader, even without intending to vote for him/her. In sum, fans are consumers, but consumers are not necessarily fans. In this regard, affective attachment may not only predispose one to forms of consumption; it also serves to distinguish fans from merely curious citizens.

As for the dimension of production, if the act of producing content about leaders seems, and probably is, more revealing of the presence of true fandom, it should be noted that the motivation to have fun is often conducive to forms of online production. Thus, if many are associated with authentic liking (or disliking, in the case of antifandom), others may be nourished simply by the desire to do something entertaining. When the ‘memefication’ of a certain leader becomes a trendy phenomenon, people with no given political orientation may also participate in its diffusion, and even in the production of memes, simply to take part in a viral phenomenon. In other words, the act of producing, if not sustained by an affective bond, cannot be taken as an incontrovertible proof of fandom. What must be kept in mind is that producers are not always potential supporters or voters. For instance, the success of the famous ‘Io sono Giorgia’ memes mentioned in Chap. 2 is likely to have enhanced the celebrification of Giorgia Meloni, but a large number of people who circulated them, including their creators, were neither fans nor supporters. In light of all this, we believe that the correct starting point for an exploration of political fandom is to focus on affect. As illustrated in the introduction, our research strategy for dealing with the topic of political fandom was to

employ a mixed-methods approach that included survey research and a study of social media content. In this and the next two chapters, our analyses are based on data obtained from a survey that we carried out in seven European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom. As anticipated in the introduction, we selected these countries since we were interested in covering a variety of political and media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) as well as different political, economic and cultural features. Data collection was conducted in the summer of 2024, and the final sample comprised 7161 respondents, with each of the seven countries having a subsample of over 1000 respondents, ranging from 1004 (in the UK) to 1049 (in Poland).¹

As discussed, we assume that all practices commonly associated with fandom—consumption, production, even a sense of community—can be conceived as expressions of an authentic celebrity–fan relationship only in the presence of affective involvement. For this reason, as will be illustrated in the next section, we directed our attention to those survey respondents who declared that they felt close to a political leader (and, in most cases, named him/her). In doing so, we were able to identify those citizens who had a clear preference for a leader and thus potentially possessed a fan–object. Feeling close to a leader is the essence of the parasocial relationship, as the illusion of closeness is the basis of what Rojek (2015) called ‘presumed intimacy’. In such relationships, emotional involvement is especially magnified in certain situations, such as when a celebrity is caught up in a scandal. Therefore, we presume that emotional involvement emerges with particular intensity in specific circumstances. When a leader is attacked or at risk, fans are ready to act in his/her defence, making the urge for protection a powerful indicator of the existence of a celebrity–fan relationship. For this reason, the analyses presented in this chapter focus on those survey respondents who, beyond closeness, exhibited several behaviours displaying a degree of emotional attachment, such as describing the leader as a friend or being offended should the leader be attacked. In short, we believe that the association of closeness with emotionality may reveal the kind of affect that may be considered the basis of fandom, the operationalisation of which is illustrated in the next section.

If affect is the driving force of political fandom, then fandom’s other dimensions should be analysed in close connection with it. For instance, if it is true that acts of consumption are not the exclusive prerogative of fans,

¹ For all other details about selection and data treatment, see the Appendix.

we may assert that true fans are strong consumers and are particularly likely to be engaged in practices of ‘affective consumption’, as will be illustrated in greater detail in Sect. 3 of this chapter. Presumably, if the citizen who is eager to consume of private details may just be curious, only a true fan wishes to interact personally with a leader or wear a t-shirt with his/her name and face. Analogously, producing supportive content that displays affect or an urge to protect is likely an indicator of fandom. Along this line, in this chapter, we have tried to build a typology of political fans by integrating indicators of the four dimensions of fandom. In Sect. 2, we draft a baseline typology of fans that allows us to distinguish between moderate and strong fans, and in Sect. 3, we examine how our categorisation of fans relates to practices of fandom and belonging in a fan community. This also allows us to outline a picture of what it means to be a fan in terms of its impact on fans’ experiences and activities. In Sect. 4, we focus on the typical socio-demographic and political characteristics of fans to delineate a proper fan profile. Finally, in Sect. 5, we summarise and discuss the main findings.

3.2 IDENTIFYING FANS: BASELINE TYPOLOGY

How do we identify political fans? Drawing on original survey data of the adult population in seven European countries, our research explores the demand side of political fandom using a multi-level approach in which the different ‘layers’ of political fandom are isolated, step-by-step, through the main dimensions identified by the literature on this topic. Given the specific emphasis of these political fandom studies on the role of political celebrities and considering the insights offered by the extensive literature on the personalisation of politics, we chose to focus on individual fan objects. That is why, in the following pages, the expressions ‘political fandom’ and ‘(political) leader fandom’ are used interchangeably.

We started with the assumption that affect should be considered the primary dimension of political fandom. To be considered a fan, an individual should in the first place develop some form of affection towards the political fan-object. This should be seen as a sort of precondition for other fan practices that correspond to other key dimensions, such as consumption, production or community orientation, which will be used to isolate the ‘inner’ layers of political fandom. Of course, an individual may (more or less continuously) consume or produce political content regarding different political ‘objects’ or even be involved in groups that form around

specific political objects, and which may be seen as (more or less stable) communities. However, unless the individual expresses at least some degree of affect, these practices alone are not enough to be considered a fan.

Our operationalisation of affect starts from the identification of its two subdimensions: closeness and emotionality. To be included in the area of fandom, an individual should be, first and foremost, able to identify a potential fan-object within a certain domain—in our case, the domain of politics. We grounded our operationalisation of citizens' closeness by mirroring standard questions on party identification. The survey question was worded as follows:

Thinking of people who have a political role in [COUNTRY] right now, is there a leader or political figure you feel close to?

This question aimed to identify the preferred political figure and potential recipient of affect. We acknowledge that similar forms of individual attachment may concern more than one political figure, especially within a specific party or political area. However, given the aims of the study and questionnaire space limitations, we decided to focus exclusively on one preferred political figure. Following the initial question on the existence of such a bond, a subsequent open-ended question invited respondents to specify the name of their preferred leader or political figure. However, even those who did not report a personal preference were retained within the area of potential fandom to avoid excluding segments of the population less willing to disclose their political orientations. For the purposes of this study, the respondent's preferred political figure will be considered a political leader regardless of her or his formal role within a political organisation.

Closeness alone is not sufficient to detect an affective bond between an individual citizen and the potential political fan-object. Thus, we introduced the dimension of emotionality, which was used to construct a typology that allowed us to distinguish between two levels of fanship. We were inspired in this by those studies assuming that fans believe they have a special relationship with their admired figures. Perceiving the admired figure as a friend is a typical dimension on parasocial scales (Dibble et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 1985). Moreover, as observed in some specific cases of political fandom (Dean, 2017), one's emotional attachment to a leader

often implies taking upon oneself any criticism or praise directed towards that leader (Lee & Moon, 2021).²

In light of all this, we asked respondents in our sample to rate, on a 0–10 scale, the extent to which they identified with two statements regarding their relationship with the political leader to whom they felt close:

I love him/her as if he/she were my friend.

When the media or other people or network users criticize him/her in a way that seems unfair to me, it is almost as if they were doing it to me.

The first sentence was designed to detect the existence of a perceived intimacy at a distance with the political leader, while the second sentence aimed to measure the ‘defensive’ emotional response triggered by (mediated) forms of polarisation. The combination of the two indicators was intended to capture the positive and negative sides of the emotional reaction elicited by reference to political fan-objects. The resulting variables were combined into an additive index ranging from 0 to 10. We established level five as the threshold for inclusion in the fan area, which was further divided into moderate fans (5–7) and strong fans (8–10). In short, to be considered a fan, an individual should be able to identify a preferred political leader—even without explicitly naming her/him—and exhibit some emotions, either positive or negative, when thinking about the potential fan-object. Furthermore, our baseline typology identified two different layers of leader fandom, based on closeness and emotionality, as different nuances of affect.

Defined as such, the affective operationalisation of leader fandom involves a significant segment of European society: 24% of the voting-age population across the seven countries included in our study. Figure 3.1 reports the distribution in the overall sample and in each country. The component of strong fans—those displaying stronger affective bonds (8–10)—was 11%. The component of moderate fandom—those displaying weaker but still relevant affective bonds (5–7)—was 13%. This first estimate of the fandom area was predictably large, but did not include the additional dimensions of fandom that point to more demanding (and hence more restrictive) definitions. These dimensions will be included in

² Lee and Moon (2021) built a political fandom scale organised around three dimensions, one of which was measured through the following questions: ‘When someone criticises <politician>, it feels like a personal insult to me. I consider the success of <politician> as my success. When someone praises <politician>, it feels like a personal compliment to me. When a story in the media criticised <politician>, I would feel embarrassed. I consider <politician> to be my political companion’.

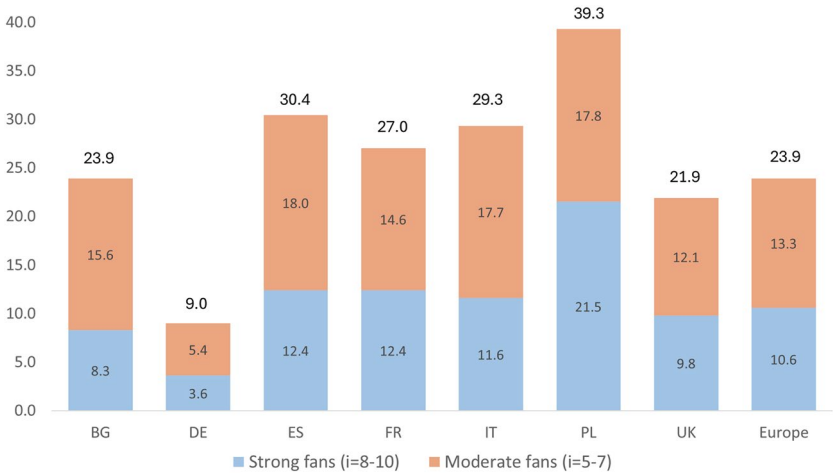


Fig. 3.1 Baseline fandom typology. (Source: *Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024* (base: 7161 cases))

the following section to further specify the ‘inner layers’ of political fandom.

The results also revealed significant variations among the seven countries, in terms of both the overall presence of fans and their internal distribution between the two levels identified by the baseline typology. Poland is characterised by both the highest overall level of fans (39%) and the highest component of strong fans (22%). However, this characterisation cannot be read as a sign of an East–West pattern, as the figures for Bulgaria are very close to the average distribution, with an overall fan prevalence of exactly 24%. Moreover, neighbouring Germany is at the other end of the distribution, with the lowest levels of both fans in general (9%) and strong fans (4%). This characterisation is consistent with the results of the study by Karvonen (2010), which identified Germany as one of the national cases exhibiting mixed negative evidence for the personalisation of politics.

Figures for the UK are only slightly below average, with 22% of fans and 10% of strong fans. Higher values appear to be specific to Southern European countries, particularly Italy and Spain, where the overall number of fans is around 30% and strong fans are 12%. In France, the segment of strong fans stands at 12%, while overall fandom is slightly lower, at 27%.

Table 3.1 Motivations for being a fan (%). For what reasons do you like this leader or political figure?

	Primary motivation		Total mentions (top 3)	
	Strong fans	Fans	Strong fans	Fans
For being competent and capable	17.7	17.7	42.7	48.1
For being a real, authentic person	17.7	15.5	41.0	39.7
For sharing his/her ideas and political vision	17.5	20.1	46.0	48.0
For understanding the problems of the people	12.8	13.8	40.0	41.7
For being an honest person	12.9	13.8	44.9	41.5
For being the only one who can save [COUNTRY]	11.7	10.7	35.1	31.6
For being likeable	6.4	5.5	23.2	19.4
No answer	3.3	2.9	–	–

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

To understand what drives the feelings of affection behind being a fan, a direct question asked respondents to report their own motivation for ‘liking’ the political leader. Each respondent could indicate their primary motivation, choosing among seven predefined options and up to two additional motivations in order of importance. Table 3.1 displays the results for the top-ranked options, as well as the overall figures, which represent the sum of the three choices. The values are reported for both fans in general and strong fans.

Predictably, the most traditional ‘political’ attributes on the list tended to emerge as the most cited by respondents, especially when we looked at overall motivations—that is, the sum of the three possible answers. Competence and ideological alignment were the main attributes that people mentioned to justify their link with an individual political figure, with 48% of fans and 43% of strong fans liking their leader ‘for being competent and capable’ and 48% and 46%, respectively, liking their leader ‘for sharing her/his ideas and political vision’. These options point to the substantive component of the leader’s profile: what leaders think and what they do (or could potentially do). Of the interviewees categorised as strong fans, 18% chose these motivations as their primary reasons for being fans. The same figure applies to authenticity, with 18% of strong fans liking their leader, first and foremost, ‘for being a real, authentic person’. Strong fans seemed to value the capacity of their leaders to present themselves without

hypocrisy, without filters and perhaps as ‘one of the people’. The relevance of this dimension is less evident when we consider fans in general (15%) and the sum of all answers, even if it should be stressed that 40–41% of fans included it in their top three reasons. In other words, leaders’ personal appeal seems to be explained by their ability to mirror the ‘real society’ rather than being perceived as part of a detached elite. In the same vein, ‘understanding the problems of the people’ was selected by about 40% of fans, with 13% of strong fans indicating it as their primary reason.

Honesty was another important (self-reported) driver of personal closeness, with more than 40% including it among their three main reasons for liking their leader and 13–14% of fans identifying it as the main attribute a leader should display. The messianic dimension of personal attraction had a lower but still significant role in people’s answers. About one-third of fans also chose their preferred leader ‘for being the only one who can save’ the country, with 11% of fans and 12% of strong fans mentioning it as the main driver of their attraction. Finally, much less frequently cited are reasons relating directly to the dimension of ‘likeability’, which was mentioned by 6% as their first reason and by 19–23% as one of their main reasons for feeling close to a political figure.

3.3 REFINING THE TYPOLOGY: CONSUMPTION, PRODUCTION AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The area of affective involvement identified in the previous section was quite large. According to our baseline typology—which centres on the criterion of affect—almost one person out of four (24%) across the seven European countries can be considered a political fan. These individuals have developed a special link with political leaders. Fans perceive themselves as being ‘together with’ the political leader, even though this connection does not imply physical proximity and is (often) mediated by technology. Despite having never met the leader in person, fans are convinced that they are engaged in a personal friendship. They feel that the leader ‘speaks’ to them and that their everyday lives ‘speak’ to the leader. Fans feel that what happens to the leader also ‘relates’ to them to some degree. They experience distress when the leader faces adversity or is the target of personal attacks. In such situations, fans feel personally targeted and reinforce their empathy towards the leader. In short, fans internalise a

sense of proximity and emotional connection: they feel they share ‘something’ with the leader on emotional grounds in their everyday lives.

If we consider the highest degree of emotionality, the area of potential fandom is reduced to less than half, with only 11% of our sample belonging to the ‘strong fan’ category. However, the inner layers of this degree of fandom can also be delineated by introducing additional dimensions suggested by established conceptualisations in fandom studies. As analysed in Chap. 2, the key dimensions suggested by the literature on these topics are consumption, production and sense of community. Table 3.2 provides a series of indicators pertaining to these dimensions, delineated as either online or offline consumption. It also introduces the additional dimension of affectivity consumption, which is intended to capture the individual propensity to ‘consume’ the leader through different practices. All of these measures are provided with a breakdown by fan category as either moderate or strong. Predictably, intensity of consumption, production and sense of community tends to increase among fans who display higher degrees of affect.

3.3.1 *Consumption*

Our indicators of offline consumption include traditional forms of engagement with the leader via in-person political events, such as rallies, demonstrations, or face-to-face encounters, as well as mediated forms of interaction through pre-digital media, such as television and the press. Political stars, like others in the celebrity world, are expected to perform for fans who attend their performances. Moreover, fans are supposed to appreciate in a special way the opportunity to meet their stars in person, exchange a few words, and, especially, take a selfie with them,³ all of which are activities that lead them to attend events in which the leader participates. In our sample, 61% of the fans had seen or heard the leader at a public event. As anticipated, this figure was higher among strong fans (71%).

Regarding mediated offline consumption, we decided not to concentrate on passive exposure to news regarding the leader and focused instead on more specific (and presumably active) attention to personal

³Selfies with politicians are supposed to be part of a strategy intended to mobilise public sentiment among voters (Abidin, 2017) and have become a new mediated political ritual (Ekman & Widholm, 2017).

Table 3.2 Political fandom typology: indicators of offline/online consumption, online production, affectivity consumption and sense of community

	<i>Moderate fans</i>	<i>Strong fans</i>	<i>Fans</i>
Offline consumption			
Read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed (% yes)	57.5	63.1	60.0
Read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines (% yes)	37.2	53.8	44.6
Read a biography/autobiography about him/her (% yes)	37.5	51.2	43.6
Saw and/or heard him/her in person at a public event (% yes)	53.0	70.7	60.9
Online consumption			
Regarding this leader or political figure, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages (% yes)	52.2	60.3	55.8
(among those who follow the leader's social media) follow one of his/her live videos (% yes)	67.1	82.9	74.7
Follow other social media accounts or pages dedicated to your favourite leader or political figure (% yes)	27.9	43.1	34.6
Online production			
(among those who follow the leader's social media) 'like' or repost his/her content (% yes)	81.3	91.9	86.4
(among those who follow the leader's social media) comment on one of his/her posts (even with an emoticon) (% yes)	64.3	83.4	73.4
... reposted/retweeted memes about him/her (% yes)	34.5	47.3	40.2
... used hashtags with his/her name (% yes)	24.7	38.5	30.8
... written posts/tweets about him/her (% yes)	28.5	42.4	34.6
... created and circulated a meme, hashtag or social media page about him/her (% yes)	28.2	38.6	32.8
Affectivity consumption			
I would like to have a coffee/beer with him/her (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	69.0	89.7	78.2
I would like to take a selfie with him/her (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	51.3	83.1	65.4
I would buy merchandise with his/her name or face on it (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	31.8	69.1	48.3
Community			
I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do (% score 6–10 on a 0–10 scale)	66.4	92.8	78.1

Source: *Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)*

information about him/her, which points to the phenomenon of the popularisation, privatisation and celebrification of politics. Usually, interest in the private lives of public figures is taken as an indicator that they have been transformed into celebrities (Turner, 2014). Thus, we expected to find evidence of this attitude among the fans in our sample. In fact, 60% of fans had read an article or watched TV programmes discussing the leader's private life, with 45% having read articles about the leader in gossip, fashion or news magazines, and 44% having read the leader's biography or autobiography. For the latter two dimensions, which are more explicitly linked to the sphere of celebrity politics, the difference between moderate and strong fans is particularly relevant.

In general, the results confirm the well-documented relevance and persistence of the legacy media, and television in particular, in mediated forms of political involvement, which also applies to the fan-leader relationship. At the same time, evidence from case studies of political fandom for leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders suggests that these dynamics have been further accelerated by the diffusion of digital media, which favours an environment in which para-social interactions take place or are, at least, reinforced. This suggested a detailed exploration of fans' online behaviour. The survey results confirm the salience of digital channels in fans' consumption of their political leader, with 56% of respondents in our baseline typology following the leader's social media accounts or pages. In this case, the difference between moderate and strong fans was less pronounced—8 percentage points—compared to what was observed regarding other digital accounts or pages dedicated to individual political celebrities. For the latter, the figure dropped to 35%, with a 15-percentage point gap between moderate and strong fans (28% and 43% respectively). It was very common among those who followed the leaders' social media to consume live content generated by their fan-object, with 75% of fans (and 83% of strong fans) watching videos published by their leaders.

To explore their overall prevalence in fan practices, these measures of offline and online consumption were combined in two additive indices. The same indices can also be used to delimit more restrictive areas of potential fandom: the inner layers that correspond to more 'demanding' conceptualisations of fanship that combine—in this case—affection and consumption. Within the area of baseline fandom—24% of the voting-age population—those with significant levels of offline and online consumption were 39% and 47% respectively (Fig. 3.2). In relation to the overall voting-age population, these figures correspond to 9% and 11% respectively.

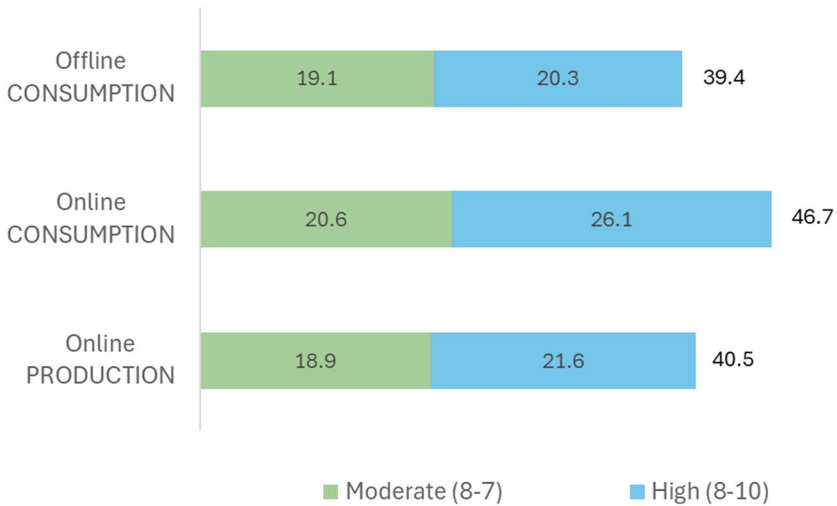


Fig. 3.2 Consumption and production indices within leader fandom. (*Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)*)

Other forms of consumption are inherently less prevalent as they imply in-person contact with the leader or the availability of products that are not necessarily distributed by the leader, their staff or the fan community. Given the inevitably wide scope of a survey of the general population, we tried to capture these additional dimensions in terms of individual propensity towards what may be termed ‘affective consumption’ (Table 3.2). This proved to be quite widespread among fans, especially among strong fans. For instance, 78% of fans and 90% of strong fans ‘would like to have a coffee or a beer with the leader’; 65% and 83%, respectively, reported a desire to take a selfie with them; and 48% and 69% would buy merchandise featuring the leader’s name or face. In other words, affect appears strongly related to affective modes of ‘consuming’ the leader, and even when fans do not have the opportunity to make their dreams come true, the desires themselves serve as a powerful indicator of the strength of their attachment.

3.3.2 *Production*

Production is another key dimension identified by fandom studies and one that is particularly related to digital media. In this environment, activation

and—at least potentially—two-way communication between citizens and political representatives take place. Online leader-oriented production encompasses a wide array of practices, from low-threshold, almost effortless ones on the part of the fan to more ‘costly’ ones in terms of the time, expertise and financial resources required to perform them. The survey questionnaire included six questions regarding behaviours related to the dimension of production.

Liking or reposting political content published on the leaders’ accounts is perhaps the least demanding way to express emotional involvement; it is the easiest way for the fan to react to the leaders’ production, to produce and reproduce media content related to them. The literature on e-participation has long debated whether such actions should be included in the domain of political participation, with terms such as slacktivism, clicktivism or armchair activism being used to disqualify these minimal-effort forms of political engagement (Cantijoch & Gibson, 2019; Ceccarini 2021). Among the baseline fans who followed their leaders’ social media accounts, about nine out of ten—86%, and 92% for strong fans—liked or reposted, while 73%, or 83% of strong fans, had commented on one of the leader’s posts, if only with an emoticon.

These results confirm that these actions are part of the habitual online routines of fans who are active in the digital space. However, a significant segment of our baseline group of fans was also involved in other online forms of production, with 40% of fans reposting memes about the leader and 31% using hashtags with the leader’s name. Both variables confirm a close relationship between affective attachment and these forms of political consumption, the prevalence of which is more than 10 percentage points higher among strong fans compared to moderate fans. Writing an original post implies a slightly higher level of commitment; nevertheless, this form of production involved more than one-third of fans and 42% of strong fans. The same holds true for the production of other self-generated online content, such as memes, hashtags or social media pages: 33% of fans and 39% of strong fans stated that they had created and circulated such digital artefacts.

Similar to the approach we adopted for the consumption dimension, we also combined these six variables through an additive index to allow for a deeper exploration of the relationships between affection and online practices, while also identifying an additional inner layer of potential political fandom. As shown in Fig. 3.2, 41% of our baseline group had been

involved, to a significant degree, in forms of online production. This figure corresponds to 11% of the general voting age population.

3.3.3 *Community*

What is the weight of the community dimension involved in being a fan? This aspect is more difficult to detect using survey tools, which cannot delve into the internal dynamics of the groups that emerge around a political figure and are instead designed to investigate individual feelings. Some attempts to capture this dimension, however, have been made (see, for instance, Lee & Moon, 2021). Drawing on insights from previous studies, we gathered data that may shed light on how political fans deal with the ‘collective dimension’ of fandom. First, we directed our attention to fan pages devoted to leaders, which sometimes consist of the primary demonstration of fandom such as in the case of ‘Le bimbe di Conte’ (Campus et al., 2025). Fans who followed ‘other’ accounts or pages—beyond those managed by the leaders and their staff—were asked about their specific motivations for visiting such unofficial, and often fan-run, digital hubs (Table 3.3). Among the responses of this subsample, the segment of those who explicitly reported feeling ‘part of a community’ was quite limited: only 5% cited it as their primary motivation, and 35% included it among their top two motivations. An additional, larger component reported that they ‘enjoy interacting with like-minded people about the

Table 3.3 Motivation for following accounts/pages dedicated to the leader. Why do you follow these social accounts or pages (among those who follow other social media accounts or pages dedicated to their favourite leader or political figure)?

	<i>Primary motivation</i>		<i>Total mentions (top 2)</i>	
	<i>Strong fans</i>	<i>Fans</i>	<i>Strong fans</i>	<i>Fans</i>
I find it entertaining	33.8	35.9	44.4	45.4
I am interested in following pages about the leader	40.2	41.1	61.4	59.2
I enjoy interacting with like-minded people about the leader	19.7	18.1	60.1	60.5
I feel part of a community	6.3	4.9	34.1	34.9

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

leader': 18% cited this as their primary motivation, a figure that rose to 61% when combining the two top responses. Other dimensions seemed to prevail in the respondents' self-reported motivations, at least when the fans who followed such pages were asked to select the top-ranked one, with 41% citing their general interest in following such pages about the leader and 36% saying it was because they 'find it entertaining'. The entertainment dimension, such as the use of memes, which also surfaced in the indicators analysed earlier in this section, emerged as another significant component of the fan experience. However, when considering the top two responses, entertainment and interest rose to 45% and 59% respectively. These figures underscore the broad relevance of interacting with fellow supporters of the leader, which garnered 61% of the combined responses.

It is worth noting that despite providing some insights into the importance of the community dimension, the data presented so far pertained to a relatively small proportion of our baseline fans—the 35% who reported following unofficial accounts or pages about the leader. To comprehensively measure the relevance of this dimension across the entire fan base, another specific question was addressed to all respondents, with 78% of fans, assigning a score from 6 to 10 on a 0–10 scale, indicating identification with the sentence, 'I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do'. Although this result does not provide evidence for an actual community, interacting with peers with congruent views and shared feelings about the leader seems to emerge as a central component of being a fan. In other words, the parasocial fan–leader (affective) interaction seems to extend, to a certain extent, to the fan–fan relationship. Other methodological approaches, especially qualitative and ethnographic ones, may provide more robust evidence regarding the existence of communities of fans defined by deep(er) emotional bonds, marked by in-group versus out-group attitudes, shared practices and dense networks of horizontal interactions. However, our data revealed, at the very least, a strong propensity in this direction among our baseline group of fans, thus highlighting a close nexus with the sphere of affection. The fact that 93% of those identified as strong fans shared a community-oriented mindset significantly reinforces this interpretation.

3.4 THE FAN PROFILE

In this section, we seek to identify the socio-demographic and political characteristics that are typical of fans to delineate a proper fan profile. In this regard, it should be emphasised that this aspect of our object of study, as far as we are aware, has not been thoroughly explored in the literature, which has instead devoted greater attention to followers' or fans' physical and psychological characteristics or their social capital (see, for instance, Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019). In pursuing this goal, we cross-tabulated the fan-/non-fan-dependent variable with five additional variables: three socio-demographic variables—gender, age and level of education—and two socio-political variables—interest in politics and self-placement on the left–right axis. Of these, the socio-political variables most strongly discriminated between fans and non-fans, since the percentages recorded in some of their categories diverged in ways particularly marked from their column marginals (Table 3.4). In this respect, it may first be observed that those who express a strong interest in politics—and to a much lesser extent, also those who show some interest in politics—display levels of closeness and affectivity towards a leader that can qualify them as fans. This is hardly surprising, as individuals who are interested in political matters are almost certainly more inclined to acquire and consume political information and are therefore more equipped to assess the qualities and competences, as well as the limits and shortcomings, of the various leaders, and thus to decide to which leader to grant their trust, thereby becoming fans.

The second socio-political variable, self-placement on the left–right axis, also had a strong impact on the likelihood of being characterised as a fan. Indeed, it is above all those at the extremes of the political continuum—particularly on the right—who show a pronounced tendency to exhibit fan-like attitudes and behaviours. This does not appear particularly surprising, as individuals holding more radical political positions usually express stronger attachment either to the political community to which they feel they belong or to the leaders who embody that community. Furthermore, with regard to the strong propensity of those who define themselves as 'right-wing' to be fans, it is perhaps superfluous to recall the importance traditionally attributed to the 'leader' by adherents to movements and parties belonging to this political galaxy. In recent years, moreover, it is especially within the so-called radical right populist parties that, thanks to the development and diffusion of digital technologies, a

Table 3.4 The profiles of fans of political leaders

	<i>Not a fan</i>	<i>Moderate fan</i>	<i>Strong fan</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Fan (moderate + strong)</i>
Gender					
Male	71.2	15.5	13.3	100.0	28.8
Female	80.7	11.3	8.1	100.0	19.4
Age class					
18–29	73.5	15.4	11.0	100.0	26.4
30–44	75.6	12.7	11.7	100.0	24.4
45–54	77.6	13.5	8.9	100.0	22.4
55–65	79.6	11.0	9.4	100.0	20.4
65+	74.4	14.1	11.5	100.0	25.6
Education level					
Low	76.3	13.4	10.3	100.0	23.7
Middle	75.5	13.8	10.6	100.0	24.4
High	76.3	12.8	10.9	100.0	23.7
Interest in politics					
Very interested	65.4	15.6	19.0	100.0	34.6
Somewhat interested	73.7	16.6	9.8	100.0	26.4
Not very interested	84.8	9.4	5.8	100.0	15.2
Not at all interested	96.9	2.1	1.1	100.0	3.2
Left–right self-placement					
Left	70.6	19.2	10.2	100.0	29.4
Centre-left	78.8	15.8	5.4	100.0	21.2
Centre	85.3	9.4	5.3	100.0	14.7
Centre-right	74.1	16.9	9.0	100.0	25.9
Right	53.8	17.0	29.2	100.0	46.2
External	95.1	3.1	1.9	100.0	5.0
ALL	76.0	13.3	10.6	100.0	23.9

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

disintermediation of politics has occurred, together with a particularly strong attempt to establish a direct relationship between the leader and his or her ‘people’ (Mudde, 2007, 2017).

Turning now to the socio-demographic variables, men are more likely than women to fit the fan profile, perhaps due to their greater involvement in political issues. With regard to the age variable, a slight propensity can be observed among both the youngest and oldest respondents to display typical fan attitudes and behaviours, thus entrusting themselves to leaders in whom they place their hopes: the former probably because

they have not yet developed a fully structured political identity, the latter perhaps because they attribute to the leader a potential role in improving a state of affairs that, in their eyes, may have appeared unchanged for far too long.

Finally, it is interesting to note that education level did not exert any influence on the likelihood of becoming a political leader fan. One might have mistakenly assumed that individuals with lower levels of education would be more attracted to the ‘personalistic’ aspects of politics and less to its substantive content. However, as observed in other fandom domains, such as sport, cinema and music, the phenomenon of fandom cuts across and bypasses educational boundaries; fans can be found across the entire spectrum, from those with the highest qualifications to those with none.

As noted above, the analyses made it possible to distinguish moderate fans from those who may be considered strong fans. It is therefore interesting to examine whether differences exist between these two levels of fanship with respect to the variables discussed above.

As shown in Table 3.4, it is once again the socio-political variables that most clearly distinguish the two fan types. Indeed, the highest proportion of strong fans (19%) was observed among those who are very interested in politics, whereas the largest share of moderate fans (17%) was observed among those who are only somewhat interested in politics. Moreover, the highest proportion of strong fans (29%) was recorded among individuals who position themselves on the right of the political spectrum, while among those who self-placed on the left, moderate fans (19%) clearly outnumber strong fans (10%).

By contrast, socio-demographic variables reveal little differentiation, except for a slightly higher proportion of moderate fans among younger respondents.

3.5 CONCLUSIONS

The main argument of this chapter is that affect is the driving force of political fandom and is thus the main dimension on which a definition of a political fan should be built. To answer the theoretical and empirical questions as to how to operationalise and measure fans’ affective attachment to their leaders, we focused on feelings of closeness and on the emotional components of affect. This allowed us to show that a not insignificant number of citizens can be regarded as fans and that this group can be

divided into two categories depending on their degree of attachment: moderate and strong fans.

Following the insights from existing studies, we analysed what it means to be a fan in terms of practices of consumption and production and a sense of community. As for the former, we expected that strong fans would be more involved than moderate fans. Overall, our findings confirmed this expectation: Strong fans scored higher in all offline and online activities. When the difference between the two groups is smaller—such as in the similar numbers of those in both groups who followed their leaders’ official accounts—this pertains to accessible activities that require minimal effort. In short, there may exist a relationship between intensity of affect and level of concrete engagement. As for sense of community, our method was not the most functional with which to investigate this dimension; nonetheless, our results suggest some explorative reflections concerning the importance of interacting with like-minded people and, especially, sharing the same feelings.

Finally, profiling fans, especially stressing the difference between the two categories of moderate and strong fans, has provided extremely interesting and possibly provocative insights into the phenomenon of political fandom. First, since famous cases of political fandom are often associated with young and digitally active people, we must stress that strong fans are not the youngest, as the elderly are slightly predominant in that category. This does not mean that political fandom is not for the young but stresses that, in contrast to some interpretations, it is not *only* for the young.

Second, the ‘funny’ side of fandom and its evident component of entertainment could misleadingly be associated with a frivolous way of approaching politics. If it may be true that these aspects have the potential to help politicians connect with previously detached people, our findings disconfirm such a widespread prejudice and rather show that strong fans are interested in politics. This suggests that, as argued by Dean (2019), many politically engaged citizens may also experience politics through non-traditional cultures, such as memes and other forms of visual media culture.

Overall, the evidence presented and discussed in this chapter confirms the importance of taking political fandom seriously. Our data show that this phenomenon concerns, albeit with different nuances and gradations, a not negligible segment of the population and pertains to the affective and emotional dimensions of contemporary politics.

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Fans Will Be Fans? Comparing Fandoms in the Political and Star Systems

Fabio Bordignon, Luigi Ceccarini, and Giacomo Salvarani

4.1 THE CELEBRITY–FAN RELATIONSHIP ACROSS DIFFERENT DOMAINS

In the context of the personalisation (McAllister, 2007), privatisation and intimisation of politics (Atia & Balmas, 2025; Rojek, 2016), following Van Zoonen (2004) and later Sandvoss (2012), we might expect political constituencies to increasingly mirror the dynamics that characterise fan communities. That is to say, we might expect to see political leaders performing celebrity roles (Street, 2004); citizen-voters acting as the leaders' followers; and those same citizens conceiving of themselves as members of a fan community. This involves practices of consumption and production of political narratives and contents in the media space, while forms of “intimacy at distance” are favoured by the digital media.

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Building on the theoretical framework outlined in Chap. 2 and drawing upon the main dimensions characterising fan communities in the star systems, the previous chapter aimed to identify the measures of political leaders' fandom in seven European countries, study its profile and internal dynamics. Using the same data, the present chapter tests to what extent leader–follower relationships in the political domain follow the same logic(s) underlying celebrity–fan relationships in other domains of public life, such as the world of entertainment, arts, and sports. While these dynamics are often studied from the point of view of the celebrities or political leaders themselves (Street, 2004), we analyse the relationship with their fans from the point of view of the latter.

Are fans of other types of celebrities or stars more likely to hold forms of personalised followership regarding political leaders? Can we imagine something as a “latent predisposition to be fan” that travels across different domains, uniting the political system and the star system? In attempting to answer these questions—which we may summarise with a formula recalling this chapter's title: *Fans Will Be Fans?*—we also aim to offer insights by addressing three more specific subsets of questions: (1) What is the overlap between star-fandom and political-fandom?¹ (2) To what extent do the internal dynamics of political leader fandom mirror those characterising star fandoms, in terms of mechanisms of personal attraction, modes of consumption and community logic(s)? In particular, is the weight of private, intimate, emotion-driven, and celebrity-status-related factors in individual attraction to political leaders comparable to what we can observe in the case of stars, celebrities, and influencers? (3) Do the political communities “resemble” in terms of their socio-demographic traits the profile of star fandoms?

¹ In this contribution, the terms “political fandom” and “leader fandom” are interchangeable, as they both represent an abbreviation of “political leader fandom”, while describing, given our operationalisation, the same phenomenon. However, from a theoretical standpoint, we do not necessarily wish to exclude the presence of political fans who are not fans of single political figures, but, e.g. of political parties (van Zoonen, 2004; Sandvoss, 2012). While the “star fandom” wording more explicitly refers to single figures, we similarly see fans of collective entities, such as sport teams (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 2004), to which the word “fan” is commonly used. Nevertheless, others put into question the very possibility of being fans of political parties, explicitly differentiating the word *fan*, which can only be applied to fans of individual figures, from *enthusiastic supporter*, which can also be applied to collective entities (Lee & Moon, 2021). In our fandom operationalisation, we similarly adopt a clear-cut approach. To include fans/supporters of collective entities, such an operationalisation should have followed a different logic from the one we use in this chapter, as the survey question wordings are specifically tailored to capture fans of individual figures.

The chapter is organised as follows. The next section provides the methodological coordinates for the comparison of political and star fandoms and illustrates their measures across the studied countries. The third section identifies different components of society as regards their joint or exclusive inclusion in the political and star fandom, studying the degree of their overlap. The fourth section presents a parallel description of the two fandoms. Using comparable indicators, it first explores the individual motivations of the followers between the two social groups. Then, it compares degrees of consumption and the presence of community orientations. The following section (5) uses logit models to detect the main traits characterising the socio-demographic profile of the two fandoms. The final section (6) summarises the main findings of these analyses.

4.2 OPERATIONALISATION AND PRELIMINARY DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The multi-country survey questionnaire was designed to provide comparable measures of the demand side of fan/celebrity relationships across the political system and the star system. This was necessary to maintain the comparative approach of the study, even though the two domains are characterised by distinct features and logics.

We identify the social reach of the star fandom phenomenon using the same approach discussed in the previous chapter to construct the baseline typology of political leader fandom. In particular, we combine the same two dimensions of affect—*closeness* and *emotionality*—as the primary criteria for inclusion in the area of fandom. We ground our operationalisation of citizens' *closeness* on two survey questions—(1) for the political domain, and (2) for the world of sport, entertainment, etc.—worded as follows:

1. *Thinking of people who have a political role in [COUNTRY] right now, is there a leader or political figure you feel close to?*
2. *Is there a current celebrity or star in sport, entertainment (film, music, etc.), media (TV personality, social media, etc.), fashion or culture whom you admire or are a fan of?*

Those who responded affirmatively to the first question were included in the area of political fandom, while those who responded affirmatively to the second one were included in the star fandom group.

It should be stressed that only the second question, referring to the star system, explicitly mentioned the word “fan” in its wording, reflecting the

habitual use of that term in this domain. The decision to avoid the term in reference to the political domain was made knowingly to avoid biasing the interviewees' responses and allow the status of political fan to emerge naturally from the analysis.

We acknowledge that the first question, explicitly focused on the national context, is structurally more restrictive. Nevertheless, the choice is justified by different considerations. The main focus of the research regards the political domain, and the mechanisms of political representation are mainly anchored to the national state. Even if one may be a fan of a foreign or international leader, it seems reasonably justified to frame the political fandom phenomenon within the national borders. On the contrary, the star system naturally extends beyond the national borders.² From a methodological point of view, this implies that our definition of star fandom is structurally broader (or less restrictive) when compared to political fandom. This may attenuate the measures of association that will be presented in the next sessions. However, this structural attenuation also corresponds to a more conservative approach: If a statistically significant association between the two types of fandom emerges, this provides robust evidence of a general tendency for individuals to participate in fandoms across those domains.

The second inclusion criterion, like the first, concerns the *affectivity* dimension, but in this case, it is specifically centred on the *emotional* sphere. For star fans, it is based on the same set of two questions used for political fans. Namely, we asked respondents, on a 0–10 scale, to what extent they identified with two statements regarding their preferred political leader or star, respectively:

1. *I love him/her as if he/she were my friend.*
2. *When the media or other people or network users criticise him/her in a way that seems unfair to me, it is almost as if they were doing it to me.*

We designed the first sentence to capture a form of emotionality related to “intimacy at distance” (Rojek, 2016), whereas the second aims to measure the emotional response triggered by (mediated) forms of polarisation (Barnes, 2022). Finally, we combined the resulting variables into an

² In the exploratory investigation presented below, however, concerning the target figures of these fandoms, we find that the most important stars in each country hold the same nationality of respondents. Thus, whilst celebrity fandoms are certainly transnational phenomena, the country-level is not irrelevant.

additive index ranging from 0 to 10. We use its values to distinguish between the exclusion (0–4) and the inclusion into the fandom subsample(s), as well as between two degrees of individual affect: *moderate* (5–7) and *strong* (8–10).

Defined and operationalised as such, the star fandom phenomenon encompasses a slightly larger component of the voting-age population: 32%, compared to the 24% included in the political fandom. This means that about one citizen out of three across the seven European countries emerges as having an affective bond with individual figures of the star system, broadly understood to include not only the entertainment industry but also the fields of arts, culture, and sports. These individuals can be defined as fans of such celebrities. Thus, this fandom can be related to the corresponding group identified in the political domain, to test the extent to which they overlap and resemble each other in terms of their drivers, profile, and internal dynamics.

It is beyond the scope of this study to analyse the specific “objects” of the star fandom and their distribution across its different domains. However, in the questionnaire, we decided to include an open-ended question, in which respondents were asked to provide the name of their preferred star. Responses were largely dominated by references to the world of music industry and, predominantly, of sports. Indeed, the most cited celebrity in each country is a national sporting figure: from football, as Hristo Stoičkov in Bulgaria and David Beckham in the UK³; from basket, such as Dennis Schröder in Germany; from swimming, such as Léon Marchand in France; and tennis, such as Rafael Nadal (and Carlos Alcaraz) in Spain, Jannik Sinner in Italy, and Iga Świątek in Poland.

Grouping all fans, in the cross-national descriptive analysis presented in Table 4.1, we first note a significant degree of variation among the seven countries in terms of the magnitude of the star fandom phenomenon. To some extent, this reflects the same ranking analysed in the previous chapter with regard to political fandom. Further, it is worth noting that in all countries but two—Poland and France—the prevalence of star fans is higher compared to that of political ones. This was largely expected, given

³ Interestingly, the two football players who emerge in this investigation are retired from professional football, which they have not been playing for over twenty years (Stoičkov) and over ten years (Beckham). Yet, their celebrity status remains intact, even if it is no longer supported by their current sporting performances.

Table 4.1 Cross-national percentages of political and star fans. Strong fans percentages between parentheses

	<i>BG</i>	<i>DE</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>FR</i>	<i>IT</i>	<i>PL</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Europe</i>
Leader fans	23.9	9.0	30.4	27.0	29.3	39.3	21.8	24.0
(strong leader fans)	(8.3)	(3.6)	(12.4)	(12.4)	(11.6)	(21.5)	(9.8)	(10.6)
Star fans	35.8	22.8	44.9	24.4	36.9	36.5	34.0	31.9
(strong star fans)	(17.5)	(8.2)	(22.4)	(11.8)	(17.5)	(22.4)	(15.9)	(15.2)

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

both the “popular” and everyday nature of engagement with (and media consumption of) the star system.

Germany emerges as the country with the lowest share of population included in the star fandom (23%)—a 9-point gap from the cross-country average. Nevertheless, this result about star fandom in Germany is significantly larger compared to the country’s 9% of political fans—a striking 15-point difference from the average. For the star fandom, we observe a similarly low percentage in France (24%), where, on the contrary, fans of celebrities are less than political fans (27%). We find a higher number of star fans in the United Kingdom (34%), Bulgaria (36%), Poland (37%), and Italy (37%). The highest value overall is registered in Spain, where 45% of respondents are included in this group. It is noteworthy that the three countries with the largest proportions of star fans also display the highest levels of political fandom, though the ranking differs, with Poland emerging as the national case with the highest share of political fans.

4.3 MATCHING THE POLITICAL AND STAR FANDOMS

The similar magnitude of the two fandoms and their correlation at the country level do not reveal, per se, an overlap at the individual level. In this section, we will examine the individual association in the overall sample and across the seven countries.

The cross-tabulations reported reveal how the prevalence of political fans increases moving from star non-fans to star-fans: it more than doubles, rising from just 15% to 43% (Table 4.2). Given the dichotomous operationalisation of the two variables, we measure the tetrachoric correlation between leader and star fandom. For the whole sample, the tetrachoric rho is 0.48 ($p < 0.001$), exhibiting a present, yet moderate,

Table 4.2 The overlap of leader and star fandom (%)

	<i>Not star fans</i>	<i>Star fans</i>	<i>Total</i>
Not leader fans	58.0	18.1	76.0
Leader fans	10.1	13.9	24.0
Total	68.1	31.9	100.0
Not leader fans	85.2	56.6	76.0
Leader fans	14.9	43.4	24.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

correlation between the two groups of fandoms. Its statistical significance is confirmed in all seven countries, which, however, exhibit differences in the strength of the correlation.⁴

Table 4.2 also reports the relative percentages of the joint distribution of the two fandom variables, thereby providing a descriptive quantification of the four groups deriving from their possible combinations. The area of non-fandom is predictably high and comprises more than half of the population: 58%. Conversely, this means that more than 40% of respondents have affective bonds with a figure from either the political system or the star system, or from both of them. The areas of “exclusive” fandom are sizable, especially regarding celebrities from the star system: 10% are fans of a political leader but not of a star, while 18% are fans of a star but not of a political figure. The most interesting segment, however, comprises those who may be termed “total fans”: individuals who have developed forms of closeness and emotional attachment to both political and non-political figures, representing the 14% of respondents.

The association between being fan of a celebrity in the two realms cannot, on its own, be used as a test of the presence of a common latent predisposition. However, descriptive evidence on the co-occurrence of the two phenomena can suggest preliminary insights into the possible presence of similar mechanisms behind them. The next two sections further develop this interpretation collecting evidence about the presence of: (a)

⁴We observe the lowest ρ in Poland (0.39) and France (0.44), the highest in Bulgaria and the United Kingdom (0.55). It is worth recalling that Poland and France are also the only countries in which the prevalence of political fandom is higher compared to that of star fandom.

similar fandom-like dynamics, in terms of sources of personal attraction, practices of consumption, and sense of community belonging and (b) at least a partially similar profile, in terms of the demographic and political traits displayed by two groups of fans.

4.4 COMPARATIVE DESCRIPTION OF LEADER VS. STAR FANDOMS

After having described the overlap between the leader and star fandoms, in this section, we carry out a comparative description of the two groups, from the point of view of: (1) the reasons for which those we classified as fans admire the political leader or star they support; (2) the degree of consumption within the fandoms of leader/star-related content, both online and offline; and (3) their propensity to be involved in a community of like-minded peers. All the analyses in this section are based on the two separate subsamples (political leader fandom and star fandom). For each analysis, we report percentages which are weighted for each country’s population, as well as for the respective distribution of gender, age class, and education.

First, in Table 4.3, we report the self-assessed reasons for liking the mentioned political leader or preferred star. This table presents results

Table 4.3 Reasons to like the leader vs. the star between leader and star fandom for two parallel but different sets of response options

<i>For what reasons do you like this leader or political figure? [Rank 1+2+3]</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>	<i>For what reasons do you like this celebrity or star? [Rank 1+2+3]</i>
For being competent and capable	48.1	51.9	For being good at his/her job
For sharing his/her ideas and political vision	48.0	22.8	For sharing his/her ideas
For understanding the problems of the people	41.7	18.3	For being one of us
For being an honest person	41.5	34.5	For being a good person
For being a real, authentic person	39.7	53.9	For being a real, authentic person
For being the only one who can save the country	31.6	50.4	For being unique and extraordinary
For being likeable	19.4	33.3	For being likeable

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

from a survey question in which respondents were asked to rank up to three reasons for their preference for a particular political leader or star, choosing from seven closed-ended options. The table displays the aggregated percentages for each category. Response categories were designed to mirror those used for political leader fandom, enabling direct comparison between the two types of fandom. However, certain categories were adapted to better reflect the specific characteristics of each domain.

The most chosen motivations to like the political leader or political figure, either as first, second, or third choice, are “[I like him/her...] ...for being competent and capable” and “...for sharing his/her ideas and political vision”. Both are chosen by slightly less than half of the political fandom subsample. The fact that the leader or political figure is “likeable” is the least chosen category, with only 19.4% of respondents in this subsample opting for this option. Looking at the overall distribution, the star fandom sees a clearer split between the most chosen categories— “[I like him/her...] ...for being good at his/her job”, “...for being a real, authentic person”, and “...for being unique and extraordinary”, each accounting for over half of the star fandom subsample—and the least chosen one, i.e., “For being one of us”, selected by only 18.3% of the subsample.

The differences between the two fandoms disclose specific logics, which may point to differing expectations that fans hold from the person they admire, and that perhaps even suggest differences in the very nature of the two phenomena. Yet, similarities are present. Fans of political leaders are mostly attracted by leaders’ tangible capabilities, such as competence in their political role, and by their political vision, which they share. Star fans also highlight the star’s competence (“being good at his/her job”), but conversely declare to like this person because of his/her attributes, either “being authentic” or “being unique and extraordinary”.

The symmetry across the two fandoms tells us that in both cases fandoms are driven by a competence evaluation (*what they can do*), which only then translates into an affective attachment. However, the person’s attributes (*who they are*) mainly matter for the star fandom, while political fandoms for the most part follow political consideration (*what is the political vision* [the leader] *embodies* and his/her *understanding of people’s problems*), with likability itself, perhaps surprisingly, ranking as the last reason for which one likes a politician. Feelings related to an intimacy “at distance” are more clearly visible in the star fandom—given that, in this case, affectivity is not based on an established proximity. Thus, what matters in

the star fandom is the celebrity being “extraordinary”, whereas in political fandom, closeness to people’s problems emerges as an important characteristic.

An intimacy, the one in regard to a political figure, that, when developed, cannot feel too much “at a distance”. Hence, to be admired, politicians must get off the high horse the stars may sometimes walk on. Nevertheless, it is important to stress how authenticity and likeability, despite being secondary to other motivations, are cited by significant portions of the political fandom as well.

In Table 4.4, and again across the two fandoms, we present percentages about fans’ online and offline consumption of leader or celebrity-related content, such as news articles, biographies, social media pages,

Table 4.4 Fandom consumption across leader and star fandoms. Percentages exhibited

<i>Regarding this leader or political figure/this celebrity or star, have you recently...</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>
Read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed?		
Yes	60.0	66.7
In particular, have you read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines?		
Yes	44.9	50.8
Read a biography/autobiography about him/her?		
Yes	43.6	52.6
Seen and/or heard him/her in person at a public event?		
Yes	60.9	57.4
<i>Again, regarding this leader or political figure/celebrity or star, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>
Yes	55.8	67.1
<i>Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other social media accounts or pages dedicated to your favourite leader or political figure/celebrity or star?</i>	<i>Leader fandom</i>	<i>Star fandom</i>
Yes, and I follow it	34.6	37.6
Yes, but I don’t follow it	25.8	24.1
No	38.6	37.4
No answer	0.9	0.9

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

and TV programmes. On top of that, we asked respondents whether they had recently seen the political leader/star in person at a public event. In this case, a higher proportion of political fans report having seen their leader in person than star fans. The difference is over 3 percentage points. However, in the two fandoms, having more than half of the fans subsamples declaring to have been in the same “physical” place as their fan-object reveals that online engagement did not replace offline engagement, rather the two are in many cases complementary, not substitute (Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2011). Further, this outcome is particularly interesting given that, for all the other questions regarding these forms of content consumption, it is star fans who exhibit higher percentages.

This demonstrates that politics, like other cultural domains involving fandom, remains rooted in offline experiences such as public events, which have not been displaced by mainstream media or online consumption but rather coexist alongside them. Thus, we can say that public events still represent an essential part of being engaged as a fan—particularly in the political sphere.

For the two fandoms, and besides the mentioned relevance of offline engagement for the political one, we notice the highest percentages for (i) following personal social media accounts/pages and (ii) for having recently read articles or watched TV programmes where the star’s private life was discussed; in both cases, the share of fans declaring of having “consumed” such content is slightly over two-thirds for the star fandom, and clearly over half for the political fandom. More star fans, than political leader ones, hence appear to consume celebrity-related content. Further, it is noteworthy that more than half of the star fandom subsample answered “Yes” to each category of celebrity-related content consumption, besides the case of social media accounts and pages dedicated to the celebrity or star, which are followed by the 37.6% of fans. Although this figure is as low as expected, it reveals a notable phenomenon affecting both domains studied to a similar extent. This practice does not involve social media accounts of political leaders or stars; instead, it involves following accounts *devoted to them*, which may constitute an expression of fandom in itself (Campus et al., 2025).

Around 60% of both groups of fans declare to know an account or social media page of this type. Thus, despite the underlined differences, there are aspects for which the worlds of political and star fans are clearly comparable.

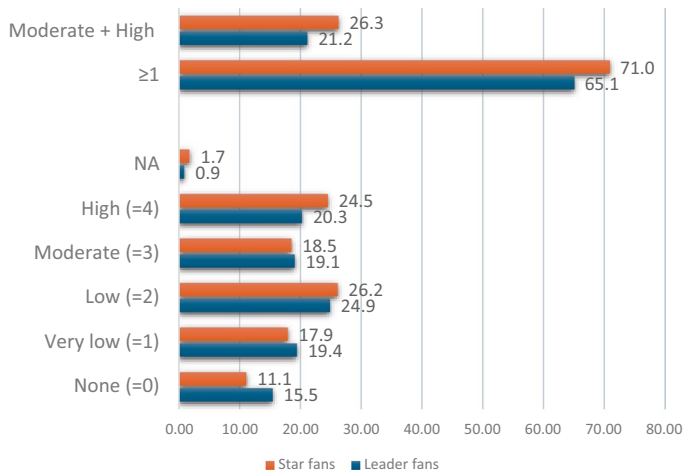


Fig. 4.1 Offline consumption index across leader and star fans. Percentages exhibited. (*Source:* Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases)

With the aim of proceeding with this comparison, we built an index, comprehensive of all the offline activities,⁵ whose percentages have been singularly reported in Table 4.4. With this comprehensive index, we want to analyse the level of this type of engagement across the two fandoms. We graphically report the results of this additive index in Fig. 4.1. In this figure, and across each of the two subsamples, we see the percentages for five levels of offline consumption—with those who did not answer included, they represent the totality of each fandom subsample—and from none up to all the four selected forms of engagement: reading articles/watching TV programmes where the leader/star’s private life is discussed; reading general articles about them; reading an (auto)biography; having seen this person live at a public event. Further, we provide the reader with a comparison of the “active” fans, namely those who were involved in at least one form of consumption, as well as a comparison of the “very active” fans, namely those who were involved in at least three out of the four consumption types. From an overall analysis of the results, we can draw three main conclusions: (1) in both families of fans, respondents are more likely to consume the politician or celebrity-related content than not; (2) net of

⁵ It is important to note that, even if we describe this index as an offline one, given that it involves activities that do not necessarily need access to the internet, some of these forms of consumption (e.g. reading news articles) can and do often happen online.

the different composition of the two fandoms, the star fandom holds an overall higher degree of engagement, which could be also the result of a higher availability and easier accessibility of star-related content to “consume” than the politician-related one; (3) without disregarding the extent to which the second conclusion is true, the distribution of engagement across the two groups appears to be very similar, which, once again, reveals elements of overlap regarding the characterisation of the two groups of fans and similar mechanisms operating within them.

A dimension not yet investigated in this contribution is that of “community”, which the scholarship presents as a key element of fandom (Dean, 2017). While we do not directly test to what extent political and star fans are part of a specific community, we analyse the extent to which they are inclined to be part of a community—or, at least, to engage with followers of the same person they are fans of. Namely, we asked the interviewees if they like talking to other people who admire the political leader or celebrity as much as they do, and to choose a category in a 0–10 scale of self-assessed identification with that sentence from “Not at all” (=0) to “Completely” (=10). We report our findings in Fig. 4.2.

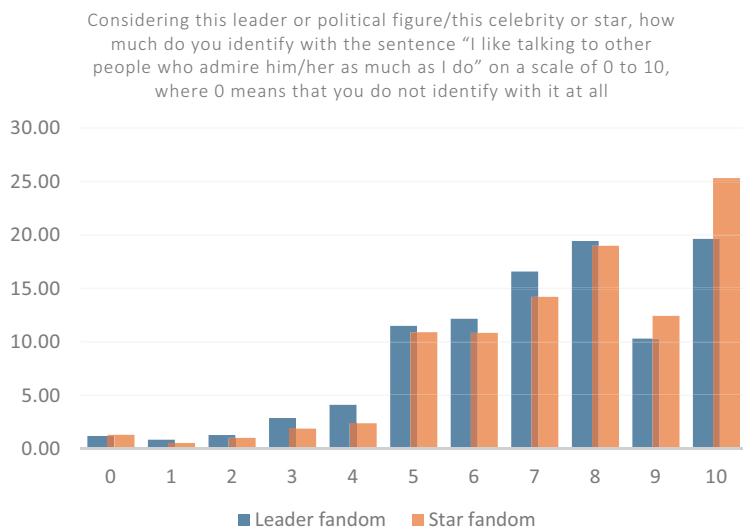


Fig. 4.2 Propensity towards a community across leader and star fandoms at each level of a 0–10 scale. Percentages exhibited. (*Source:* Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases)

Results confirm that being a fan typically entails a willingness to be part of a community of peers of like-minded followers, with the upper categories being chosen more frequently than the lower ones. Sharing admiration and connecting with other admirers thus appear as a fundamental rather than an ancillary part of the being-a-fan experience. With regard to the comparison across the two fandoms, while exhibiting a strikingly similar distribution in the two scales, fans of a celebrity from sports or popular culture have a higher propensity towards a fandom community than political leaders' fans. Regarding the latter group, 78.1% assign a score of agreement of 6 or above, while 81.8% of star fans do likewise. One explanation for this discrepancy—which nevertheless falls barely outside the margin of error—might be that politics, more than sport, art or entertainment, entails higher social costs associated with public engagement (Paler et al., 2018), which can result in a higher discretion. Expressing enthusiasm for a political leader is indeed more likely to be met with social disapproval and negative spillover effects within one's social networks. This may lead political fans to exercise greater caution than star ones—not because their desire for community is inherently weaker, but because the perceived risks of expressing political preferences remain salient even in like-minded settings.

4.5 COMPARING FANDOM PROFILES

Following the comparative description of the two fandoms presented above (leader and star fandoms), we now address their socio-demographic composition, specifically analysing the traits that are associated with the individual inclusion in one of the two groups. To this aim, we run two regression logit models, with belonging to the fandom (a dichotomous variable with 0 = No and 1 = Yes) as dependent variable (Tables 4.5 and 4.6). The independent variables function both as possible predictors, which we inductively take into consideration and test, and control variables isolating the effect of the other factors.

The socio-demographic independent variables are the following:

- *Gender*, with “Male” as reference category (=0) and “Female” (=1);
- *Age class*, a discrete five-level variable recoded from the declared age at the time of the interview, with the younger cohort—starting from 18 years old, the age of majority in the countries of our sample—as reference category (18–29 = 0);

Table 4.5 Logit regression model (DV: Political leader fandom)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Female (ref.: male)	−0.332***	0.091	0.000
Age class (ref: 18–29)			
30–44	−0.088	0.159	0.578
45–54	−0.255	0.154	0.098
55–65	−0.321*	0.157	0.042
65+	−0.082	0.148	0.578
Education level (ref: Low)			
Middle	0.039	0.110	0.724
High	−0.160	0.130	0.217
News source (ref: TV news)			
Newspaper websites/apps	−0.008	0.126	0.951
Social media	0.086	0.141	0.539
Print newspapers	0.178	0.148	0.229
Radio	0.182	0.139	0.190
Podcasts	0.379†	0.225	0.093
News avoidance	−0.672*	0.332	0.043
Political interest (ref: Not interested)	1.208***	0.154	0.000
Political orientation (ref: Centre)			
Left	0.604***	0.142	0.000
Centre-Left	0.231	0.151	0.127
Centre-Right	0.547***	0.149	0.000
Right	1.274***	0.148	0.000
External/None	−1.028***	0.207	0.000
Country (ref: France)			
Bulgaria	−0.296	0.198	0.135
Germany	−1.605***	0.184	0.000
Spain	0.136	0.150	0.365
Italy	0.075	0.139	0.590
Poland	0.342*	0.166	0.039
UK	−0.538**	0.171	0.002
<i>Constant</i>	−1.615***	0.279	0.000

$N = 6900$; $\chi^2(25) = 591.03$, $p = 0.000$; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.1748$

Note. Logistic regression with robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

- *Education level*, a discrete three-level variable, with “Low”, the reference category (=0), including respondents with no education or holding up to the lower secondary diploma, and with the highest category, “High” (=2), consisting of those with a tertiary education.

Table 4.6 Logit regression model (DV: Star fandom)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Female (ref.: male)	−0.079	0.074	0.290
Age (ref: 18–29)			
30–44	−0.355**	0.121	0.003
45–54	−0.594***	0.126	0.000
55–65	−0.718***	0.138	0.000
65+	−0.751***	0.127	0.000
Education level (ref: Low)			
Middle	−0.025	0.094	0.791
High	−0.177†	0.103	0.086
News source (ref: TV news)			
Newspaper websites/apps	0.043	0.107	0.690
Social media	0.193†	0.111	0.082
Print newspapers	0.062	0.140	0.656
Radio	0.012	0.127	0.923
Podcasts	−0.001	0.189	0.995
News avoidance	−0.384	0.254	0.130
Political interest (ref: Not interested)	0.530***	0.094	0.000
Political orientation (ref: Centre)			
Left	−0.113	0.128	0.377
Centre-Left	−0.095	0.126	0.451
Centre-Right	−0.104	0.129	0.421
Right	0.224†	0.123	0.069
External/None	−0.513***	0.142	0.000
Country (ref: France)			
Bulgaria	0.507***	0.144	0.000
Germany	−0.315*	0.137	0.022
Spain	0.888***	0.117	0.000
Italy	0.550***	0.114	0.000
Poland	0.320*	0.140	0.023
UK	0.289*	0.135	0.032
<i>Constant</i>	−0.698**	0.218	0.001

$N = 6900$; $\chi^2(25) = 276.30$, $p = 0.000$; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.0587$

Note. Logistic regression with robust standard errors. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024 (base: 7161 cases)

The other independent variables considered are:

- *Most used media*, which identifies the respondents' first choice⁶ to the question "To keep up-to-date, what media have you most frequently used recently?", with "Television: newscasts or talk shows" as reference category (=0) and the other response options including "Websites or apps of daily newspapers or news magazines", "Social media, such as Facebook-Meta, X-Twitter, Instagram or others", "Daily printed newspapers or printed magazines", "Radio news programs", "News podcasts", and a last option indicating respondents that mostly try not to follow news and avoid keeping up to date;
- *Political interest*, a four-level variable recoded into a dichotomous one, so that those "Not very interested" in politics are grouped with those "Not at all interested" and form the reference category (Not interested in politics = 0), while the other category is formed by grouping those who answered "Somewhat" or "Very" (Interested in politics = 1);
- *Political orientation*, a categorical variable recoded, from the 0–10 scale traditionally used to measure the self-assessed left-right orientation moving upwards from left to Right, into six categories, "Left" (0–2 = 1), "Centre-Left" (3–4 = 2), "Centre" (5 = 3), "Centre-Right" (6/7 = 4), "Right" (8/10 = 5), and with "External" (=6) in a different category, which jointly includes those who refused to answer and those who declare not to recognise their orientation into this scale.

All the independent variables in the model were coded as categorical ones. On top of those mentioned above, both models included country fixed effects. Figure 4.3 presents the results of the two regression models (see Tables 4.5 and 4.6)—in teal, those referring to the leader fandom model, in orange those to the star fandom one—by exhibiting the point and interval estimates of the independent variables' coefficients. We depict coefficient estimates with a p -value lower than 0.01 with a darker shade, while those with a higher p -value appear with a lighted shade.

⁶ Respondents *could* (but *did not have to*) select up to two options, but they had to rank them for "importance". Therefore, we consider the first choice as the most important media used by respondents to keep up to date with news.

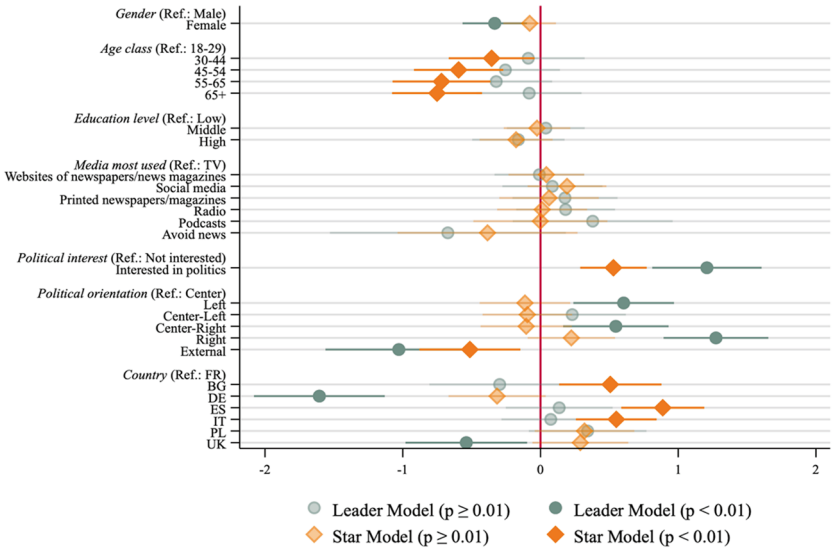


Fig. 4.3 Coefficient plot logit regression models (political fandom vs. star fandom). (*Source*: Fandom Democracy Project, July 2024, base: 7161 cases)

We now turn to the interpretation of the results. Despite some similarities and the overlap previously discussed in Sect. 3 of this chapter, and despite both being forms of parasocial attachment, the two parallel logit regression models show that the political leader fandom and the star fandom are associated with different socio-demographic and attitudinal factors. First, regarding gender: holding the other factors constant, we do not find an actual gender gap in the star fandom, while identifying as “female” significantly reduces the probability of belonging to political leader fandoms. Thus, on the one hand, the phenomenon of fandom itself exhibits gendered differentiation that has been observed in other domains of political life (Abendschön & García-Albacete, 2021)—such a disparity in relation to fandom engagement will be further analysed in Chap. 5. On the other hand, this does not extend to fandoms of famous personalities in sports, music, show business, cinema, etc., which are just as likely to be characterised by a more balanced “male” and “female” presence.

Differences can also be detected in the age class composition of the two fandoms. In this case, it is the political leader fandom exhibiting no significant association with any of the age classes compared to the younger

cohort (18–29). Conversely, we find the expected pattern of a linear decline in the probability of belonging to the star fandom as age increases, relative to respondents under 30 years old.

However, neither of the two fandoms is particularly characterised by fans with a high or low level of education. This is particularly striking when considering that, in other forms of political participation, such as voting, the education gap is persistent and perhaps even growing, where the turnout rate is diminishing (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017). Yet, political fandom communities do not respond to similar mechanisms, and the celebrity appeal of political leaders invests the electorate regardless of people's level of education. Similarly, star fandoms do not specifically pertain to the “uneducated” or “educated” ones in society.

Perhaps surprisingly, another similarity lies in the fact that political interest is significantly and positively associated with being part of a political leader fandom, but also of a star fandom. Overall, this is an important finding that shows again another perspective from which we note an—although partial—overlap. However, the effect of political interest as a predictor of belonging to a fandom appears to be much stronger for the political leader. Further, it is not only interest in politics in itself that raises the chances of being a political fan, but also the individual ideological positioning. The self-positioning on the left vs. right scale indeed reveals that holding a specific political orientation heightens the probability of belonging to a political leader fandom. In particular, this is true for those who position themselves at the margins of the political *continuum* from “left” to “right”, compared to those belonging to the “centre” of the political spectrum; on top of that, such effect is remarkably stronger for those on the “right”, who, when compared to centrists, are more than two times more likely to be fans of a political leader than those on the “left”. The latter hold the same probability of being part of a fandom as those on the “centre-right”. Even if, analysing the star fandom, we do not detect a similar pattern—with no specific political orientation playing a role in this case—for both fandoms, we find a negative association with falling into the category of those “External” to the political spectrum.⁷ While the star fandom appears ideologically neutral, it is—much like political fandom—clearly characterised by fans who do hold a political

⁷This category includes those who openly refuse to position themselves in the left vs. right scale and those who did not answer the question; together, these two groups constitute approximately 16% of the unweighted overall sample.

orientation, regardless of its specific nature. The rejection of the conventional spectrum left vs. right, on top of political disinterest, indicates a likely parallel rejection of developing fan-like relationships with public figures, regardless of whether they pertain to the political domain or the world of culture, entertainment, sport, etc. Yet, the culture of political fandoms is not merely an attachment to a general (and politically neutral or politically miscellaneous) fandom culture; instead, it is integrated into ideologically conditioned views, especially (but not exclusively) into right-wing ones. Even if we observe unpolitical fandoms inspiring or acting as a springboard for political engagement—in line with Hinck's (2019) findings—this terrain proves to be characterised by distinct dynamics involving political orientations as such, and with some being more prominent than others.

Now let us go back to the cross-country variation with regard to the probability of belonging to the two studied fandoms, which was already investigated in Sects. 2 and 3. With respect to France—selected as the reference category owing to its median level of political fans—there is a higher probability of belonging to a political leader fandom in Poland and a lower one in Germany and the UK, with no other significant differences. The star fandom presents a different picture: while, compared with France,⁸ Poland maintains a positive relationship—exhibiting a strong fandom culture across domains—and Germany maintains a negative one—exhibiting low fan-like engagement—the UK flips sign. Furthermore, while Bulgaria, Italy, and particularly Spain did not present significant differences with France in relation to political fandom, they exhibit a positive relationship with star fandom compared with France. This indicates that respondents from Bulgaria, Italy, and Spain are more likely to belong to the celebrity fandom.

Finally, it is worth mentioning model fits measures,⁹ for which we note that, *ceteris paribus*, the leader fandom model has a better fit than the star fandom one. This means that, regardless of individual coefficient

⁸ Whilst France holds the median percentage for political fandom, it holds the second-to-last percentage for star fandom, after Germany. To facilitate comparisons, France was maintained as the reference category across both models; however, its different positioning across the two fandoms must be considered when interpreting results.

⁹ In particular, the McFadden R^2 , often identified as a Pseudo R^2 measure, given that it recalls the 0–1 scale of R^2 applied to linear regression models. While in logit regression models we cannot directly calculate through this measure, the percentage of variance explained, higher values mean a better model fit.

significance, the star fandom appears to be a less predictable phenomenon, less adequately captured by the chosen explanatory variables. Conversely, the leader fandom phenomenon is more clearly outlined by the variables included in the model. This could be attributed also to the inclusion in the model of political attitudes, such as political interest and left–right self-placement.

4.6 CONCLUSIONS

The key question framing this chapter—*Fans Will Be Fans?*—carries an implicit hypothesis: that being-a-fan operates as a generalised latent disposition, an attitude that can travel across domains and manifests similarly whether the object of affect is a renowned sporting figure, a star of music or cinema, or a political leader. Aiming to answer our initial question, we operationalised “leader fandom” and “star fandom” through comparable measures of affectivity, disaggregated into the two key dimensions of closeness and emotionality; we then analysed these measures using original survey data across seven European democracies.

First, we do find an overlap between the two groups of fans: those who hold affective bonds with (non-political) celebrities are likely to do so with political leaders as well, and this correlation holds across all seven countries. The *total fans*, namely those invested in both spheres, represent a non-negligible segment of our studied population (14%) and exactly one-third of the overall fandom subsample. This suggests that something like a fan disposition does exist: a readiness to engage in parasocial relationships, to invest emotionally in public figures, regardless of the domain in which the latter operate. Even regarding consumption patterns, the fans in the two domains behave similarly, notwithstanding some distinctions and generally higher levels of mediated consumption in the star fandom. Yet, political fans more frequently report having seen the leader they refer to in person at public events. Offline engagement remains a distinctive feature of political fandom, and the digital transformation has not entirely replaced but rather complemented traditional forms of political engagement. The propensity towards forming a community of like-minded fans follows similar distributions, although star fans display a slightly higher willingness to connect with one another, possibly due to the lower social costs associated with publicly declaring admiration for non-political figures.

The most important difference lies in *why fans like* the objects of their affectivity. Star fandoms focus on the “extraordinary”: fans are drawn to

authenticity and uniqueness, to figures who stand apart. Political fandom, by contrast, while incorporating celebrity-related dynamics, revolves primarily around a logic of representation: citizens like leaders for understanding their problems, for sharing their vision, for competence in addressing their concerns. They do not require extraordinariness, but rather concreteness; the leader need not save the country but must be *responsive*; and their likability ranks last among the selected options.

Given these results, we can conclude that the political domain has not simply been colonised by entertainment logic. Rather, it has developed its own form of fandom—a fandom that remains ideologically conditioned (with right-wing citizens more likely to identify as political fans), more male-oriented (reproducing the persistent gender gap in certain forms of political engagement), and age-neutral (unlike star fandom, which steadily declines with age). These patterns indicate that political fandom is not merely a spillover from popular culture, but a phenomenon shaped by the specific features of democratic political life: the logic of representation, inequality of participation, costs of public commitment, and ideology. Nevertheless, it is interesting to highlight the similar role of political alienation: those who refuse to position themselves on the left–right spectrum are less likely to belong to *either* fandom. Regardless of the domain, a capacity for fan-like engagement may require a minimal degree of integration into shared frameworks of meaning. The alienated and disengaged do not simply redirect their affective energies from politics to entertainment; they appear to withdraw from parasocial investment altogether.

What, then, is the answer to our opening question? Fans will be fans, yes. But not in the way the question implies. The predisposition to fandom is there, but it does not imply a *mechanical* and equal engagement across domains, nor does it cancel the inherent differences between them. Political fandom borrows some attributes from celebrity culture while remaining attached to specific political dynamics. Fans-citizens approach politics also on its own terms; they seek someone competent and capable alongside a promise of being understood and represented.

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Mapping Political Fandom: Male (Not Only Young) and Right-Leaning

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and Giacomo Salvarani*

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the sociodemographic profiles of political leaders' fans, with particular emphasis on the influence and dynamics associated with gender and age characteristics. It discusses the potential role of educational attainment and political attitudes in shaping political fandom profiles and dynamics and considers geographical variation in political fandom across seven European countries: Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

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Sociodemographic traits, such as gender, age, and educational qualifications, have historically constituted significant explanatory factors for social and political behaviours. These characteristics were formerly regarded as constants in their political impact, that is, as ascribed qualities of citizens and voters that remained stable over time and contributed to the reproduction of behavioural patterns and political attitudes. However, contemporary political and social change appears to have eroded the stability of attitudinal and behavioural patterns in politics, weakening the role of sociodemographic factors as predictors of citizens' orientations towards politics and, in this context, towards political leaders in a digital media environment. Scholars disagree over the extent of these changes, partly because scholarly attention to these issues has been sporadic, perhaps owing to their presumed self-evidence (Corbetta & Ceccarini, 2010). In this chapter, we explore the role played by sociodemographic factors in political fandom, which, in our understanding, is a form of political engagement that (at least partially) reworks forms of contemporary political involvement. Adopting a comparative perspective, we identify principal elements of convergence and divergence among the seven European countries under examination, analysing continuities and changes in the influence of sociodemographic factors on political attitudes and behaviours.

Women have traditionally exhibited lower levels of participation in conventional political activities. Research outcomes on age patterns indicate that younger cohorts demonstrate greater openness to unconventional modes of political engagement (Giugni & Grasso, 2021; Melo & Stockemer, 2014; Pitti, 2018). However, emerging and non-institutionalised forms of participation attract young people as well as women (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Consequently, gender disparities in political participation tend to diminish or even disappear within these alternative civic contexts.

Moreover, broader processes of social change and innovations characteristic of the digital age have transformed political socialisation, generating substantial shifts in political culture and behaviour, particularly among women and younger cohorts (Bolin, 2017; Ceccarini, 2021).

Given that young people have been portrayed as agents of change who challenge established social and political patterns, examining the combined influence of these two sociodemographic variables is essential for understanding the model of involvement analysed in this volume. This examination is particularly significant as it captures transformations in how

people develop and approach novel forms of political engagement and civic participation.

The influence of education on political orientations has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in comparison to the emphasis placed on social class. Nevertheless, a consensus exists among scholars over a positive relation between education and political interest. Although some argue that education provides citizens with the cultural and cognitive resources necessary to navigate the complexities of political life and participation, others downplay the role of education, pointing out that the positive relation could in fact conceal the role of other factors (Persson, 2015). Although educational qualifications do not appear to influence the propensity towards political fandom, we incorporate educational attainment as a control variable in the logistic regression models reported in the concluding part of this chapter.

More specifically, this chapter studies how gender and age factors shape political fandom as a specific form of citizen engagement. Digital platforms and disintermediated (or, more accurately, ‘re-intermediated’) communication processes have enabled direct interaction between citizens and political celebrities. Consequently, digital communication has fostered what may be termed intimacy at a distance through a ‘parasocial interaction’ model (Hills, 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956) with political leaders.

The following analysis explores how these two sociodemographic groups engage with political celebrities through emotional attachment, affective bonds, and the *consumption* and *production* of leader-related content, and compares their behaviour with that of the broader population.

In sum, this chapter examines the implications for the development of fandom democracy across Europe to assess the prevalence of political fandom among key social groups defined by gender and age stratification. By investigating these dynamics in a comparative perspective, this chapter seeks to examine emerging trajectories of political modernisation and evolving citizenship norms (Dalton, 2008; Micheletti & McFarland, 2011; Van Deth, 2014).

The chapter proceeds as follows: Section 2 investigates gender differences in political fandom; Section 3 analyses age dynamics; Section 4 addresses consumption and production practices; Section 5 explores the relationship between political fandom and activism; Section 6 tests factors influencing the probability of political fandom membership; and Section 7 concludes the chapter.

Table 5.1 Political fandom and proportion of strong fans, by age and country (%)

Age classes	European countries							Total
	BG	DE	ES	FR	IT	PL	UK	
18–29	21,5	17,5	28,6	31,4	22,4	28,1	32,9	26,5
(of which strong fans)	(6,3)	(6,9)	(10,9)	(14,0)	(9,3)	(10,0)	(14,8)	(11,0)
30–44	26,3	9,2	30,7	30,0	26,2	32,9	26,2	24,4
(of which strong fans)	(5,6)	(2,8)	(13,6)	(15,6)	(12,1)	(13,8)	(16,4)	(11,7)
45–54	31,5	4,8	26,5	23,4	27,9	36,9	24,0	22,4
(of which strong fans)	(15,1)	(1,0)	(10,8)	(9,9)	(10,6)	(18,2)	(7,9)	(8,9)
55–65	20,2	10,5	26,4	23,3	27,4	48,0	4,9	20,4
(of which strong fans)	(6,7)	(5,5)	(8,6)	(10,6)	(10,6)	(30,7)	(2,3)	(9,4)
65+	19,6	4,1	38,3	25,7	38,5	51,4	17,0	25,6
(of which strong fans)	(7,7)	(2,1)	(16,8)	(11,1)	(14,0)	(35,7)	(4,2)	(11,5)

Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)

5.2 GENDER DISPARITIES IN POLITICAL FANDOM

As noted in Chap. 4, approximately 24% of citizens in the European countries examined in this study qualify as political fans. Among these, we classify nearly half (11%) as strong fans based on their intense affective attachment to a political leader (see Table 5.1). By comparison, the findings for star fandom indicate that approximately one-third fall into this category (32%), distributed almost equally between moderate (17%) and strong (15%) fans.¹

Figure 5.1 illustrates gender-based differences in political fandom. The data reveal that, across the seven European countries surveyed, men are overrepresented among political fans (29% vs 19% of women). As anticipated, male respondents also exhibit higher representation in the strong fan subgroup, with the disparity falling to 5 percentage points but remaining relatively significant: 13% of men compared to 8% of women.

The gender gap observed in political fandom is replicated in the entertainment domain: Male respondents demonstrate a higher propensity than female respondents (34% vs 30%) to identify as fans of entertainment celebrities (e.g., singers, film stars, athletes). Consequently, men appear

¹ On the operationalisation of ‘(strong) political fans’, see Chap. 3; on ‘political fans’ alongside ‘star fans’, see Chap. 4.

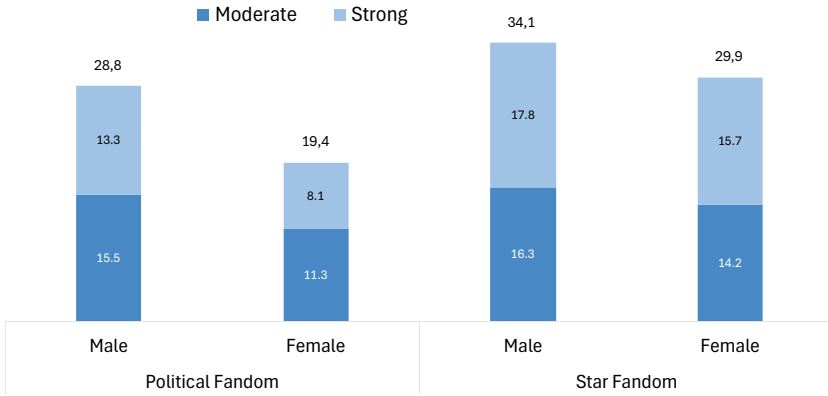


Fig. 5.1 Political and star fandom, moderate and strong, by gender (seven European countries; %). (*Source:* Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

more inclined to establish affective proximity with public figures, regardless of whether they belong to the political or entertainment spheres.

Moreover, beyond differences in the proportions of men and women who identify as fans of politicians or celebrities, the ratio between strong and moderate fans remains consistent for both genders. This suggests that gender differences manifest primarily in frequency rather than in the intensity of affective attachment.

To extend the analysis of survey data collected across the seven European countries, it is useful to examine cross-national variation through a gender lens. In this regard, Fig. 5.2 illustrates differences between men and women across the countries under investigation. These findings add further insight into the phenomenon under examination. Specifically, the pattern observed above characterises all seven countries consistently. That is, men are overrepresented among political fans overall and in the strong fan subgroup. The highest prevalence is found in Poland, where 43% of men and 36% of women identify as political fans. Conversely, Germany exhibits the lowest rates: 10% of men and 8% of women.

Italy, Spain, and France exhibit above-average rates of political fandom, particularly among men. Over one-third of Italian and Spanish male citizens, and nearly 40% of French men, qualify as political fans, compared to the overall European average of 29%. In France, we also observe the

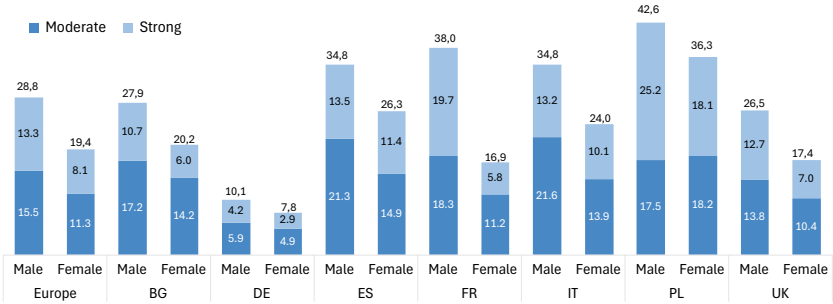


Fig. 5.2 Political fandom, proportion of moderate and strong fans, by gender and country (%). (*Source:* Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

largest gender difference (21 percentage points). Male respondents demonstrate higher rates of political fandom across all seven surveyed countries. This finding aligns with existing research documenting a persistent gender gap in both traditional and online political participation (Grasso & Giugni, 2024; Grasso & Smith, 2022), with men participating at higher rates than women.

Thus, at this preliminary stage of analysis, a classic gap appears to re-emerge regarding citizens’ political involvement and commitment levels. One might reasonably posit that the characteristics and disparities observed in conventional forms of political participation are largely reproduced even in this *individualised* collective action, specifically when practised through digital media. Such activities embody the defining features of this mode of engagement: flexibility, networked, low-threshold, non-territorially based, and subpolitical (Micheletti, 2003, p. 27). Political fans use social media and lifestyle politics to construct a personalised and fluid political identity, an approach we employed to operationalise political fandom in this study (see Chap. 3). However, traditional inequalities persist in political fandom, diverging from patterns evident in other individualised forms of participation (Micheletti, 2004).

Moreover, as mentioned throughout the preceding chapters, it is a form of participation that embodies the logic of intimacy at a distance with reference leaders, a mechanism that, though with varying intensity, characterises all seven countries examined in this study.

5.3 AN AGE GAP IN POLITICAL FANDOM?

This section examines how age shapes political fans' orientations. The analysis begins by investigating the relationship between age cohort and European citizens' engagement with fandom. To clarify this phenomenon, the political dimension of fandom is systematically compared with entertainment, music, and sports fandoms.

As illustrated in Fig. 5.3, age-related patterns follow two distinct patterns. Political fandom exhibits a U-shaped distribution, whereas star fandom shows an expected downward trend as respondents' age increases (declining from 43% to 27%). Younger cohorts show a predominant orientation towards entertainment and sports personalities as role models, with stronger identificatory bonds with these celebrity figures.

Figure 5.3 reveals that political fandom is slightly more prevalent among younger respondents (27%) and older respondents (26%). These contrasting patterns, namely the U-shaped curve for political fandom and

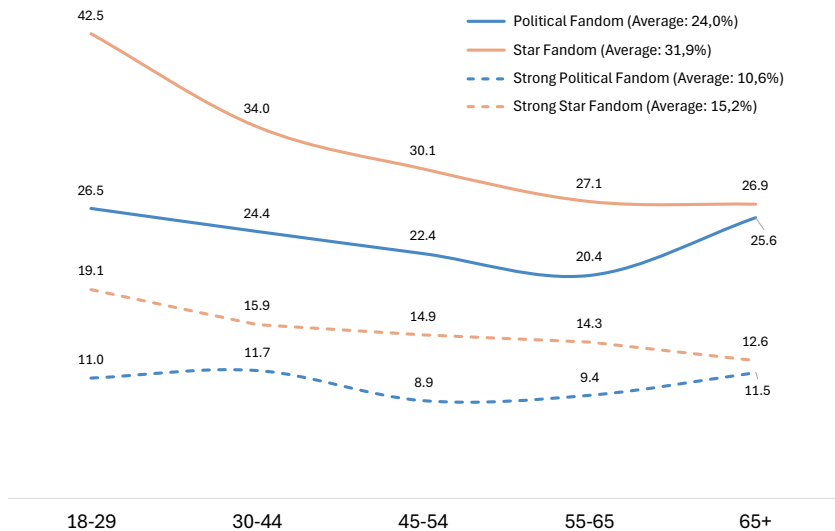


Fig. 5.3 Proportion of political and star fandom, by age (%). (*Source:* Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

the linear decline for celebrity fandom, persist when examining strong political fans.

Overall, the age slope in political fandom is relatively modest and demonstrates considerable cross-generational prevalence. Notably, time availability has long been recognised as a critical factor in participatory activism, as articulated in socioeconomic status and civic voluntarism models (Verba et al., 1995). Life cycle effects may partially account for these patterns: Younger individuals possess greater flexible time for such engagement, as do citizens over 65.

Cross-national analysis reveals a more nuanced picture (Table 5.1). Political fandom exhibits a pronounced youth orientation in the United Kingdom and France, with similar, though less marked, tendencies in Poland and Spain.

Conversely, older citizens demonstrate higher levels of political fandom in Poland, Spain, and Italy, with Poland registering the most substantial engagement among this age cohort (51%). Notably, Bulgaria presents a distinctive pattern, with middle-aged respondents showing the highest proportion of political fandom. Germany, by contrast, displays consistently low engagement across all demographic groups relative to the cross-national average.

Political fandom emerges as a predominantly male phenomenon across age cohorts, as illustrated in Fig. 5.4, which compares age categories and gender. The gender disparity is highest in the 30–44 age cohort, persisting throughout all age cohorts except the youngest one (18–29 years), where the gap narrows to only 4 percentage points. This suggests potential gender convergence in political fandom engagement.

5.4 THE PRAXIS OF POLITICAL FANDOM: CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

Having examined the distribution of political fandom across the two principal sociodemographic dimensions (gender and age), the analysis now turns to how this form of political engagement manifests in practice. Drawing upon the conceptual framework developed in Chaps. 2 and 3, two modes of involvement are incorporated into the gender and age analysis: consumption and production. These activities facilitate a more detailed examination of the phenomenon under investigation.

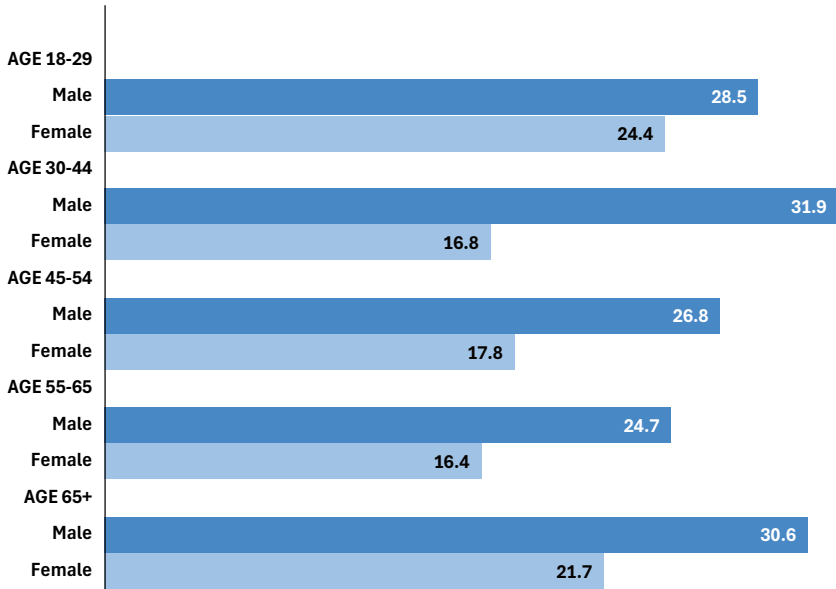


Fig. 5.4 Proportion of political fandom, by gender and age (%). (*Source:* Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

Regarding consumption, affective attachment constitutes a foundational conceptual element deserving initial consideration. Examining the affective dimension through the lens of consumption practices offers valuable insights into the dynamics and praxis of political fandom.

As previously established, this emotional bond connects fans to their reference leaders and simultaneously embeds them within broader political communities with which they identify, relate, and engage. It is precisely through immersion within this community-based reality that in-group and out-group dynamics emerge and consolidate. Such dynamics operate through a reciprocal and reinforcing relationship with affective polarisation, simultaneously generating and being sustained by inter-group antagonism between the in-group (partisans aligned with a given political leader) and the out-group (supporters of rival political formations and their own political leaders), thus enabling the mobilisation of one's electoral constituency (Ceccarini et al., 2022). After considering affective

Table 5.2 Production and consumption indices (high + moderate) by gender and age group (column %)

	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Age classes</i>					<i>Total</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>18–29</i>	<i>30–44</i>	<i>45–54</i>	<i>55–65</i>	<i>65+</i>	
Consumption								
–Affective	66,8	58,5	64,5	77,5	67,1	57,8	49,0	63,4
–Offline	40,4	38,0	53,9	49,9	43,8	29,2	20,6	39,4
–Online	48,0	44,9	62,6	59,8	51,8	37,0	23,8	46,7
Production	43,9	35,6	67,0	56,3	43,2	24,0	12,2	40,5

Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)

consumption, the analysis proceeds to consider both online and offline consumption, before addressing production practices.

Table 5.2 presents cumulative indices summarising these gender-based patterns of involvement across the typology of actions, encompassing both consumption and production dimensions. Thus, four forms of engagement are considered: three consumption modes (affective, online, and offline) and one production mode.² These summary measures, reported in the following table at ‘moderate’ and ‘high’ thresholds, reveal systematic gender disparities in patterns of engagement with reference celebrities.

Gender-based gaps in political fandom practices merit particular attention. Men demonstrate a higher propensity for political fan identification, as previously established, and exhibit significant levels of active engagement across both consumption and production practices.

Affective consumption encompasses attitudes such as feeling unhappy when the leader faces criticism, experiencing friendship-like affection, or desiring personal interaction (e.g., sharing coffee or taking a selfie). Men score 67% compared to 59% for women. Gender disparities remain even when considering online consumption (commenting on posts, following live videos, liking, or reposting content) and offline consumption (reading articles, biographies, or gossip, and watching television programmes featuring the leader’s private life), as shown in Table 5.2.

Age-related patterns similarly reveal significant variation. Citizens under about 50 years old demonstrate higher levels of both consumption and

² For details on index construction, see Chap. 3.

production compared to older cohorts, a finding that aligns with expected trends.

Particularly pronounced disparities emerge between the youngest and oldest political fans: Younger respondents exhibit elevated engagement across all consumption dimensions, whereas older respondents consistently register lower scores, with large differences. Notably, in affective consumption, citizens aged 30–44 and 45–54 exhibit the highest levels (78% and 67% respectively), exceeding both those aged 65 and over (49%) and the overall average (63%).

Production practices exhibit similar gender and age patterns: 44% of men compared to 36% of women engage in such practices. Age-related production engagement demonstrates a marked decline, declining from 67% among the youngest cohort to 12% among older respondents. Overall, the data reveal that the intensity of political fandom engagement across both consumption and production is consistently higher among younger individuals (particularly male) and declines systematically with age.

However, when examining production practices within political fandom, and specifically the more intensive engagement corresponding to the ‘high’ level, a more complex pattern emerges (Fig. 5.5). Young men and women (aged 18–29) exhibit comparable peak levels of production activity (approximately 30% in each group). This is followed by a pattern in which women surpass men in this dimension of engagement (34% vs 28%) in the age group 30–44, before male predominance reasserts itself in later adulthood.

This pattern merits attention as it likely reflects the intersection of generational and life-cycle dynamics. Specifically, women demonstrate heightened engagement when political issues directly affect their everyday life experiences, particularly concerning gender-salient matters such as employment, care responsibilities, welfare policies, and family provisions (Margolis, 2018; Quaranta & Dotti Sani, 2018). This pattern persists across diverse welfare models, family structures, and domestic labour arrangements among the seven countries studied. Moreover, digital tools have afforded younger female cohorts substantially greater resources and opportunities for political engagement than those available to older generations. In this regard, the ‘media generation’ (Bolin, 2017) framework helps explain, at least in part, the observed generational variation.

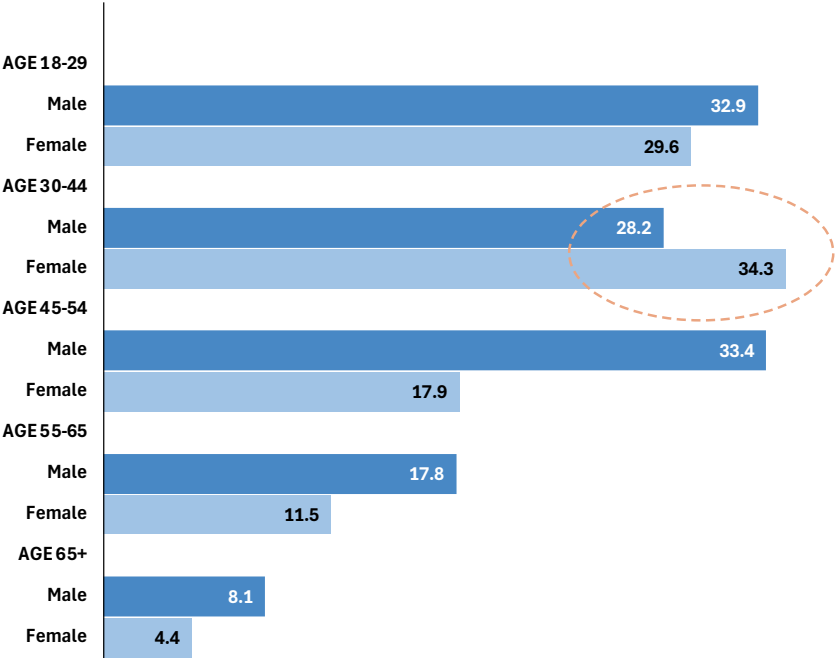


Fig. 5.5 Proportion of political fandom scoring ‘high’ on the production index, by gender and age (%). (*Source:* Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

5.5 THE NEXUS BETWEEN POLITICAL FANDOM AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Political participation serves as a lens through which to examine civil society and its relationship with the political sphere. As extensively documented in the literature, political participation encompasses a constellation of attitudes and behaviours shaped by multiple factors, including the availability of individual, contextual, and territorial resources. Elements such as political or civic identity, spreading and sharing specific social norms, and the organisational capacity of political actors operating within a given territory, along with individual-level resources, can either facilitate or, when absent, constrain political involvement and willingness to engage in actions aimed

at influencing public policy decisions. This section extends the analysis by examining the relationship between political fandom and various forms of political activity, with particular attention to gender and age dynamics.

5.5.1 *Political Interest and Ideological Orientation of Fandom*

The analysis begins with political interest, a classical indicator that captures both citizens' fundamental orientation towards politics and the characteristics of their broader political culture. Political fans demonstrate substantially elevated levels of interest compared to the overall European average across the seven countries: 40% within political fandom, and nearly half (49%) of strong fans, report being 'very' interested in politics, compared to 28% in the overall population. Political fandom is positively associated with heightened political interest, even at a moderate level of engagement. The most passionate fans (categorised as strong) consistently express greater political interest, suggesting an association with more intensive participatory behaviour patterns, as the following analysis will demonstrate. When considering gender differences, the association between interest and being a strong political fan is particularly pronounced: Over half (54%) report being 'very' interested in politics. This figure rises even higher among younger adults aged 18–29, reaching 61%.

Political identity, measured through self-placement on the left–right continuum, provides additional analytical leverage for understanding ideological orientation among political fans. Political fandom exhibits stronger resonance among citizens positioned towards the right side of the political spectrum. Figure 5.6 compares the ideological positions of three groups (strong fans, moderate fans, and the general population) and reveals a pronounced right-leaning orientation among political fans in comparison with the overall population. This pattern is particularly evident among men and citizens in the 30–44 age cohort. This ideological divergence intensifies when examining strong political fans specifically: Men, young (18–29), and the 30–44 age group demonstrate even greater rightward positioning on the ideological continuum. The contrast between the general population and strong political fans proves especially pronounced. Accordingly, the ideological configuration of political fandom appears to possess distinctly clear and delineated features.

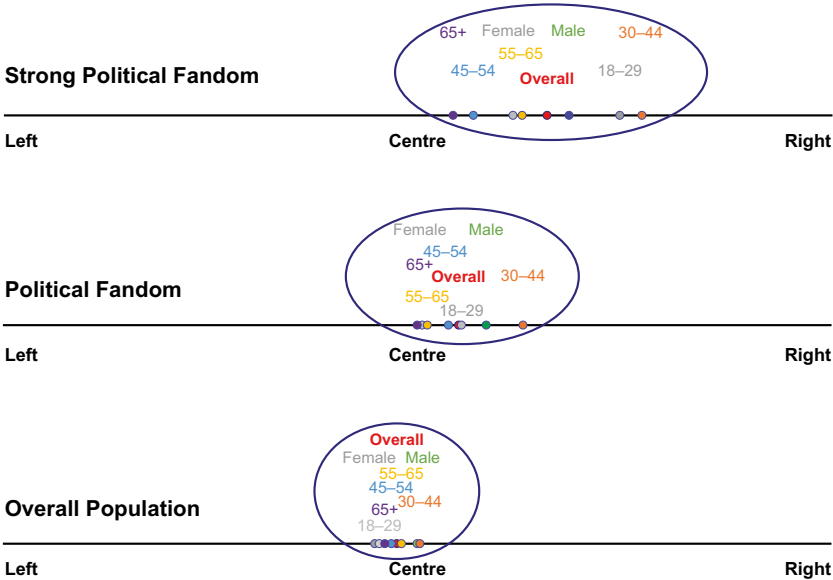


Fig. 5.6 Self-placement on the ideological continuum of sociodemographic groups. Comparison among strong political fans, political fans, and the overall population (average value, scale: 0 = left, 10 = right). (Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

5.5.2 Political Fandom and Political Participation

The political culture orientations identified above manifest in conventional civic activism and political participation, as well as in political fandom. Political celebrity fans show marked associations with active engagement practices, as the data presented below illustrate.

Figure 5.7A reveals a substantial participation gap between political fans and non-fans. The former demonstrate a triple engagement rate in party-oriented activities such as election campaigning (34% vs 10%) and attending party-organised events (43% vs 15%). Fan participation is similarly elevated in protest activities (43% vs 19%) and online political discussion (58% vs 27%), roughly doubling non-fan rates. These patterns intensify among strong fans, demonstrating that political fandom corresponds with a markedly higher level of engagement.

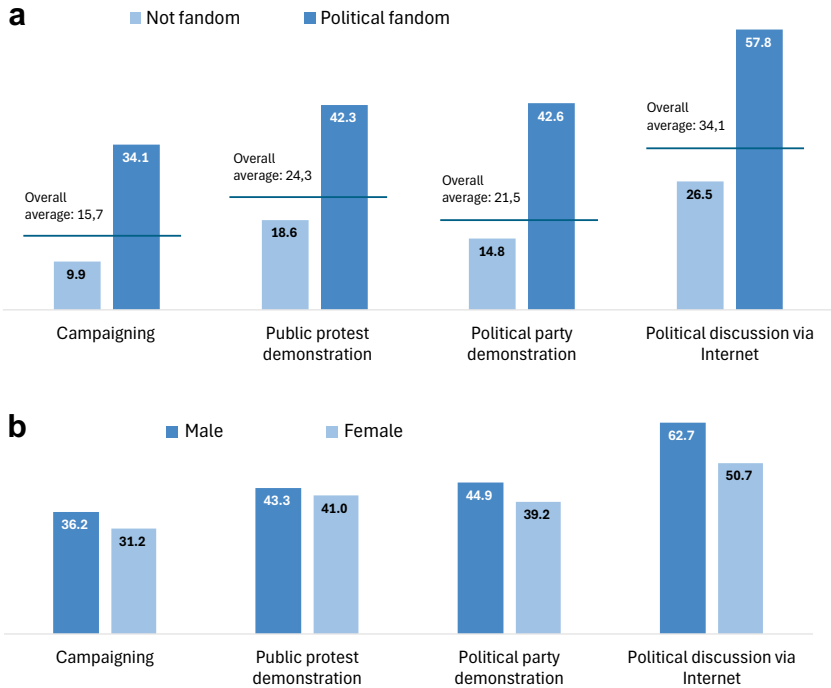


Fig. 5.7 Panel A: Political fandom and non-fandom; Panel B: Political fandom by gender, based on political participation actions undertaken in the year before the interview (%). (*Source:* Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

Particularly noteworthy, however, is the smaller gender gap in political participation among political fans. When considering diverse forms of political participation with which political fans engage, we find relatively modest gender differences (Figure 5.7B). Disparities amount to only a few percentage points across most participatory activities considered, with the notable exception of online political discussion, where male participation exceeds female participation by 12 percentage points, although this activity still engages approximately half of female political fans, representing the most widespread form of participation (51% vs 27% of the overall female population). Consequently, this specific domain of political

engagement appears less constrained by the patterns that perpetuate gender disparities evident in other modes of political participation. In other words, although political fandom practices exhibit significant gender differences, these disparities largely disappear when examining other forms of political engagement among political fans.

Further analysis of survey data suggests higher political involvement among younger political fans. Young political fans actively engage in public protests (a classic form of unconventional political action; Pitti, 2018) and participate in party-organised demonstrations and more conventional activities, such as campaigning for candidates, parties, or electoral coalitions. This pattern reflects engagement across both unconventional and institutionalised, party-mediated forms of participation (van Deth, 2014).

This multifaceted participatory pattern occurs far less frequently among older cohorts, suggesting that political fandom serves as a mechanism for expanding the civic and political repertoire in other cohorts, particularly among younger citizens. As is well known, young people demonstrate more fluid conceptualisations of participation compared to older cohorts, who tend towards a more rigid approach to emerging engagement forms (Bennett, 2017).

Moreover, younger political fans exhibit greater activity in online political participation, a pattern consistently observed across the seven European countries, which also aligns with existing scientific literature. This finding echoes the ‘media generation’ concept: Youth demonstrate distinctive media usage patterns and embrace more fluid and fragmented (political) identities and approaches (Fig. 5.8) (Bolin, 2017).

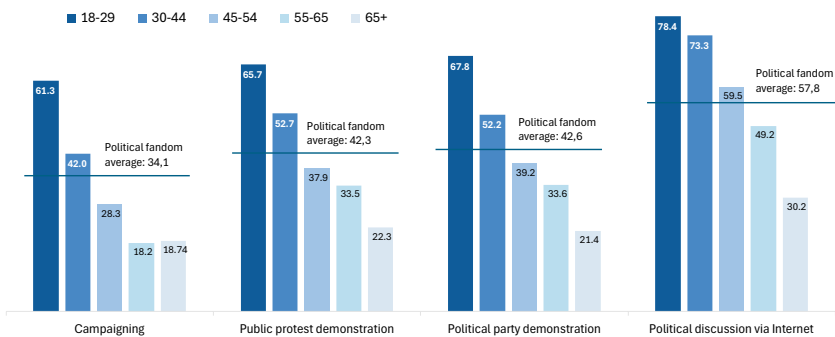


Fig. 5.8 Political fandom by age, based on political participation actions undertaken in the year before the interview (%). (Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases))

This pattern, however, does not fully hold. Notably, a subset of middle-aged citizens (30–44) identify as strong political fans despite reporting limited political interest: 20% describe themselves as ‘not very’ interested in politics, compared to 12% overall (a difference of 8 percentage points). Although political fandom is rooted in political and representational logics, even when mimicking star fandoms (see Chap. 4), these findings suggest that, in a minority of cases, political fandom develops independently of traditional factors of engagement, operating instead within a broader constellation of digitally mediated practices driven more by entertainment-oriented motivations than by ideological conviction. Although the modest size of this subset constrains the scope for extensive statistical examination, this pattern merits analytical consideration.

In short, these preliminary findings indicate that political fandom expands the terrain of political engagement beyond citizens with clearly articulated political orientations and established patterns of involvement. As previously observed, the strong political fan subgroup encompasses individuals motivated by heterogeneous factors and reasons. This inherent heterogeneity renders the phenomenon notably complex and heterogeneous, incorporating diverse cultural and popular dimensions.

Thus, although political fandom is primarily driven by individual political involvement, it is simultaneously shaped by the logic of broader socio-cultural transformations that are redefining contemporary modes of political engagement. Furthermore, this framework constitutes a manifestation of the fragmentation and fluidity that define the postmodern political condition (Ceccarini, 2026).

In this regard, one may advance both an interpretation and a hypothesis, already documented in the existing literature, concerning the nexus between digital participation, social media affordances, and the proliferation of participatory practices. Studies consistently demonstrate a positive relationship between educational attainment and political participation, whereas citizens with limited socioeconomic resources typically face significant barriers to political engagement.

Digital forms of political participation exhibit a lower entry threshold. In our findings, educational attainment exerts a negligible influence on political fandom engagement, indicating that citizens participate in this domain regardless of educational background (see the following section).

Findings from the Fandom Democracy research programme indicate that emergent forms of political engagement challenge established patterns of participatory inequality encapsulated in the ‘rich get richer’

hypothesis (Norris, 2001). Digital technologies seem to serve as levelling mechanisms that both reduce structural barriers to participation and potentially narrow gender gaps in political engagement. To elucidate these relationships more precisely, the following section presents multivariate analysis that isolates the independent effects of each variable and controls for potential confounders.

5.6 TO WHAT EXTENT DO GENDER AND AGE INFLUENCE POLITICAL FANDOM?

Table 5.3 presents two multivariate logistic regression models with dichotomous dependent variables indicating political fandom membership. Specifically, Model 1 examines overall political fandom, and Model 2 focuses on the strong political fan subgroup. The analysis centres primarily on the two key variables examined in this chapter, gender and age, controlling for respondents' other sociodemographic characteristics (educational attainment and country of residence) and two fundamental political culture indicators: left–right ideological self-positioning and self-reported level of political interest. Only statistically significant coefficients are discussed here; the remaining parameters appear in the table.

Beginning with Model 1, gender effects confirm the patterns identified in preceding paragraphs: Men demonstrate significantly greater orientation towards the affective dimension of political fandom and feelings of closeness to political leaders active in the political sphere. The coefficient for female respondents is statistically significant and negative, indicating that, *ceteris paribus*, their probability of political fan identification is substantially lower.

Regarding age, the youngest cohort (18–29 years), serving as the reference category for the regression analysis, exhibits a strong association with political fandom, thus increasing the likelihood of membership. Remaining age groups either demonstrate non-significant or negative coefficients, highlighting their greater distance from political fandom involvement. Specifically, controlling for all other sociodemographic and political culture variables, membership in the two middle-aged cohorts (45–54 and 55–64 years old) is associated with a significantly lower probability of political fandom membership. Despite the modest U-shaped participation pattern observed in bivariate analysis, older citizens remain significantly less likely to engage in political fandom when controlling for other factors.

Table 5.3 The determinants of political fandom

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
	<i>Political fandom</i>		<i>Strong Political fandom</i>	
	B	SE	B	SE
Gender				
Female (ref. male)	−0.3340***	(0.0896)	−0.3551**	(0.1359)
Age				
18–29 (ref. cat.)				
30–44	−0.1548	(0.1514)	0.0095	(0.2260)
45–54	−0.3000*	(0.1460)	−0.2835	(0.1948)
55–64	−0.3520*	(0.1469)	−0.1275	(0.2013)
65+	−0.1246	(0.1349)	0.0081	(0.1814)
Education				
Low (ref. cat.)				
Middle	−0.0081	(0.1093)	−0.0010	(0.1501)
High	−0.1837	(0.1307)	−0.0619	(0.2032)
Country				
BG	−0.2801	(0.1821)	−0.5211*	(0.2487)
DE	−1.5435***	(0.1796)	−1.2975***	(0.2935)
ES	0.1389	(0.1448)	0.1143	(0.2342)
FR (ref. cat.)				
IT	0.0772	(0.1338)	0.0254	(0.2100)
PL	0.4629**	(0.1690)	0.6409**	(0.2428)
UK	−0.5270**	(0.1653)	−0.3577	(0.2580)
Political interest level				
From 1=not at all, to 4=very	1.1418***	(0.1486)	1.1075***	(0.3257)
Left–right continuum				
self-placement				
Left	0.5333***	(0.1440)	0.4078*	(0.2228)
Centre-left	0.1735	(0.1523)	−0.2331	(0.2383)
Centre (ref. cat.)				
Centre-right	0.5390***	(0.1496)	0.3799	(0.2391)
Right	1.2412***	(0.1491)	1.6597***	(0.2236)
External	−1.1228***	(0.2122)	−0.8468*	(0.3543)
Constant	−1.3973***	(0.2754)	−2.7874***	(0.5116)
Observations	7157		7157	
Pseudo R ²	0.170		0.176	

Note: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, + p<0.10

Source: Fandom Research Project, July 2024 (base: 7961 cases)

Turning to educational attainment, we observe that it does not demonstrate a significant effect, confirming the pattern observed through bivariate analyses discussed above. Regarding cross-national variation, when compared with France (the reference category), Poland exhibits a positive and significant coefficient, whereas Germany and the United Kingdom display a lower propensity towards political fandom, all else being equal.

The relationship between political interest and ideological self-positioning with political fandom (Model 1) merits further examination. Political interest functions as a fundamental precondition for political fandom engagement, as with other participatory activities, and the regression output confirms this positive association among European respondents. Regarding political-ideological identities, those at the ideological extremes demonstrate positive associations with the affective dimension of fandom. Notably, those who self-position themselves on the right of the political spectrum exhibit the strongest positive effect on the dependent variable. Similarly, respondents who decline to position themselves on the left-right spectrum and distance themselves from these traditional ideological categories display a negative coefficient, suggesting a diminished likelihood of political leader attachment and fandom behaviours.

Model 2 further clarifies these dynamics. Gender emerges as the predominant variable, and age is no longer statistically significant (in contrast to Model 1). The ideological dimension also gains clarity in this second model. The two extreme positions remain statistically significant and positive, though the coefficient capturing the effect of self-positioning on the left of the spectrum loses significance. Conversely, those on the right demonstrate the strongest probability of being a strong political fan.

5.7 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter began by posing a research question that pertains to two sociodemographic variables: We sought to establish whether gender and age exerted any influence on encouraging political fandom. Specifically, we aimed to determine whether these characteristics serve as distinguishing traits among citizens who profess a strong attachment to a political leader and engage in a variety of affective activities that enhance this figure at a distance. We also examined whether these variables were predictive factors of that approach to leaders. Thus, through a multivariate analysis, we examined whether these sociodemographic traits function as catalysts for a political engagement based on the principles of ‘parasocial interaction’, as

conceptualised within the framework of political fandom studied in this work (Chap. 2).

The analysis conducted in the preceding sections demonstrates that being male is strongly associated with this form of political involvement. This pattern constitutes a consistent feature across all seven countries examined in the European *FanDem* research project, reinforcing the main findings.

The relationship between age and political fandom, however, remains less clear. The youngest and, to some extent, the oldest age cohorts appear to exhibit higher levels of involvement. Notably, the more committed segment of political fans (strong fans) shows no greater association with younger cohorts.

When the influence of gender is examined through multivariate analysis, the results indicate that, holding other factors constant, identifying as 'male' exerts a positive influence on being part of a political fandom, which is coherent with the findings of our descriptive analyses.

Other sociodemographic variables, conversely, demonstrate minor or negligible predictive power. It is noteworthy that educational attainment exhibits no direct influence in either the bivariate analysis or the logistic regression models.

Nevertheless, two dimensions of citizens' political culture retain considerable explanatory power: political interest and ideological identity on the left–right spectrum. Greater political interest is associated with participation in political fandom, a relationship that appears relatively intuitive. More significantly, however, ideological identification with extreme positions, particularly on the right, but also on the left, appears to raise the probability of being a 'political fan'.

These findings suggest that political fandom constitutes a channel through which the most politically engaged citizens, particularly those exhibiting greater ideological polarisation, identify an opportunity to express their political positions and strengthen their identity. Given these findings, it is reasonable to hypothesise that political fandom operates as a mechanism of affective polarisation, suggesting a fruitful direction for future research on this complex and debated phenomenon.

Within this scenario, the party leader emerges as both a focal point and catalyst for citizens' political engagement, manifested through social media participation and grassroots mobilisation, as demonstrated above.

From this perspective, citizens can articulate, construct, and reconstruct their political identities through participation in both affirmative

fandom and oppositional anti-fandom dynamics. As established in previous studies, the latter, which falls beyond the scope of this study, tends to frame rival political actors as enemies rather than legitimate competitors worthy of democratic respect.

In conclusion, this complex identificatory process operates along two interconnected axes: vertical attachment to the reference leader, and horizontal attachment to the broader in-group or political community, formed primarily by the online fandom mobilised around that political figure: the celebrity politician.

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Political Fandom and Anti-fandom on Instagram During the 2024 European Parliament Election Campaign

Giovanni Barbieri and Sara Consonni

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter primarily presents the empirical findings of our analysis of social media content, focusing on how political fandom and anti-fandom are expressed on Instagram during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. While the emphasis here is on the data, the analytical framework derives from the theoretical concepts discussed in the previous chapters, particularly those concerning the affective logics of political engagement, the celebritization of politics, and the convergence between popular culture and political communication. Building on these foundations, the chapter operationalizes these concepts through a comparative study of digitally mediated affective performances across Italy, France, and Spain.

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In recent years, the rise of political fandom and anti-fandom has emerged as a key phenomenon for understanding the emotional dimensions of political engagement in the digital age. As explored in previous chapters, political fandom refers to citizens' intense affective attachment to political leaders, reflecting patterns traditionally associated with celebrity and entertainment fandom (Dean & Andrews, 2021; Sandvoss, 2013). Conversely, political anti-fandom involves emotional investments in opposing and delegitimizing specific figures, typically manifesting through persistent critique, ridicule, and antagonistic sentiment (Gray, 2003; Dean, 2017). These opposing affective dynamics are not marginal or anecdotal: They reflect a deeper convergence between popular culture and political communication, one that reconfigures how political loyalty, engagement, and identity are constructed and expressed in contemporary democracies.

At the heart of this convergence lies the rise of political fandom itself, while the broader process of the celebritization of politics provides the context within which political leaders increasingly adopt the styles, narratives, and promotional techniques of celebrity culture to foster emotional proximity and mobilize support (Street, 2004; Wheeler, 2013; Wood et al., 2016). From a theoretical perspective, this chapter draws on a body of scholarship that frames political fandom not merely as a reflection of ideological alignment, but as a form of media consumption and affective investment (Van Zoonen, 2005; Sandvoss, 2013). These dynamics have contributed to a transformation in the modes of political participation and the construction of collective identities, shifting the terrain of democratic engagement from deliberative reasoning to emotional resonance.

In this new media ecosystem, political leaders must navigate a fundamental paradox. As Wood et al. (2016) suggest, they are required to appear both “above us”—embodying authority and exceptionality—and “like us”, signalling normalcy, approachability, and authenticity. This tension is especially visible in digital environments, where social media provide unique opportunities to perform these dual roles. Instagram, with its emphasis on visual storytelling, intimacy, and affective expression, has become a central arena for the performance, circulation, and contestation of political fandom and anti-fandom.

Digital media not only amplify emotional content but actively shape the structures of affective engagement. Algorithmic curation favours emotionally charged and polarized content (Reviglio & Agosti, 2020), thereby intensifying the visibility of both fan-like and anti-fan-like performances.

These performances contribute to the formation of what Papacharissi (2015) has called “affective publics”: emotionally networked communities that engage with politics not just cognitively, but through shared affect and identity. Within this framework, political leaders craft hybrid modes of visibility, alternating between “superstar” and “everyday” personas (Starita & Trillò, 2022; Meyrowitz, 1977), while interacting with audiences situated in increasingly fragmented and “refracted” publics (Abidin, 2021).

Importantly, political fandom communities share structural and functional features with entertainment fandoms: They are built on emotional attachment, participatory practices, collective identity, and the imaginative reworking of reality (Van Zoonen, 2005). Political enthusiasm, when conceptualized as a form of media fandom (Sandvoss, 2013), can become a powerful driver of mobilization and loyalty. Yet, the very affective intensity that fuels engagement may also undermine the liberal ideal of deliberation through discourse. As several scholars argue, fandom politics can privilege emotional expression over rationality, reinforce identity-based polarization, and contribute to the consolidation of emotional partisanship (Dean & Andrews, 2021; Sandvoss, 2013).

Building on these premises, this chapter investigates how political fandom and anti-fandom are expressed and negotiated on Instagram during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. The focus is placed on emotionally charged posts related to selected political leaders, with particular attention to the interplay between multimodal aesthetics—encompassing both visual and textual elements—narrative strategies, and participatory dynamics. The empirical analysis is grounded in a comparative approach across three European countries—Italy, France, and Spain—in order to explore how national contexts and political cultures shape distinct configurations of affective engagement.

The chapter is organized into four sections. In the second, we outline the methodological framework, detailing the data collection procedures, the criteria for selecting leaders and hashtags, the construction of the dataset, and the coding strategy adopted in the quantitative content analysis. The third section examines the dimensions of fandom and anti-fandom, analysing how affective attachments and oppositions are constructed through Instagram content. Particular attention is given to how these dynamics reinforce identity boundaries and emotional polarization. The fourth section explores the contextual factors and strategic choices that shape the intensity and nature of these affective expressions, examining how political climates, actor types, and leader characteristics condition the

likelihood of fan-like or anti-fan-like engagement. Understanding these factors is crucial, as it helps to disentangle the structural and situational forces that shape affective political practices across different countries and electoral contexts. The final section develops a discussion of the broader implications of these findings for understanding emotionally driven political engagement in digital environments.

6.2 DATA AND METHOD

This study investigates the emotional dynamics of political fandom and anti-fandom as expressed through Instagram posts during the campaign for the 2024 European Parliament elections. The empirical analysis draws on a corpus of 1368 posts containing affective content, published between 1 May and 10 June 2024. This timeframe was chosen to capture the intensification of emotional mobilization in the weeks immediately preceding the vote, a period during which digital political engagement tends to peak.

The selection of Italy, France, and Spain as case studies is rooted in their shared status as consolidated democracies in Western Europe, characterized by multiparty systems, strong personalization of leadership, and the centrality of social media in political communication. All three countries have undergone profound political transformations in recent years—such as the rise of populist actors, growing public disaffection with traditional elites, and increasing reliance on digital platforms for campaigning—making them fertile ground for a comparative exploration of emotionalized political participation (Bosco & Verney, 2012; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015).

Posts were collected using automated scraping techniques via the Python package *Instaloader*. The dataset was compiled by identifying content associated with 12 selected political leaders through the use of leader-specific hashtags (e.g.: #GiorgiaMeloni, #EmmanuelMacron, #PedroSanchez). This approach allowed us to gather user-generated content referring explicitly to the targeted politicians. While these hashtags do not necessarily indicate personal identification or ideological alignment, they act as de-facto aggregators, making it possible to map the circulation of discourses on Instagram concerning a public figure, including emotional content and symbolic statements of affiliation typical of fan behaviours.

The selection of political leaders followed two main criteria: gender balance and ideological diversity. For each of the three countries—Italy, France, and Spain—we included two men and two women (with the

exception of France), representing both centre-left and centre-right orientations. The Italian sample includes Giorgia Meloni (Brothers of Italy), Matteo Salvini (Lega), Giuseppe Conte (Five Star Movement), and Elly Schlein (Democratic Party); the French sample comprises Emmanuel Macron (Renaissance-La République En Marche), Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National-RN), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (La France Insoumise), and Raphaël Glucksmann (Place publique); while the Spanish sample features Pedro Sánchez (The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party-PSOE), Santiago Abascal (Vox), Isabel Díaz Ayuso (Popular Party), and Yolanda Díaz (Sumar). This configuration ensures comparability across political and demographic lines and enables us to explore whether the expression of fandom and anti-fandom varies in relation to leader characteristics such as gender, ideological alignment, or institutional role.

Each Instagram post in the dataset was manually coded by a team of trained coders according to a structured codebook. This process allowed us to classify posts by type of user (political actors, ordinary users, political commentary and fan accounts, media and celebrities), emotional tone (positive or negative), and target (the political leader or their community of supporters). Posts were categorized as “fandom” when they expressed admiration, support, or positive identification with a leader, and as “anti-fandom” when they conveyed criticism, emotional rejection, or antagonism. Only posts with a clear affective orientation were retained in the final corpus; neutral or unclassifiable content was excluded.

The methodological approach combines quantitative and qualitative content analysis, although this chapter focuses exclusively on the quantitative dimension, while the following chapter will provide a qualitative and interpretive perspective.

The first part of the analysis adopts an exploratory approach, as it seeks to map the affective structure of fandom and anti-fandom without testing pre-formulated hypotheses. In contrast, the second part of the analysis focuses on the underlying factors that shape the likelihood of a post being fandom or anti-fandom in nature. We distinguish among three types of explanatory variables: contextual factors (time and country), political demand-side factors (who publishes the post), and political supply-side factors (the leader's position in government and their gender).

While working in a relatively under-researched field, we drew on the limited but growing body of scholarship on political fandom and affective political engagement to formulate a set of theoretically grounded expectations (e.g., Dean & Andrews, 2021; Sandvoss, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen,

2019). Existing studies have pointed to the increasing emotionalization of political communication and to the role of social media as catalysts for affective intensification, yet systematic empirical evidence—particularly in cross-national perspective—remains scarce. Against this backdrop, we hypothesized that emotional engagement would intensify as the election approached; that ordinary users would be more inclined towards fandom than institutional actors; that leaders in government positions would be more frequently targeted by anti-fandom due to their heightened visibility and public accountability; and that gender and national context would further mediate the distribution of fan-like and anti-fan-like expressions.

Overall, this chapter offers a comparative and data-driven examination of how affective practices—both supportive and antagonistic—manifest on social media during a key moment of political mobilization, contributing to broader debates on the emotionalization of political communication in digital contexts.

6.3 THE DIMENSIONS OF FANDOM AND ANTI-FANDOM

Building upon the theoretical framework outlined above, this section delves into the affective manifestations of fandom and anti-fandom as they emerge in Instagram posts relating to the twelve political leaders under analysis. By adopting a comparative lens, the aim is to shed light on the emotional underpinnings of digital political engagement during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. As previously noted, the findings presented here draw on a systematic quantitative content analysis of 1368 posts, identified as emotionally charged and categorized according to their affective tone.

Overall, fandom and anti-fandom expressions appear to be almost equally distributed within the dataset, with a slight prevalence of fandom (50.8%) over anti-fandom (49.2%). However, a more detailed breakdown reveals meaningful differences in the composition of these two emotional registers.

As shown in Table 6.1, fandom is primarily driven by personal admiration towards the leader, which accounts for nearly one quarter of all posts (23.9%). This is followed by engagement with the leader's community of supporters (17.7%), while explicit approval of political actions or policies plays a comparatively marginal role (9.2%). These results suggest that fandom is anchored more in personal and relational dynamics than in ideological or agenda-based alignment. Such patterns are consistent with

Table 6.1 Fandom, anti-fandom, and their components

<i>Component</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Tot %</i>
Personal admiration	327	23.9
Approval of political action	126	9.2
Participation in the community of supporters	242	17.7
Fandom	695	50.8
Personal dislike	314	23.0
Disapproval of political action	326	23.8
Antagonism towards the community of supporters	33	2.4
Anti-fandom	673	49.2
Total	1368	100.0

existing literature on fan cultures, where emotional attachment, symbolic identification, and communal belonging often outweigh rational or issue-based support (Van Zoonen, 2005; Sandvoss, 2013). As discussed in the chapter of this volume devoted to the theoretical foundations of political fandom, these dynamics highlight the centrality of affective investment over programmatic considerations in shaping contemporary forms of political engagement.

In contrast, anti-fandom displays a more overt political configuration. The most prominent component is the disapproval of political action (23.8%), closely followed by personal dislike (23.0%), indicating that critiques of leadership style and political substance often coexist. Expressions of antagonism towards the community of supporters are significantly less frequent (2.4%), suggesting that while affective polarization is present, it is generally directed towards the figure of the leader rather than their followers. This distribution aligns with previous findings on the discursive practices of anti-fans, who frequently articulate their dissent through critical engagement with the leader's public persona or policy positions (Gray, 2003; Törnberg, 2022).

To further illustrate the emotional texture of these interactions, Figure 6.1 maps the predominant emotions associated with both fandom and anti-fandom. Within fandom-related posts, love emerges as the most recurrent affective expression, followed by esteem and admiration. This emotional repertoire reflects a celebratory and affiliative tone, rooted in symbolic closeness and emotional idealization of the leader. By contrast, anti-fandom posts revolve predominantly around negative emotions—especially anger and indignation—which appear with similar frequency.

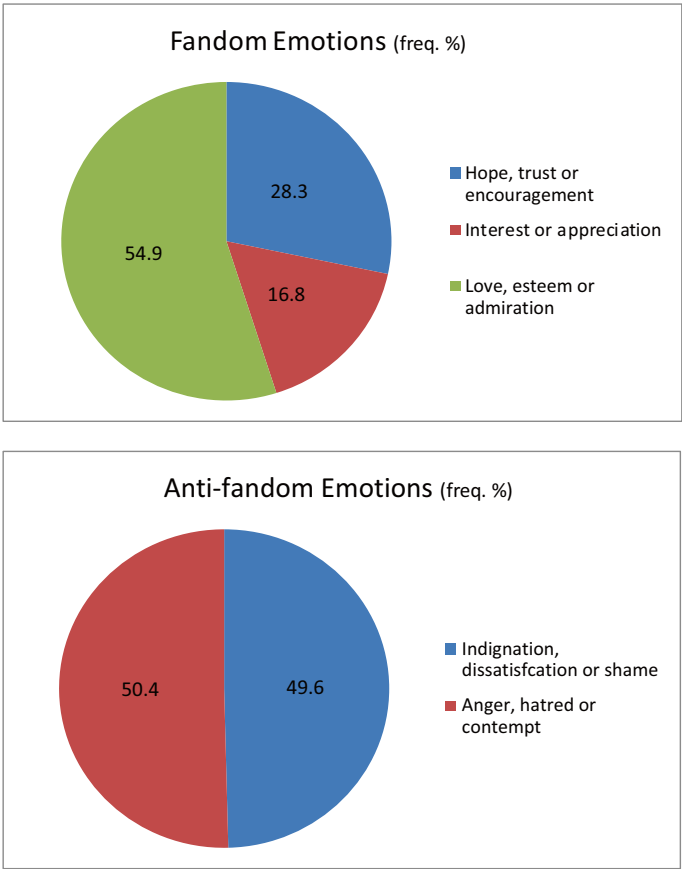


Fig. 6.1 Fandom and anti-fandom emotions

Rather than signalling a broader emotional repertoire, this concentration highlights a reactive and critical stance that is less about emotional attachment and more about political resistance and disapproval.

This contrast in emotional profiles underscores an important asymmetry in the nature of affective political engagement on Instagram. Fandom tends to draw on positive emotions to express personal affinity, and communal belonging, often neglecting political dimensions. On the other hand, anti-fandom posts display explicit political discontent, combining

emotional intensity with critical judgement. Together, these patterns offer a revealing portrait of how emotions operate in the digital public sphere, contributing to the construction of polarized political identities and shaping new modalities of civic participation in the hybrid media environment.

In contemporary political communication, emotions have become central structuring forces of both participation and representation. Anger and love stand out as particularly salient affective registers. Mediated anger functions as a performative and collective force, discursively constructed in political rhetoric. It operates both as a barometer of public discontent and as a mobilizing resource, particularly within populist movements (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). By contrast, the politics of love underpin forms of political fandom in which citizens cultivate affective attachments to leaders that resemble cultural fan practices. This “political love” fosters communities of belonging, reinforces collective identities, and legitimates new forms of participation grounded less in political alignment and more in feelings of personal connection with leaders (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

This analysis of fandom and anti-fandom posts illustrates how these affective dynamics materialize in digital discourse. In the case of fandom, emotional engagement appears diversified. Feelings of love, esteem, and admiration are primarily associated with leaders perceived as successful, skilled, or popular (66.7%). This highlights the centrality of symbolic capital—understood as the leader’s perceived legitimacy, charisma, and public credibility—and of the performative expressions of leadership, which serve to reflect and reinforce existing affective attachments. Other attributes follow different emotional orientations: Hope and trust are strongly connected to support the party or its candidates (54.6%), suggesting a form of collective or ideological investment; honesty and consistency are most frequently associated with interest and appreciation (9.4%), underscoring the role of perceived credibility as an affective anchor; aesthetic appreciation (8.1%) and perceived closeness to the people (8.7%) are primarily connected to expressions of love and admiration, while also prompting forms of attentive engagement. Leaders described as energetic or assertive are linked to a mix of hope (4.6%) and interest (4.3%), suggesting that dynamism can attract positive attention while signalling perceived political effectiveness.

Anti-fandom, by contrast, presents a more concentrated emotional structure, which means that there is no specific association between some negative traits attributed to the leader and certain emotions. Leaders described as incompetent, weak, or ineffective account for 64.2%; this

confirms that anti-fandom is driven by a narrow set of negative emotions, reflecting a reactive and critical stance grounded less in affective attachment than in political resistance and disapproval. An additional 26.0% target inconsistencies in political behaviour or communication, confirming the salience of capacity and coherence as benchmarks of legitimacy. Symbolic delegitimization through aesthetic or cultural labelling (5.8%)—portraying leaders as arrogant, unattractive, or out of touch—remains marginal. Posts that depict leaders as energetic or aggressive also appear in this category (3.7%), but in these cases the trait is framed negatively, often as arrogance or authoritarianism. The cross-cutting presence of this representation underscores the ambivalence of certain emotional triggers: Assertiveness can mobilize admiration and hope, yet the same display may provoke rejection when perceived as aggressiveness.

These patterns resonate with Papacharissi's concept of affective publics (2015), which emphasizes the constitutive role of emotional expression in shaping public discourse, generating shared meanings, and reinforcing collective imaginaries. Fandom thrives on a plurality of positive stimuli, such as charisma, symbolic proximity, and credibility, whereas anti-fandom is more politically focused and affectively homogeneous, anchored in strong rejection of perceived incompetence or incoherence. This suggests that emotional participation in political life is increasingly structured around affect-based affinities or aversions towards the targeted leader, contributing to digitally mediated publics whose cohesion rests less on ideological programmes and more on shared emotional orientations.

On a theoretical level, this analysis aligns with the work of Sara Ahmed (2004) on the reconceptualization of emotions as social and cultural practices rather than private inner states. Emotions “do things”: They orient desires and fears, establish bonds of belonging, and mark boundaries of exclusion. Thus, hatred, fear, and disgust operate as political resources that reinforce borders, sustain practices of surveillance, and justify exclusionary policies, while love—particularly “national love”—functions as a coalescing force that nonetheless restricts belonging to selected bodies. Ahmed terms these dynamics “affective economies”, circuits through which emotions acquire social and political value by virtue of their circulation. In this perspective, emotions are not natural or pre-social phenomena but socially constructed practices embedded in existing cultural and political structures. As Ahmed argues, emotions such as anger are shaped by these structures and, through their circulation, can consolidate hierarchies and attachments or, alternatively, serve as resources for resistance and the reconfiguration of the political imaginary (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Dimensions of emotions

<i>Emotion</i>	<i>Love, esteem, or admiration</i>	<i>Hope, trust, or encouragement</i>	<i>Interest or appreciation</i>	<i>Tot. %</i>	<i>N.</i>
a) Fandom posts					
Successful, skilled	66.7	35.2	47.0	54.5	378
Supporting to the party/candidates	11.3	54.6	24.8	25.8	179
Honest, consistent	4.5	2.6	9.4	4.8	33
Aesthetically appealing	8.1	0.0	6.8	5.6	39
Close to the people, one of us	8.7	2.6	7.7	6.8	47
Energetic, aggressive	0.8	4.6	4.3	2.4	17
Tot.	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	693
<i>Emotion</i>	<i>Anger, hatred, or contempt</i>	<i>Indignation, dissatisfaction, or shame</i>		<i>Tot. %</i>	<i>N.</i>
b) Anti-fandom posts					
Energetic, aggressive	3.6	3.9		3.7	25
Incompetent, weak, ineffective	64.6	63.8		64.2	430
Inconsistent	24.7	27.2		26.0	174
Ugly/snob/ other	6.5	5.1		5.8	39
Tot.	100.0	100.0		100.0	668

6.4 FACTORS UNDERLYING FANDOM AND ANTI-FANDOM

As previously highlighted, one of the objectives of this study is to identify the various mechanisms underpinning the publication of fandom or anti-fandom posts. That is, to engage in social media practices aimed at supporting a preferred leader or denigrating rival leaders.

The first contextual factor considered is the variable “time”. The data collection period, as noted, coincided with the run-up to the 2024 European elections. In order to properly assess the development of the phenomenon, we decided to divide the reference period into weekly intervals¹. As illustrated (see Figure 6.2), up to the fourth week, the number of fandom and anti-fandom posts tends to decline, albeit irregularly, then

¹Data collection began on 1 May; therefore, the first week actually comprises only five days. Moreover, 10 June—the final day on which data were collected—was excluded from this analysis for reasons of comparability.

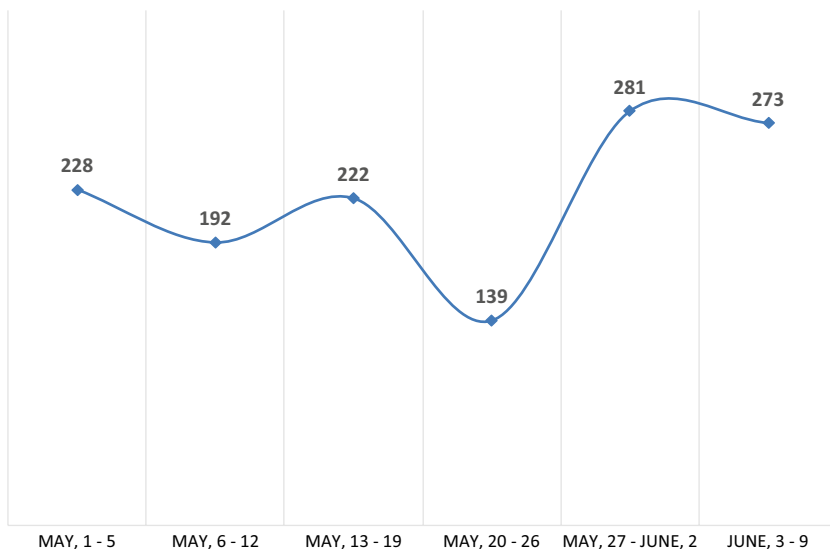


Fig. 6.2 Temporal trend of posts

rises sharply during the fifth week, followed by a slight drop in the final week. What we expected, therefore, is only partially confirmed.

To assess whether and to what extent the various factors listed above contribute to a propensity towards fandom or, conversely, anti-fandom practices, we conducted a bivariate logistic regression using the dichotomous variable “fandom post vs anti-fandom post” as the dependent variable. While the overall trend of the time variable had been previously analysed in relation to the total number of fandom and anti-fandom posts, in this regression it did not emerge as particularly significant. Only the third week displayed a high level of significance. For this reason—and in order to construct a more parsimonious model—we decided to exclude the time variable from the final model.

The estimated model is statistically significant and demonstrates strong predictive capacity, explaining 60.6% of the variance. Moreover, it correctly classifies 82.1% of cases.

Regarding the second contextual factor, the likelihood of publishing anti-fandom posts is significantly associated with the country of origin of

Table 6.3 Binary logistic regression model (Dependent variables: fandom)^a

		<i>B</i>	<i>E.S.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>
Country	France	1.703	0.431	***	5.489
	Spain	2.426	0.43	***	11.312
Who posts	Political actor	-5.694	0.92	***	0.003
	Political commentary and fan accounts	1.814	0.466	***	6.136
	Other ^b	1.749	0.535	***	5.75
Leader's position	Government leaders	2.384	0.39	***	10.847
Leader's gender	Male leaders	-0.905	0.198	***	0.405
Interactions	Political actor by government leaders	2.142	0.879	*	8.515
	Political commentary and fan accounts by government leaders	1.065	0.547	.	2.9
	Other by government leaders	-1.427	0.502	**	0.24
	Political actor by France	2.809	0.601	***	16.588
	Political commentary and fan accounts by France	0.203	0.859		1.225
	Other by France	-1.895	0.506	***	0.15
	Political actor by Spain	1.955	0.846	*	7.061
	Political commentary and fan accounts by Spain	-2.265	0.63	***	0.104
	Other by Spain	-2.426	0.731	***	0.088
	Government leaders by France	-1.229	0.493	*	0.293
	Government leaders by Spain	-0.619	0.532		0.539
	Constant	-1.443	0.383	***	0.236

^a The reference categories for the independent variables are as follow: Country-Italy; Who posts-ordinary user; Leader's position-Opposition leader; Leader's gender-Female.

^b "Other" is a residual category (127 posts, accounting for 9.3% of the total) which includes "Fan or anti-fan political pages" (63 posts), "Media actors" (58 posts), and "Celebrities/Influencers" (6 posts).

N=1368; $\chi^2=828,214$, $df=18$, sig ***; R^2 of Nagelkerke=0.606; 82.1% correct case classification

the publisher. Specifically, post related to French and Spanish leaders are respectively over 5 and 11 times more likely to be anti-fandom than Italian ones (see Table 6.3).

It is highly likely that these differences are linked to the distinct socio-political climates characterizing the three countries during the months preceding the European elections—the period in which our data were collected. While this analysis does not establish causal relationships, the

patterns observed may plausibly reflect the intensity of public debate, levels of political polarization, and the salience of specific issues in each national context.

Among the three countries considered, Italy is the only one governed by a centre-right majority, with the head of government being the leader of the radical right party Brothers of Italy. Since her victory in the 2022 legislative elections, Giorgia Meloni has pursued a strategy of “normalizing” the party, with the overt aim of gaining a central role at the European level as well. Moving from an openly Eurosceptic stance, the party under Meloni has adopted the more reassuring slogan “*Italy changes Europe*”, summarizing a programme aimed at shaping the EU into a more confederal and protectionist entity, with greater powers over immigration control (Magni-Berton, 2025).

In comparison with the Italian political situation, those of Spain and France appear to be more polarized and, as such, more fertile ground for the spread of anti-fandom practices.

In Spain, one of the consequences of the formation of the first Sánchez government in 2018 has been the growing polarization between the left, led by the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party), and the right, where the PP (Popular Party) constitutes the main political force. In the subsequent 2023 legislative elections, in which the PSOE narrowly defeated the PP (by 4.93%), Sánchez managed to secure another term as Prime Minister thanks to the support of eight different parties and political coalitions. In this highly polarized context, several analysts have noted that the 2024 European elections functioned, in practice, as a vote either for or against Sánchez (Marcos-Marne et al., 2024). The governing parties portrayed the Spanish right and far-right forces as a threat to the country and to Europe, while the opposition intensified its attacks on the government and its leader. These attacks focused in particular on the Amnesty Law for Catalan independentists and the Organic Law on the Integral Guarantee of Sexual Freedom, which—due to specific legal loopholes—led to the early release of individuals convicted of sexual offences (Chazel, 2025; Marcos-Marne, 2024). As Marcos-Marne (2024, p. 360) observes, the campaign unfolded in an atmosphere marked by “accusations of lawfare, insults, and questioning of the government’s legitimacy to a scale not seen before”.

Moving to France, it should be noted that the 2022 legislative elections marked a turning point. The coalition *Ensemble pour la République*, which brings together the parties supporting President Macron, failed to secure an absolute majority in the National Assembly. As a result, the government

that followed operated in a minority position, relying on ad-hoc negotiations to pass legislation. This government demonstrated marked fragility from the outset, surviving only by reaching compromises with the centre-right Gaullist Republicans and frequently resorting to Article 49.3 of the Constitution, which allows the government to pass legislation without a vote in the National Assembly (Gunts & Mattos, 2024; Ivaldi, 2024). With the use of this legislative tool, a highly contested pension reform was passed, raising the retirement age from 62 to 64. This reform was strongly opposed by both right and left-wing forces. Combined with other factors, such as the economic recession and the rising cost of living, this generated widespread discontent and waves of strikes. In this climate of deep mistrust towards Macron and his allies, the RN capitalized on the opportunity to frame the European elections as a referendum on the President and his government, positioning itself as the only viable alternative to Macron's party (Gunts & Mattos, 2024; Ivaldi, 2024).

As for the sole factor related to the characteristics of content producers, our expectations are not confirmed. Compared to ordinary users, political actors are more inclined to publish fandom content, while political commentary pages, fan accounts, and the residual "other" category tend to privilege anti-fandom expressions. This tendency is arguably related to the communicative incentives faced by political actors, who often prioritize reinforcing the legitimacy and visibility of their own leaders, while only secondarily combining such support with criticism of rivals. In this sense, political actors themselves can be seen as active participants in fandom practices, strategically performing attachment to their leaders as a resource for mobilization and identity construction. These dynamics blur the line between institutional communication and fan-like engagement, anticipating what can be described as *fandomesque* performances—a phenomenon examined in greater depth in the following chapter. Political commentary and fan accounts (as well as the "other" category) display an opposite tendency towards anti-fandom posts, a pattern that may reflect the communicative styles and functions typical of these types of actors. Indeed, while the messages conveyed by memes can sometimes express positive sentiments—such as supporting a cause or offering humorous but constructive commentary—research on political communication suggests that, in polarized contexts, memes are often employed to ridicule opponents, express hostility, or amplify antagonistic narratives (Paz et al., 2021). In our dataset, this pattern is reflected in the prevalence of memes conveying critical or derogatory portrayals of political leaders.

Turning to political supply factors, namely those referring to the characteristics of the leaders featured in the posts, we observe that—as hypothesized—holding governmental roles tends to attract anti-fandom content (posts targeting government leaders are over 10 times more likely to be anti-fandom than those targeting opposition leaders). Indeed, those who hold government offices frequently face complex issues, often with limited resources, and usually struggle to fulfil the often-exaggerated promises made prior to election, thereby attracting widespread public discontent.

Gender differences also emerge: Female political leaders appear to be more frequently subjected to anti-fandom practices than their male counterparts. It is well known that, despite progress made in recent decades, significant gender disparities persist in political offices in Europe and beyond. Women remain underrepresented in national parliaments, governments, and political leadership roles (Norris & Krook, 2011; Franceschet et al., 2012). Cultural barriers and gender biases continue to impede their full recognition even after election, making them an easy target for those who believe politics is “not a matter for women”.

Regarding interaction effects, we must first note that the gender of the political leader does not interact with the other variables we considered; thus, it was excluded from the final model. Similarly, the three-way interaction between Country $\times$ Who Publishes $\times$ Leader’s Position was found to be statistically insignificant in preliminary tests and was therefore also excluded.

When analysing the interaction effects between the country in which a post was published and other explanatory variables, several noteworthy patterns emerge. As previously observed, political actors are generally more inclined than ordinary users to post fandom content. However, this tendency is significantly altered when these actors are based in France or Spain. In these contexts, political actors show a marked preference for anti-fandom posts, suggesting that the political climate in which they operate substantially influences their communicative behaviour.

This finding is consistent with the broader political dynamics observed in the two countries. Both France and Spain were characterized by heightened political polarization during the period under study—particularly when compared to the more stabilized Italian context. It is therefore not surprising that in these more conflictual environments, anti-fandom emerges as a dominant expressive mode, nor that political actors—who are directly involved in electoral competition and partisan confrontation—play a central role in its production. In highly polarized contexts, affective

communication often becomes a strategic resource, and appeals articulating negative emotions can be employed to delegitimize opponents and mobilize supporters (Iyengar et al., 2012).

An interesting deviation from this trend is observed in Spain, where posts published by political commentary and fan accounts—despite their general tendency towards anti-fandom—display a more supportive tone towards certain political leaders. In this context, such pages appear to act not merely as vehicles for critique or satire but also as tools for promoting specific political causes or figures.

Another interaction effect involves the “other” category of users—a residual and heterogeneous group whose communicative patterns are difficult to generalize. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that these actors, who independently tend to produce fandom content, maintain this orientation even in countries like France and Spain, where anti-fandom is more prevalent. While interpretative caution is warranted given the diversity of this group, the persistence of fandom content across different national contexts may point to motivations that transcend country-specific political dynamics, such as personal admiration or identity-based attachment to a leader.

A final notable interaction concerns posts from France that target government leaders. Individually, both variables—country and institutional role—are associated with a higher likelihood of anti-fandom expressions. Yet, when combined, the interaction yields an unexpected result: posts that are predominantly fandom in nature. This apparent reversal can be explained by looking at the identity of the leader in question. In the French case, the government figure most frequently referenced is Emmanuel Macron. It is plausible, therefore, that the posts coded as fandom were produced by his supporters or by actors aligned with his political camp, seeking to reinforce the President’s legitimacy in a climate of widespread discontent and institutional fragility.

6.5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has explored the emotional dynamics of political fandom and anti-fandom as expressed on Instagram during the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. Through a systematic quantitative content analysis of over 1300 affectively connotated posts across Italy, France, and Spain, we have examined how, in these specific contexts, Instagram posts function as sites where political supporters and opponents articulate emotional engagements, identity claims, and symbolic conflicts.

The findings suggest that fandom and anti-fandom operate according to distinct emotional dynamics: While fandom expressions tend to diversify in terms of emotional tones and attributions, ranging from admiration and hope to communal identification, anti-fandom is more politically charged and concentrated, mobilizing around criticism of leaders' perceived incompetence or inconsistency. These patterns confirm the centrality of affect in digital political communication and show how emotions can structure and reinforce discursive polarization.

Moreover, the study has displayed that the emergence and variation of fandom and anti-fandom expressions are shaped by contextual, social, and individual factors. Country-specific dynamics play a crucial role: Spain and France display a stronger orientation towards anti-fandom, arguably due to more polarized political climates. The identity of the content producers also matters: Political actors are significantly more likely to post fandom content, while political commentary and fan accounts tend to engage in anti-fandom practices. Leader characteristics further mediate these dynamics: Those in government roles and female politicians are more frequently targeted by emotionally charged content, particularly negative. As discussed in the analytical section, the communicative behaviour of political actors—who frequently adopt fan-like modes of endorsement and visibility-building—opens up a dimension that is examined more closely in the following chapter.

These results contribute to the growing literature on the affective turn in political communication by offering empirical evidence from a comparative, cross-national perspective. They show how social media not only reflect but also amplify the emotional undercurrents of contemporary political life, and how digital platforms foster new forms of mediated partisanship grounded in affect rather than ideology. At the same time, as the work of scholars has shown (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), rising affective polarization can have detrimental effects on public discourse in contemporary democracies, undermining the conditions for pluralism, mutual recognition, and meaningful deliberation.

The next chapter builds on these insights by adopting a qualitative perspective that focuses on a dynamic specific to the Italian case. Through in-depth analysis of selected Instagram posts, it explores the narrative structures, aesthetic strategies, and affective framings that underpin political fandom and anti-fandom, shedding further light on how emotions are mobilized in the construction of digital political identities.

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From Fans Practising Politics to Politicians Practising Fandom: *Fandomesque* Political Communication in Italy

Marco Mazzoni  and *Giovanni Daniele Starita* 

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Most of the scholarly attention dedicated to political fandom has been focused on the spontaneous affect-driven practices of ordinary users. This chapter seeks to expand current understandings of political fandom through the exploration of a tangent yet distinct phenomenon: the borrowing of fan performances by political actors, undertaken to boost the online visibility of their leader and of their digital personae. We named the resulting genre *fandomesque*, meaning content that mimics the key characteristics and vernaculars of fandom content (as described by Barnes, 2022; Dean & Andrews, 2021; Gray et al., 2017; Sandvoss, 2013) while being produced and circulated by political candidates or party accounts, rather than by ordinary fan-constituents.

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As we show in this chapter, these stylised expressions, though superficially akin to grassroots fan practices, originate from actors actively participating to the political game as party staff or candidates for office. In particular, these actors adopt fan-like rhetoric, imagery, and performances, seemingly to increase the visibility and reach of their digital persona while fuelling the legitimacy of their party leader. The production and circulation of *fandomesque* content allows these political actors to reach audiences interested in grassroots expressions of support for a leader, but potentially uninterested in the digital persona of other political candidates from the same party. It has already been established in the relevant literature that social media affordances can foster the affect-based, para-social relationships necessary for fandoms to emerge (Coduto, 2022; Hills, 2016). Unsurprisingly, this dynamic also applies to political fandoms that have been observed to proliferate especially in media landscapes characterised by high levels of consumption of social media content (Barnes, 2022; Campus et al., 2025).

To be precise, this chapter builds the argument that if there is high-visibility, political leaders build performances of authenticity, alternating exhibits of ordinariness and of extraordinariness to gather and retain fame online (Trillò & Starita, 2025; Wood et al., 2016), other party members can exploit this mechanism by disseminating *fandomesque* content as they seek to promote their own digital personae. Arguably, the construction of a *fandomesque* genre in this context can potentially fulfil a dual purpose: corroborating the authenticity of the leader's self-presentation and fuelling the self-presentation of the publisher as a true supporter of the leader. To do so, we provide an empirical analysis of *fandomesque* practices on Instagram concerning Giorgia Meloni, leader of the far-right party Fratelli d'Italia and at the time of writing this chapter Prime Minister of Italy.

In foregrounding *fandomesque* communication, the chapter shifts the analytical lens from bottom-up political fandom to the top-down appropriation of fan culture by members of the passive electorate. Similarly to the observations of some scholars pertaining the exploitation of fandoms performed by companies to maximise profits (McCutcheon et al., 2022; Wang, 2020), this perspective offers a complementary and necessary expansion of political fandom studies. An expansion that does not merely look at what articulations of political fandoms look like, and what characteristics they possess, but proposes a critical approach to the transposition of non-political concepts into strictly political phenomena. Hence, we set

the ground for future studies to engage with the concept in a critical manner that does not dismiss its soundness. Instead, we put into question the use and understanding of the concept of political fandoms to further the understanding of how fan-like practices and social media affordances can intersect. By analysing how political actors themselves perform fandom, we gain a clearer picture of how affective politics operates across different registers of authorship and intentionality. Moreover, it is yet another example to add to the literature focusing on the noticeable trend of political actors borrowing the vernaculars of ordinary users to boost the reach and relatability of their digital personae (e.g.: Abidin, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Starita & Trillò, 2022).

To build this argument, the chapter is structured as follows. First, we look at the interpolation of celebrity and politics related to the shifts brought by televised broadcasting. Second, we look at how celebrity politics phenomena have radically changed with the widespread usage of social media and the subsequent hybridisation of media systems, characterised by a mixture of practices related to legacy media and the new possibilities enabled by digital platforms. Third, we employ these analytical concepts to reflect on the mimicking of Internet celebrities (or influencers) performed by celebrity politicians in their borrowing of the vernaculars of ordinary users. Most importantly, we observe that such borrowing practices can fulfil the need for high-visibility politicians to appear relatable and authentic. Fourth, we provide a brief overview of the background of Giorgia Meloni, the politician this chapter focuses on, to show that this dynamic is very relevant to understand her digital persona.

Hence, we move on to provide the methods and data analysis that compose our empirical grounding. In the subsequent discussion, we critically engage with the provided analysis to make the case for *fandomesque* content to be a fruitful way for other members of Fratelli d'Italia to legitimise their candidacy and party membership. Building upon these elements, we conclude that the spread of *fandomesque* content online can also be particularly fruitful for the legitimisation of Meloni as the leader of a consolidated country. Hence, we conclude that this phenomenon may be considered a byproduct of the need for politicians to negotiate the tension between strategic campaigning efforts and appearing as authentic public figures, whose life is as close as possible to that of the average constituent.

7.2 CELEBRITY, FAN CULTURE, AND TELEVISION'S MEDIATING ROLE

As described in Chapter 2, the social and affective formation of contemporary fan culture did not emerge in a vacuum. Its roots are tightly entangled with the rise of mediatised celebrity, particularly as shaped by the mass use of television that marks the period after the Second World War (Meyrowitz, 1986). From the mid-twentieth century onwards, television played a pivotal role in manufacturing visibility, crafting fame, and nurturing affective bonds between audiences and celebrities allowing spectators to seemingly intrude into the private lives of public figures (Bennett & Holmes, 2010; McNamara, 2009). In reality, the disclosures of private aspects of the lives of celebrities can be carefully constructed by media actors and by the celebrities themselves, which can constantly attempt to renegotiate the space between their private and public lives (Thompson, 2011). A carefully curated disclosure of seemingly private aspects of the celebrities' lives can appear as genuine, artificially filling the need for affective elements typical of para-sociality. As Horton and Wohl (1956) famously argued, television gave spectators the illusion that they were sharing their own private life with that of the celebrities they saw through the screen. This dynamic paved the way for the development of powerful para-social bonds: one-sided relationships characterised by an emotional connection between the viewer and the distant media character (Meyrowitz, 1994).

Moreover, this form of para-sociality laid the groundwork for the emergence of organised fan cultures (Hills, 2017). Yet it also had broader ramifications for political life. Scholars have noted how, beginning in the late twentieth century, political figures increasingly adopted the stylistic codes of celebrity culture (Manin, 1997). John Street (2004) captures this shift through the conceptualisation of the “celebrity politician”, a hybrid archetype whose capacity to gather consensus derives not only from their political endeavours but also from their ability to construct and maintain mediatised fame. Ronald Reagan used his familiarity with mass media performances to cultivate an accessible and emotionally resonant leadership style (Schickel, 1985). Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy employed a mixture of calculated disclosures of his private life with public endorsements by popstars and mainstream celebrities (Alomes & Mascitelli, 2012; Campus, 2010) that showed a savviness of the ways

television shifted the public interest for politics just as it did for celebrities in other sectors.

In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi further expanded this model exploiting his fame as an entrepreneur and his power as a media tycoon to become a “tele-populist”: a leader that constructed a public persona that would immensely influence the communication strategies employed in Italian politics (Boni, 2008; Taguieff, 2003). His ownership of television networks not only afforded him vast communicative reach but also enabled him to blur the boundaries between entertainment and politics, casting himself as a “man of the people” while centralising media control (Ginsborg, 2005). These cases point to a broader pattern: the infusion of politics with the narrative, visual, and affective strategies of celebrity culture. Just as it happened with non-political celebrities, the all-seeing-eye of the television camera shifted the public preference for political figures from being focused on their technical expertise in lawmaking and policy design processes into their overall opinions and personal endeavours (Langer, 2010; Manin, 1997).

7.3 PERFORMING CELEBRITY IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

The mediating logic of television set the conditions for the spread of fan culture into politics, changing how many of the more passionate constituents engage with professional politicians. With the widespread use of social media however, articulations of political fandom phenomena shifted again. Arguably, these shifts are strictly connected to the ways digital platforms radically changed how celebrity is enacted and sustained. In contrast to the centralised, broadcast-based model of celebrity production, social media set the ground for a more decentralised and performative model for the gathering and retention of fame. In other words, celebrity is now less of a given status. Rather, it has become part of the identity of an individual that has to be continually reinstated through performances of affective labour (Basmehchi & Ignatow, 2021), strategic self-disclosures (Abidin, 2015), and algorithmic calibration (Cotter, 2019).

Marwick and boyd (2011) describe this emergent mode as “micro-celebrity”: a set of practices involving the curation of authenticity, the performance of intimacy, and the management of audience engagement across platforms. Initially coined by Senft (2008) to describe niche influencers, the notion of micro-celebrity has increasingly informed the

communicative strategies of mainstream political actors. Public figures are now expected to be not only rhetorically persuasive but also emotionally transparent, culturally fluent, and socially responsive (Hernández-Santaolalla, 2020; Khamis et al., 2017; Salisbury & Pooley, 2017). In other words, the overflow of the private into the public sphere observed by Thompson (2011) and Meyrowitz (1986) with the spread of television was further accelerated by the interconnected, networked publics that characterise the social media age (boyd, 2010; Thompson, 2020).

These expectations on the performativity of the private mixed with that of the public are especially evident in the fame model related to influencer culture, which functions as a template for digitally mediated authority and influence more broadly (Verboord, 2022). As argued by Abidin (2016), influencers embody a paradoxical dynamic: They must appear relatable and ordinary while simultaneously cultivating aspirational appeal. This performative tension is mirrored in the way political actors use social media—oscillating between seemingly earnest policy messaging and vernacular, often playful, forms of engagement that mimic the styles of everyday users (Diamanti & Pregliasco, 2019; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Rega & Lorusso, 2014). The delicate equilibrium between these two seemingly contradictory principles was identified even in the study of some of the most mediatised politicians in legacy media contexts (Meyrowitz, 1977). However, it was only with widespread social media use that it was observed as an omnipresent tension that any politician engaging with broadcast and post-broadcast media has to interface with (Wood et al., 2016).

In the study of political communication, these dynamics converge in what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) termed “connective action”, a model in which individuals and institutions both participate in the circulation of personalised, digitally native content. Political figures adapting to this environment increasingly deploy strategies aimed at fostering emotional proximity and fluency in platform vernaculars, which we will show are two key components of *fandomesque* performances. In other words, candidates seeking consensus in the digital sphere tend to construct narratives of humanisation, fostering relatability and perceived authenticity among targeted audiences (e.g.: Castaño et al., 2024; Marino, 2019; Vuković & Krapić, 2025). On this matter, Giorgia Meloni is no different from many other leaders from Western democracies, as she often oscillates between ethno-nationalist, value-based remarks, and the disclosure of personal details from her private life (Gazzola, 2022; Giordano & Antonucci, 2023).

7.4 MIMICKING THE VERNACULAR: POLITICAL ACTORS AND THE AESTHETICS OF RELATABILITY

One of the defining features of *fandomesque* content is its appropriation of the stylistic and rhetorical conventions commonly associated with ordinary social media users. Politicians and parties now regularly post seemingly amateurish selfies and share personal anecdotes (Abidin, 2017), engage in real-time commentary (Bucy et al., 2020), and participate in meme culture (Marino, 2019). These moves are not merely aesthetic choices: by engaging in behaviours that imitate those of the average user, politicians can produce in their (potential) constituents a sense of immediacy, accessibility, and authenticity. These three elements have been proved to be particularly fruitful in the campaigning of populist politicians (Bartlett et al., 2011; Ivaldi et al., 2017), but their influence has been observed to be a key shaping factor for the digital personae of celebrity politicians in general (Lalancette & Cormack, 2020; Mendonça & Caetano, 2020; Wood et al., 2016).

This shift has been theorised as part of a broader process of “informalisation” in political communication (Manning et al., 2017). In other words, if high-visibility politicians formerly accumulated a social capital based on institutional authority and political savviness, they now seek forms of soft power rooted in affective resonance, adherence to pop culture phenomena, and participatory aesthetics. In this context, politicians adopt the communicative behaviours of their audiences to be perceived as emotionally available, socially engaged, and culturally embedded.

Recent examples clearly illustrate this dynamic. US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has become emblematic of this approach. Through her Instagram stories, she shares glimpses of daily routines, personal reflections, and candid moments that blur the boundaries between the personal and the political. Ceccobelli and Colombo (2025) analyse this hybrid performance style as an outcome of a mix of individual qualities of the politician (such as their expertise and skills) and of socially constructed perceptions of the politician’s public persona, such as the public perception of how authentic and relatable their persona is. Similarly, studies comparing the personal branding strategies of influencers with communication strategies employed by politicians on social media have shown that authenticity plays a pivotal role in the construction of the digital persona of both figures.

An example of a politician using social media in a radically different manner from Justin Trudeau is the Singaporean MP Baey Yam Keng. Abidin (2017a) analysed his digital presence on Instagram, and specifically his use of selfies. According to Abidin (2017a), Baey willingly uses his Instagram account to show parts of his daily life that are generally considered part of the backstage behavioural space (Goffman, 1978; Meyrowitz, 1986), when it comes to a politician's public persona. Connectedly, he uses selfies to indicate that he is personally managing his account and that the pictures are taken to represent his daily activities in a simple and immediate way. Abidin (2017a) argues that Baey's digital persona makes him emerge as a more relatable politician, compared to those keeping their private life away from the public.

Summarising, the political celebrity can only be perceived as competent in their job if they are also perceived as relatable and authentic, independently of past proof of technical expertise or political savviness. This is the most crucial aspect they share with Internet celebrities: Authenticity is a requirement for most politicians and influencers to acquire and retain social media fame. In other words, it seems that with the widespread use of social media, and the new ways to obtain and retain fame that these platforms allowed, even celebrity politics has adapted to influencer trends (Colussi et al., 2023; Starita & Trillò, 2022). The result is a communicative environment in which political actors must not only disseminate information but also demonstrate connection with their audience.

Our core argument is that to understand *Fandomesque* content, we have to consider the pivotal role played by authenticity in social media communication as described above. Taken together, these dynamics show the utility of *fandomesque* strategies. By leveraging them, less visible political actors can increase their media visibility, while cultivating an ostensibly spontaneous, grassroots stream of fan-like expressions towards the leader. In an age where fame has become a completely performative endeavour, and where emotional resonance and storytelling often trump material actions, the tools of fan culture become valuable assets for political branding and engagement. In other words, politicians and candidates can employ fan-like content to achieve a dual purpose: fuel the seemingly grassroots mobilisation of ordinary users expressing their affection for the leader and exploit the visibility and fame of the leader to attract followers from the fanbase of the leader.

Hence, we argue that *fandomesque* content is a product of political actors adapting to platform norms to maximise their attractiveness. It

reflects how political actors have borrowed and repurposed the affective and stylistic codes of participatory culture, similarly to what has happened countless times in non-political fandoms (McCutcheon et al., 2022; Wang, 2020). The observation of this dynamic should not come as surprising as it is aligned to recent studies on the reliance of companies active on social media on the content produced by ordinary users, which are in fact engaging in practices of free labour (Beverungen et al., 2015). Understanding this process offers a critical lens through which to analyse the mediatisation of politics and the evolving strategies of political image-making in the digital era.

7.5 GIORGIA MELONI AND FRATELLI D'ITALIA: A NATIONALIST LEADER FOR A LOCALISED PARTY

Giorgia Meloni has been the leader of Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, also FdI) since 2014. FdI draws its ideological lineage from the post-fascist tradition via its predecessors, the National Alliance (AN), which was a direct successor of the Italian Social Movement (MSI). Meloni's political trajectory commenced within the youth wings of MSI and AN. Once she got into electoral politics, she distinguished herself due to the ideological clarity and communicative immediacy of her public speeches (Nadeau, 2018). Meloni stands out as an example of the hybridised interplay between institutional politics and affect-driven media performances.

Specifically, her public persona is the result of a mix of vague but assertive nationalist rhetoric with the populist vernaculars that typify contemporary digital celebrity. In other words, Meloni frequently alternates the explicit appeals to tradition and national identity of her public speeches with many relatable, informal interactions captured by media cameras and disseminated through her social media channels (Gazzola, 2022; Pasculli, 2023). The FdI leader employs colloquial language and informal styles of communication strategically, fostering para-social bonds with her audience akin to those commonly observed in influencer-driven digital environments (Giordano & Antonucci, 2023). In a nutshell, her digital performances successfully bridge affective closeness and ideological mobilisation, articulating a model of political celebrity that found success in Italy (Di Ciccio & Sensales, 2019; Marino, 2019; Rega & Lorusso, 2014) just as it did in other Western democracies (Bucy et al., 2020; Vampa, 2020).

Under Meloni's leadership, FdI has deviated notably from the prototypical template of a populist far-right party, as it inherited and further developed a territorialised organisational structure and a rhetorical strategy rooted into themes and attitudes deeply embedded into the Italian socio-political context (Baldini et al., 2023). Rather than relying solely upon generic nationalist appeals, FdI systematically invests in grassroots mobilisation, foregrounding local representatives who closely replicate Meloni's communicative style and ideological positioning. This simultaneous emphasis on local specificity and national coherence has substantially bolstered the party's legitimacy, enhancing its appeal by projecting authenticity and responsiveness to constituents' localised concerns (Vampa, 2023a).

Looking at Meloni's political career, we can observe a celebrity politician capable of strategically appropriating communicative styles rooted in popular culture (Pasculli, 2023) that can coalesce the consensus attracted by her leadership with a hierarchical but territorialised party (Vampa, 2023b). In other words, Meloni's figure as a party leader effectively merges the establishment of affective connection through relatability with a hierarchical but territorialised political organisation that strengthens both her and FdI. Her case thus serves to illuminate broader dynamics at play in the ongoing co-optation of user vernaculars performed by Internet celebrities (e.g.: Abidin, 2016, 2017; Khamis et al., 2017; Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022). In other words, this case study can shed new light on how members of a strongly hierarchical party with a consolidated political tradition relate with a leader who is a media-savvy political celebrity.

7.6 METHODS FOR MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS

The case study developed in this chapter stemmed as a qualitative focus from the mixed methods research described in Chapter 6. In addition to the methodological elements exposed in that chapter on the extraction and elaboration of the data, the work presented in this chapter required an additional layer of qualitative, visual analysis. In the next section, we applied this qualitative approach to the analysis of three examples extracted from the relevant sample. Crucially, a multimodal approach was selected to read and interpret the textual data attached to the analysed images in conjunction with the visually codified messages (Kress, 2013), as to not

alter the meaning from that intended by the original publisher. To disentangle and analyse the visuals, we employed the analytical tools provided by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) in their pivotal work *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Specifically, we focused on how the represented participants, their location(s) within the frame and the interactions shown contribute to the construction of the messages shared by the publisher.

Before proceeding with the empirical analysis, a clarification is necessary. As reported in the previous chapter, the personal, political, and communal were identified as three key elements of fandom. The same distinction was employed in the following analysis, selecting and analysing three examples of photographs that differ from one another in their display of fan-like performances. Nonetheless, these three elements can and often do co-exist within the same fan-like performance. Fandoms are spaces where the communities of fans, their adoration for the individuals contributing to the object of their passion, and the values attached to that object all mix (Starita et al., 2025). Hence, you will find traces if not evidences of the communal aspect of being a fan of Giorgia Meloni in posts fostering her extraordinary personality, or her abilities as a party leader. Briefly, what we deem as personal fandom (or *fandomesque*) is a post where the individual characteristics of Meloni are at the centre of the publisher's message, whereas communal or political elements may be more marginally or implicitly present.

Finally, the focus on *fandomesque* practices concerning Giorgia Meloni was based on the cross-country analysis displayed in the previous chapter. First, Italy was the country that showed a connection between fan-like content shared in the analysed infosphere and its circulation as performed by political actors. Second, within the Italian case there is an obvious dealignment of the content circulated by political actors concerning Meloni's public persona and the overall trend relevant to Italian political fandoms. In other words, when it comes to Giorgia Meloni's fandom, the practices shown by political actors deviate significantly from those shown by other political actors in relation to the other three leaders analysed, and from the overall trend shown by all analysed users.

7.7 FREQUENCY ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON BETWEEN POLITICAL ACTORS AND OTHER TYPES OF PUBLISHERS

The groundwork for the subsequent qualitative analysis is laid in a frequency-based study of 870 posts labelled as fan-like in the #GiorgiaMeloni hashtag. The present series of posts constitutes a sub-sample of the units analysed in the preceding chapter for the Italian case. Therefore, the classification in question identifies the same elements. The present study focuses on the type of publisher, the attitude expressed towards the leader, and the way the leader is represented in the posts.

Table 7.1 displays a notable phenomenon: Political actors are the most frequent producers of content within the analysed infosphere, outnumbering ordinary users. This finding was the initiator of our interest in the *fandomesque* and in its conceptualisation. To find the fan-like performances shown in #GiorgiaMeloni as a space dominated by political actors is somewhat counterintuitive considering that political fandoms have been studied mainly as grassroots phenomena spontaneously constructed by admirers. Even when party members were deeply involved in the development and spread of political fandoms (i.e.: Dean, 2017; Dean & Andrews, 2021), it was local supporters and organisers of party events that were put at the front of the analysis, not the elected officials and representatives of the party. Instead, it posits that actors maintaining a professional involvement in the political field play a major role in the generation of emotionally charged, fan-oriented content.

When comparing political actors and all other types of publishers as in Table 7.2, a clear asymmetry emerges in their stance towards the leader. The overwhelming majority of posts by political actors are strongly

Table 7.1 Distribution of the type of publishers on #GiorgiaMeloni

<i>Type of publisher</i>	<i>N. of posts</i>
Political actors	331 38%
Ordinary users	261 29.9%
Political commentary and fan accounts	238 27.3%
Others	42 4.8%

Table 7.2 Attitude expressed towards the leader on #GiorgiaMeloni

<i>Attitude towards the leader</i>	<i>Political actors</i>	<i>Others</i>
Participation to the community supporting the leader	143 43.2%	39 7.2%
Personal admiration	124 37.5%	78 14.4%
Political approval	48 14.5%	34 6.3%
Political disapproval	10 3%	190 35.1%
Personal dislike	4 1.2%	186 34.4%
Antagonism against the community supporting the leader	2 0.6%	14 2.6%
Total	331	541

positive, with a dominant emphasis on participation in a community of support (43.2%) and personal admiration (37.5%). By contrast, criticism pervades the content circulated by non-political actors, showing a bimodal field in which political actors focus on constructing adoration and legitimacy, while oppositional voices are externalised.

The results shown in Table 7.2 are the reason we decided to focus solely on positive representations of Meloni in the selection of the qualitative examples. The admiration of personal traits of the leader (Figure 7.1), validation of her qualities as a professional politician (Figure 7.2), and affirmation of adherence and attachment to the community supporting her (Figure 7.3) constitute the dominant narrative pillars of *fandomesque* performances among institutional actors. On the contrary, all expressions of disapproval, dislike, or antagonism against Meloni or her supporters compound only to less than 5% of the sample.

Table 7.3 shows the representation of Meloni constructed by political actors as compared to that performed by other types of publishers. These numbers further corroborate what was already shown in Table 7.2: Political actors craft Meloni as a competent, successful, and loyal leader, with attributes overwhelmingly aligned to political efficacy rather than personal charisma or human warmth. Notably, “close to the people” and “aesthetically attractive” are marginal, indicating that the appeal of Meloni within *fandomesque* content is not primarily based on informality or

appearance but on ideological and organisational resonance, arguably consistent with her far-right, nationalist stances.

7.8 DISENTANGLING *FANDOMESQUE* PERFORMANCES: A MULTIMODAL VISUAL ANALYSIS

7.8.1 *Personal Admiration Fandomesque*

The photo shown in Figure 7.1 is an example of a *fandomesque* post centred on the expression of appreciation for Meloni's individual qualities. The publisher is a representative of Fratelli d'Italia in the Sicilian regional parliament. First, the published photo shows Meloni and other famous party members (including the publisher, a local politician from Sicily) as they seemingly participate to some collective ritual (the caption points out that they are singing the national anthem). The connection between the words of patriotism of the national anthem and Meloni's ideological attitude that strongly levies nationalistic principles is stressed by the strong

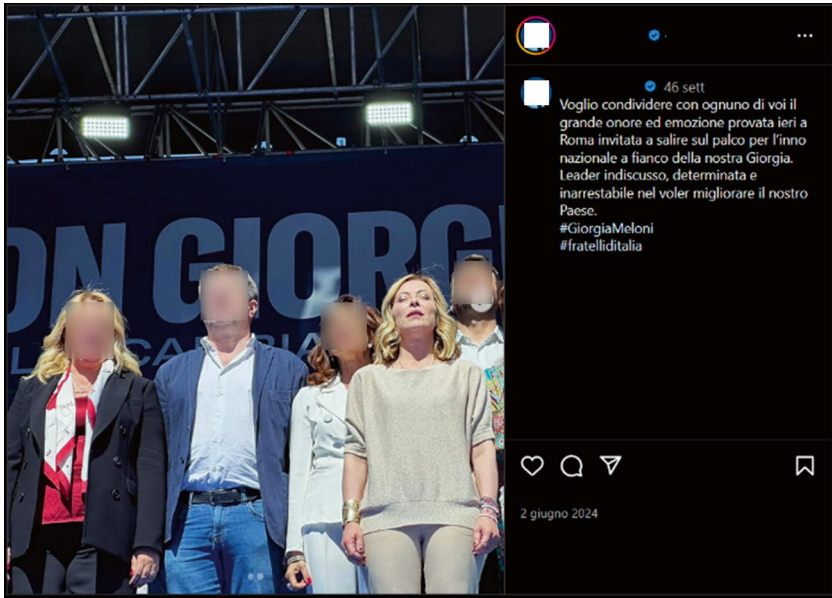


Fig. 7.1 An example of a *fandomesque* post focusing on the personal dimension

emotions she shows in this photo: Her eyes are closed, her face hinting a smile as she sings a song calling for all Italians to be ready to give their lives for the Nation. The emotionality of the moment is reinstated by the caption attached to the photo, which says: “*I want to share with each of you the great honour and emotion I felt yesterday in Rome, as I was invited to go on stage for the national anthem next to our Giorgia. Indisputable leader determined and unstoppable in her desire to improve our Country*”.

Hence, this post channels the emotionality and ideological poignancy surrounding the depicted moment. Singing the anthem is for Meloni deeply significant. The same can be said for the local politician, as she is sharing the stage with the leader of her party. Figure 1 is also a good example of how the political and individual aspects mix when it comes to political leaders, and consequently to the fandoms developed around them. In essence, the publisher shares her admiration for the person that Meloni is, but such admiration is inherently connected to the values professed by the leader throughout her political career and depicted in the moment captured by the photo they published. This form of emotional personalisation is effective in crafting a leader’s public image as not just competent but also intimately connected to share national values. This use of *fandomesque* cues humanises Meloni while simultaneously elevating her to a heroic status by fostering her representation as a person that deeply identifies with her nationalist values.

7.8.2 Political Approval Fandomesque

Figure 7.2 is a good representation of a *fandomesque* post centred on the political aspects of Meloni’s public persona. The publisher is a municipal councillor from a small town located in the North-East of Italy, publishing a picture taken during one of the party leader’s rallies in Rome. First, the post shows Meloni far away from the camera, as she is giving a speech from a stage. This representation puts Meloni as an individual in direct relation with the larger political context of the party she leads, that she is immersed in during the rally. Second, the centrality of her role in the represented moment is stressed by the huge screens broadcasting her to the listening audience located just below the stage. Hence, the actual representation of Meloni is rather marginal in the framed space, but the significance of the represented moment is given by the setting that surrounds the leader, which occupies the rest of the shot. The party and national flags held by audience members, the writings on the wall behind the leader saying:



Fig. 7.2 An example of a fandomesque post focusing on the political dimension

Table 7.3 Representation of the leader on #GiorgiaMeloni

	<i>Other publishers</i>	<i>Political actors</i>
Successful/capable	90 (16.6%)	177 (53.5%)
Supportive of party/candidates	31 (5.7%)	118 (35.6%)
Honest/consistent	11 (2.0%)	7 (2.1%)
Aesthetically attractive	1 (0.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Energetic/aggressive	22 (4.1%)	4 (1.2%)
Close to people/one of us	15 (2.8%)	8 (2.4%)
Incompetent/weak/ineffective	252 (46.6%)	12 (3.6%)
Inconsistent	87 (16.1%)	3 (0.9%)
Unattractive	7 (1.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Snob	14 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	10 (1.8%)	1 (0.3%)
N/A	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.3%)
Total	541	331

“With Giorgia Italy changes Europe¹”. The attached caption is very descriptive both in emotional terms and content-wise. Specifically, it first mentions the publisher’s excitement for their attendance to the event pointing out that it was: *“A one-time opportunity to listen to her passionate speech”*. Subsequently, it summarises the political contents of Meloni’s speech which was focused: *“(…) on matters relevant for Europe and on the cruciality of voting for Brothers of Italy for the future of our Country. Giorgia Meloni underlined the necessity of not being the tail-end in Europe (…)”*. Finally, the publisher closes the caption further strengthening their supportive message for the leader: *“Only with a compact and decisive leadership we can hope in a strong and cohesive Europe”*. The choice to capture Meloni at a distance, emphasising her projection on screens and the surrounding supportive crowd, positions her not as an isolated figure but as the epicentre of a larger political movement. Hence, the post legitimises her leadership by inferring both visually and textually the approval of her audience for the ideas expressed in her speech. This framing not only reinforces her authority but also visually demonstrates the collective endorsement provided by the crowd, thereby lending legitimacy to her political platform.

7.8.3 *Participating to the community of supporters of the leader*

The collage shown in Figure 7.3 is a good example of an articulation of the *fandomesque* that channels the communal element of fan-like performances in politics. Its publisher is a local politician from Rome, serving at the time of publication of this post as city councillor in Rome. The post contains three images, none of which shows Meloni². Differently, the published collage shows three different instances of supporters of Meloni and her party attending the introduction of the party candidates to the EU Parliament to the public in Rome.

In the top image, the publisher is making a selfie with two other participants. Similarly, the two images at the bottom show respectively the publisher in company of other participants to the event, and the other attendants clapping as the presentation of the candidates unfolds. The

¹ Original in Italian: “Con Giorgia l’Italia cambia l’Europa”, motto of Brothers of Italy for the 2024 European Elections campaign.

² The face of the leader is partially visible in the manifestos behind the represented participants in the photo in the bottom left corner.



Fig. 7.3 An example of a *fandomesque* post focusing on the community of Meloni's supporters

attached caption states: “*Great enthusiasm at the introduction of the candidates of Brothers of Italy for the European Parliament*” before closing with a repetition of the party’s motto for the EU elections. The multimodal representation displayed in Figure 3 functions as a catalyst for a sense of collective identity among the followers, thereby fostering a sense of belonging that transcends individual political motivations.

7.9 DISCUSSION

The analysis of Figures 7.1–7.3 has shown that political actors producing *fandomesque* content to express fan-like support for their leader can channel their attitudes in a manner analogous to that of any other political fan. Consequently, their messages can predominantly foster the extraordinary qualities of the individual (Figure 7.1), the validity of the political character ascribed to their public persona (Figure 7.2), or the added value of the community of supporters (Figure 7.3) that was created around that leader. It is evident that these social media posts, despite being published by political candidates, party members, or elected officials and not by ordinary

grassroots supporters, display stylistic features frequently associated with fan practices. This results in a blurring of the line between organic fan engagement and strategically curated political communication.

It is arguably impossible for researchers to infer the motivations underlying the publication of *fandomesque* content at large. Drawing upon the provided analysis and theoretical framework, we argue that two, equally valid motivations may be driving political actors to create and disseminate *fandomesque* content. This dynamic may be attributed to strategic, consensus-gathering oriented aims, yet it is also plausible that it is motivated by genuine fan-like attitudes pervading the field of professional politics. For example, it could be that the publisher of the post displayed in Figure 1 is a genuine political fan turned politician, possibly due to their fan-like attitude pushing them to support Meloni's party even more directly. If and where valid, the presence of this motive would require researchers to recognise a decisive blurring of the line between fan-constituents and fellow party members. In other words, the personalisation of politics and the fan-like attitudes that seem to increasingly pervade electoral politics have shaped political communication phenomena to the point that making clear distinctions between the communicative devices of ordinary constituents and those of political actors may be irrelevant to the specifics of the current political and mediatic landscapes.

However, it is also possible that they are a political candidate merely seeking approval of Meloni's supporters by demonstrating their allegiance to the leader. Significantly, such forms of strategic approach to political fandom practices would be a sign of the deep embeddedness of political communication devices with the affordances and underlying mechanisms of social media interactions. In essence, analogously to influencers that appropriate and leverage the trends and communicative repertoires of ordinary users to fuel the relatability of their digital persona, these politicians turned fans would be exploiting the practices of ordinary fans of Meloni exploiting the popularity of the leader and self-presenting as ordinary, relatable citizens that play in the political field despite having little in common with traditional, professional politics.

Arguably, the possibility for FdI's members to engage with fan performances may influence the selection of candidates and staff that takes place within the party. This is especially relevant considering the role that FdI seems to play in reinforcing Meloni's leadership role, and the hierarchical but territorial organisation of the party. It has already been observed that FdI is a top-down organisation that also serves the function of providing

seemingly grassroots support to Meloni (Vampa, 2023b), and to other members at the top of the party hierarchy. This suggests that aspiring candidates and party staff members who engage in fan-like performances are more likely to be selected, as they are already supporting the consolidation of the leader's perceived legitimacy. Moreover, with its increasing electoral success FdI seems to have transformed into a fully-fledged personal party (Newell, 2024). As many personal parties, it lacks complex middle management structures, and links directly those at the top of FdI's hierarchy with grassroots activists, fostering in party members the feeling that they are directly involved in the party activities at all levels (Melito & Zulianello, 2025). Arguably, the structuring of political fandoms, envisioning the political game as one played by masses of fans directly addressing high-visibility politicians, provides the perfect frame for *fandomesque* to thrive in. In other words, the personal party that Fratelli d'Italia is today is arguably the perfect ground for fan-like phenomena to emerge and thrive in.

Despite the obscurity of the motivations underlying this phenomenon, it is important to note that the examples provided in the qualitative analysis illustrate how *fandomesque* practices employed by political actors do not merely mimic grassroots fan expressions. The specific meanings they attribute to the shared content allow publishers to boost their own visibility as they strengthen their relational proximity to their highly visible leader. Simultaneously, they fuel the representation of Meloni as a strong leader with large internal support. This phenomenon is indicative of a widespread shift in the domain of political communication, wherein affective resonance and aesthetics of ordinary engagement pervade the context of social media interactions. Thus, even if such messages were deliberately crafted for strategic purposes, their content remains virtually undistinguishable from that produced by ordinary fans for the average user. As stated in the methodological section, oftentimes the identification of the publisher as a political actor required further examination of their Instagram profile. That is, even if there are notable exceptions such as that shown in Figure 7.1, where the post displays a direct involvement of the publisher into electoral politics.

Overall, this analysis shows that political actors, by performing as fans of their own leaders, challenge conventional distinctions between genuine admiration and politically motivated promotion up to where it becomes undistinguishable to the viewer that does not know the publisher's background. This phenomenon raises significant questions regarding the tensions inherent to the mediatic landscape, where political actors have to

manage an expectation to continuously display seemingly spontaneous, authentic self-presentations in a setting of perpetual campaigning. In this environment, candidates are required to carefully construct their digital persona to avoid being perceived as inauthentic or unrelatable characters, while somewhat channelling their professional activity as politicians. Arguably, the fact that virtually no *fandomesque* posts showed anti-fan attitudes is a sign of the affirmative function served by it to party and leader legitimisation processes. Thus, the *fandomesque* genre, meaning the use of political actors of fan-like expressions of support shown by constituents for a prominent fellow politician, is just another articulation of this inherent tension between two contrasting needs. It allows political actors to positively fuel the leader's self-presentation, enhance their visibility online and foster their own self-presentation as relatable individuals. Nonetheless, whether *fandomesque* practices result from fans turning into politicians, or of politicians turning into fans, and the level of strategic construction underlying these performances, remain to be scrutinised.

7.10 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has examined how political actors engage with fan-like practices online, specifically through the exploration of *fandomesque* content associated with Giorgia Meloni. The analysis has illustrated that political actors producing such content can channel their support for the leader of their party expressing fan-like attitudes that are remarkably akin to those displayed by ordinary supporters. These actors' messages can emphasise the extraordinary qualities of the leader, reinforce the legitimacy of the political persona attributed to them, or underline the value of the network of supporters surrounding the leader. This overlap blurs traditional distinctions between authentic fan engagement and strategically curated political communication, raising previously unexplored matters concerning the very nature of political fandoms.

The findings suggest that the motivations driving political actors to produce and share *fandomesque* content are inherently ambiguous, potentially combining the genuine expression of fan-like attitudes with more strategic constructions of endorsements of the leader aimed at gathering consensus among Meloni's base of supporters. This ambiguity points to an essential shift in contemporary political communication. It highlights how personalisation and fan culture elements can permeate professional political environments to the point of rendering it challenging to distinguish clearly

between the communicative phenomena unreflectively performed by grassroots constituents and those strategically employed by political actors.

Moreover, the qualitative analysis shows that *fandomesque* practices employed by political actors do not solely serve the purpose of making them self-present as fans. Instead, these practices allow publishers to enhance their visibility and relational proximity to prominent leaders, leveraging the visibility that accrues to political celebrities for their own and in turn reinforcing the leaders' perceived strength and internal support. This phenomenon reflects broader shifts in political communication, where affective resonance and aesthetics of ordinary engagement dominate social media interactions, making politically motivated content virtually indistinguishable from spontaneous fan-generated content.

Ultimately, this chapter displays that the presence of a *fandomesque* phenomenon challenges conventional distinctions between genuine admiration and politically motivated (self-)promotion oftentimes traced in the literature on political communication. This dynamic highlights critical tensions within the contemporary mediatic landscape, where political actors must continuously present authentic yet carefully managed digital personae while remaining engaged with the context of perpetual campaigning. Moreover, this perpetual campaigning is increasingly personalised, and party leaders are becoming more and more pervasive figures even for the local branches of parties. Thus, there is arguably a need for political actors to self-present in ways that exploit social media affordances and do it in a way that appeals and refers to the preferred political leadership. *Fandomesque* content is thus revealed as a nuanced manifestation of these tensions, prompting further investigation into the complex interactions between authenticity, strategy, and digital identity construction in modern political communication.

To conclude, we invite researchers engaging with the topic of political fandoms to engage with the *fandomesque* genre, meaning content that imitates the key characteristics and vernaculars of fandom content while being produced and circulated by political candidates or party accounts, rather than by ordinary fan-constituents. We consider it necessary to explore the validity of its conceptualisation in political landscapes other than the Italian one and concerning political characters that differ in terms of ideology and leadership from Giorgia Meloni. Finally, we consider it a key part of the development of this concept to investigate how constituents understand and interpret *fandomesque* content.

The present chapter has focused on the offer of *fandomesque* content to highlight its existence and understand it within the context of Meloni's leadership and the structure of the party she leads. For the expansion of the arguments developed in the discussion above, it is crucial to assess the demand for such content to test the efficacy of *fandomesque* in influencing the electorate. This may shed new light both on the efficacy of strategic employments of fan-like attitudes from politicians and help us find unexplored interpretations of the phenomenon, its consequences and its relationship to social and legacy media affordances.

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Conclusions

Donatella Campus, Luigi Ceccarini, and Marco Mazzoni

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this book was to develop a theoretical framework and carry out an original empirical analysis to understand political fandom. We claimed that celebrity politics has been transforming political followership in a form of fandom. Therefore, we focused on the ‘demand’ side—that is, citizens’ attitudes towards celebrity politics. As most research in this field deals with only one or two countries at a time, our ambition was to carry out an analysis of political fandom across several countries to draw some general conclusions and obtain a broader perspective about this phenomenon.

The methodological approach we adopted—a mixed-method research design including surveys and analysis of social media content—provided us with rich and valuable information and data. The huge amount of

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material that we gathered and only partially used in this book's analyses—which we consider just the first step of our research endeavour—allowed us to provide a broad picture and highlight some aspects that are, in our opinion, worthy of being emphasised and discussed.

The following sections are organised around topics that we have identified as the most crucial on the basis of our empirical findings. The sections focus on fan profiles according to the results from survey data and social media content; the relationship between fandom and ideology; the differences and similarities between political and celebrity fandoms; the practices of fandom; anti-fandom—a phenomenon that appears more diffuse than we expected and which has consequences for the general polarisation of the political sphere; and the *fandomesque*, which suggests that the dividing line between demand and supply is blurred. The final section of this chapter discusses a future research agenda.

8.2 SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC AND 'GEOPOLITICAL' PROFILES

8.2.1 *Results from Seven Countries Survey*

The sociodemographic profile of political fandom, drawn from opinion polls conducted in the seven European countries examined in the study, has specific characteristics that distinguish it, at least in part, from star fandom. Moreover, as evidenced by the analyses, political fandom involves approximately 24% of the population across the countries examined.

With respect to sociodemographic variables, men were more likely than women to engage in political fandom. The survey showed that 29% of the men interviewed can be classified as fans, with 13% falling into the 'strong fan' category, while the corresponding figures for women are 19% and 8%, respectively. It is also worth emphasising that political fandom is not only a youth-oriented phenomenon. While there was indeed a propensity towards fandom among the youngest cohort (18–29 years), a similarly robust interest emerged among the elderly (those aged over 64). Of particular note was the slight predominance of older individuals among strong fans; these fans also exhibit a markedly greater affinity for the community dimension relative to their younger counterparts—a finding that complicates the prevailing assumption that political fandom is an exclusively digital-era phenomenon associated with younger generations.

An interesting finding concerns educational level, which does not influence the probability of becoming a fan of a political leader. The

phenomenon cuts across all education levels. Therefore, it is not solely the less educated who are attracted to aspects related to the personalisation of politics.

Among the countries surveyed, Poland boasted the highest percentage of political fans, at 39%. It also has the largest component of strong fans (21%). At the opposite extreme lies Germany, with only 9% total fans and a mere 4% strong fans. These data are consistent with previous studies describing the German system as less predisposed to the personalisation of politics, of which political fandom is a noteworthy expression.

Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain showed above-average results. In these democracies the phenomenon is deeply embedded among citizens, with a fan percentage of 30% and a share of strong fans equal to 12%. France and the United Kingdom occupy an intermediate position. France had a total fandom level of 27% (and a 12% ‘strong’ component); the United Kingdom was positioned slightly below the overall sample average (24%), with 22% total fans and 10% strong fans. Bulgaria aligned precisely with the sample average, with 24% of fans.

The comparative analysis across countries suggests that the ‘geopolitics’ of fandom does not conform to any identifiable pattern. No sharp distinctions emerge between Eastern and Western Europe, nor between Northern European and Mediterranean countries. The differences observed amongst the countries examined therefore reflect, above all, national political cultures and historical traditions, which shape affective attachments to individual leaders rather than any macro-regional characteristics.

8.2.2 *Political Fans on Instagram: A Three-Country Comparison—France, Italy and Spain*

In order to go deeper into the considerations outlined above, it is valuable to broaden our perspective by taking into account the second line of the Fandom Democracy research project, which, as previously mentioned, is based on social media analysis—namely Instagram. This provides significant information on the phenomenon under study in three countries: France, Italy and Spain. The analysis of content posted on Instagram enabled the profiling of the supporters/fans behind the posts into distinct categories: ordinary users, political actors, political commentators and those who run fan accounts (the residual category of ‘other’ was also considered in the previous chapters, where the data was presented and discussed).

The citizens who were the most active in producing, publishing or circulating posts containing affective content were ordinary users (519 posts, 37.9% of the total). However, individual and collective political actors (party members and candidates, local political committees, etc.) were also remarkably numerous (418 posts; 30.6%) and appeared to adopt fan-like attitudes primarily to enhance visibility and mobilise support for their preferred leaders. The number of posts published by political commentary and fan accounts was reasonably significant (304 posts, 22.2%).

This profiling revealed notable differences across the three countries—Italy, France and Spain—considered in the analysis of social media content. In France and Spain, ordinary users played a pivotal role in expressing support for or criticism of a leader (42.5% and 62.1%, respectively), whereas other actors assumed a comparatively marginal role. In Italy, by contrast, there was a predominance of posts published by political actors (38.0%), although those produced by ordinary users (29.9%) and political commentary and fan accounts (27.3%) were also significant.

Thus, whereas in France and Spain Instagram constitutes an important media platform for ordinary users wishing to articulate their symbolic proximity to or distance from a political leader, in Italy it functions primarily as an instrument employed by political actors to both cultivate trust in and demonstrate loyalty to a leader and to engage in a form of political propaganda (see, in this regard, the considerations around the ‘fandomesque’ explored later in this chapter).

8.3 PROFILING IDEOLOGY AND INVOLVEMENT

Returning to the public opinion analyses conducted on survey data, including multivariate models, our research identified the variables that best define political fans based on their political orientation. Political interest and ideological orientation provide important evidence for this. Fans exhibit significantly higher levels of interest in politics than do non-fans. Those who are ‘very interested’ in politics are strongly over-represented among high-intensity fans. While this may appear self-evident, if not trivial, these findings confirm that fandom represents a mode of participation widely practised by citizens who have a political culture marked by a competent and engaged approach to politics.

Moreover, political fandom is enriched by another element: it is more common among those at the extremes of the political ideology spectrum,

and there is a marked prevalence of it among those identifying as right-wing. Analyses conducted across different chapters show that those self-identifying as right-wing have a highly pronounced tendency to manifest political fan attitudes and behaviour. This is a bond that intersects the affective dimension—albeit ‘at a distance’—and which is characterised by direct, disintermediated communication between the people and a (strong) political leader. Such dynamics are typical of populist movements, particularly (though not exclusively) those on the radical right.

8.4 COMPARING POLITICAL AND CELEBRITY FANDOMS

The survey also allowed for a comparison between political and celebrity fandom, highlighting the similarities and differences between them. Regarding common features, education level carries entirely marginal weight within both political followership and star fandom. Furthermore, like celebrity fans, political fans desire intimate parasocial interactions, such as having coffee or taking selfies with their reference figures. Additionally, a significant proportion of fans are willing to purchase merchandise featuring the leader’s face, a practice typical of the star-fandom mechanism.

In terms of differences, one must mention not only the issue of age, which is directly linked to the ‘frivolous’ and youthful aspect typical of the celebrity fandom, but also the nature of the engagement itself. Political fandom is an activity involving politically engaged and mature individuals open to innovative languages (such as memes) and non-traditional modes of experiencing their political passion; these people may be susceptible to polarisation when it comes to their political stances. It should also be noted that for political fans, the ability of a politician to share a vision and display competence, honesty and, above all, responsiveness—the capacity to address citizens’ demands—is paramount.

The figure of the political leader is thus evaluated not for traits of ‘extraordinariness’, as occurs with star fandom in the showbiz realm, but for their concreteness. However, it should also be noted that a marked overlap between the two types of fandoms—14% (celebrity fandom accounts for 18% and political fandom accounts for 10%)—suggests the complexity of this research subject and the interweaving of the issues under study, which extends far beyond the necessary analytical distinction drawn between the two types of fandom.

8.5 THE PRACTICES OF POLITICAL FANDOM

Throughout the book we have stressed the importance of consumption and production as key components of political fandom. In a nutshell, this elucidates the real-life activities fans undertake in practising their fandom. Our findings confirm that those defined as fans engage heavily in both offline and online forms of consumption. Our research design, especially, aimed to focus on media outlets and formats that might reveal a degree of intimisation of politics. This produced data and analyses that confirmed our expectations by highlighting the occurrence of this type of exposure among fans. Predictably, production, since it is more time-consuming and requires more effort, appears less commonly practised than consumption. Our findings about the propensity towards some fandom experiences—like taking a selfie or having a coffee with the preferred leader—are also of interest.

Here follows a short recapitulation of the main results. Regarding offline consumption—that is, participation in political events such as rallies or face-to-face encounters, as well as forms of interaction through pre-digital media, such as television and the press—we can confirm that fans are interested in seeing their leaders in person (61% of fans in our sample saw or heard the leader at a public event) and to know details of their private life (60% of fans read an article or watched TV programmes discussing the private life of the leader; 45% read articles about the leader in gossip, fashion or news magazines; 44% read a biography or autobiography of the leader). All these activities are more prevalent among strong fans.

In order to capture not only what fans do, but also what they like to do, we introduced a measurement of their propensity for engaging in types of consumption that are not always available or accessible (we refer to this set of activities as affective consumption). The following proved to be experiences that fans would appreciate—especially strong fans: 78% of fans and 90% of strong fans ‘would like to have a coffee or a beer with the leader’; 65% and 83%, respectively, reported a desire to take a selfie with them; and 48% and 69% would buy merchandise featuring the leader’s name or face. In other words, affect appears strongly related to affective modes of ‘consuming’ the leader and, even when fans do not have the opportunity to make their dreams come true, the desires themselves serve as a powerful indicator of the strength of their attachment.

As expected, online activities are a crucial aspect of fandom, especially as far as production is concerned. Liking or reposting political content published on the leaders' accounts was perhaps one of the most accessible and least demanding types of production: Predictably enough, about 9 out of 10 fans (86%) who follow leaders' social media accounts have liked or reposted, while 73% have commented on one of the leaders' posts, even if only with an emoji. Percentages increase among strong fans (92%, with 83% for fans). These actions appear to be part of the habitual online routines of fans, or at least those who are active within the digital space. However, a significant segment of our baseline group of fans is also involved in other online forms of production (40% of fans reposted memes about the leader; 31% used hashtags with the leader's name).

In general, our results confirm a close relationship between affective attachment and practices of political consumption and production: Strong fans are more inclined to engage in all the consumption and production activities we have explored.

8.6 THE OTHER FACE OF FANDOM: ANTI-FANDOM

In examining what fans do both online and offline, a fundamental distinction must be drawn between supportive fandom and affectively charged opposition to a political personality. 'Anti-fandom' was taken into consideration in both lines of research—the multi-country opinion poll and web analysis. Although it was not the subject of in-depth analysis, the basic figure is interesting and shows that anti-fandom is socially widespread. Across the seven European countries surveyed, 68% of citizens stated that there was a leader or political figure they 'really dislike[d]'. In the context of public sentiment, it is interesting to understand how citizens practise anti-fandom.

Political anti-fandom on Instagram is not a marginal phenomenon. Rather, it is a substantial part of digital participation that is nearly equivalent in prevalence to positive fandom. Unlike fandom, which focuses primarily on expressions of personal admiration and affective attachment to a leader, anti-fandom constitutes a markedly more political and critical configuration of attitudes. Its primary components are the disapproval of political actions and dislike of a leader's personality. This demonstrates that critiques of political substance and leaders' personalities are closely intertwined in the digital sphere.

The affective dimension of anti-fandom posts is characterised by a less diverse and more reactive emotional repertoire than that of positive fandom. While support for a leader is displayed through a range of emotions, such as love, esteem and hope, opposition tends to coalesce around dominant negative sentiments, such as anger and indignation. This emotional asymmetry reflects a posture of political resistance in the anti-fan; they do not seek emotional attachment but instead employ affective intensity to channel critical opinions that are frequently related to their perception of the targeted politician as illegitimate or inept in their actions.

Within this framework, anti-fandom targets specific leadership traits perceived as benchmarks of illegitimacy, with more than 64% of such posts describing leaders as incompetent, weak and ineffective. A significant portion of the content focuses on inconsistencies in political behaviour, while a smaller but notable percentage employs aesthetic and cultural delegitimation, portraying leaders as arrogant or out of touch with their country's social reality.

In other words, survey findings indicate that when citizens' expectations regarding the competence and effectiveness of political leaders go unfulfilled, this disappointment acts as a catalyst for criticism across social media platforms.

Regarding the producers of dissent, as mentioned previously, the data reveal a central distinction between institutional actors and ordinary users. The likelihood of a leader being targeted by anti-fans is heavily influenced by their institutional role and personal characteristics. Leaders holding government positions are 10 times more likely to be the target of attacks by anti-fans than are those in opposition.

This trend is largely attributable to the fact that governing figures must manage complex issues with limited resources and often struggle to fulfil their election promises, thereby engendering widespread public discontent. Additionally, gender disparities persist in these digital dynamics, as female political leaders are more frequently targeted by anti-fandom practices than their male peers.

This is partly attributable to the still regrettably widespread perception that politics is a sphere for which women are not particularly 'suited' and partly to the fact that the qualities of women engaged in political life are too often assessed by recourse to inappropriate, extra-political considerations, such as their physical attractiveness or elegance.

Finally, the intensity of anti-fandom varies significantly according to the national political climate. Within the analytical framework developed, Spain and France were comparatively more polarised than Italy, owing to recent institutional and electoral dynamics that have intensified that country's political competition.

In both cases, institutional fragility, narrow margins of political contestation and escalating discursive confrontation render antagonism structurally salient; this fosters communicative conditions that are particularly conducive to the diffusion of anti-fandom practices. In such highly polarised contexts, anti-fandom emerges as the dominant mode of expression not only among ordinary users but also among political actors, who may abandon celebratory communication in favour of systematically denigrating their opponents.

8.7 THE FANDOMESQUE

Analysis of social media provides a novel and important perspective on political fandom in that it critically engages with shifts in celebrity politics related to the widespread adoption of the medium. The main contribution of our work is the introduction and operationalisation of the concept of the *fandomesque*. The 'fandomesque' refers to a specific genre of political communication practised by political actors (i.e. party members, candidates and office-holders) who strategically mimic the stylised vernaculars and affective expressions of fandom.

Fan-like practices fuelling the popularity of Giorgia Meloni's digital persona have prompted a critical reappraisal of political fandom as a predominantly grassroots phenomenon. Oftentimes, political fandoms are regarded as communities formed by ordinary constituents and activists adopting fan-like practices to engage with high-visibility politicians. However, the empirical evidence gathered from the frequency and multi-modal analysis of the #GiorgiaMeloni hashtag suggests a more nuanced reality, where seemingly spontaneous as well as carefully constructed fan-like performances may intertwine.

This performance of fandom is not merely a byproduct of spontaneous digital enthusiasm; rather, it serves as a sophisticated tool for top-down visibility and legitimacy construction. By appropriating the aesthetics and tone of political fans, those engaging in *fandomesque* practices are able to

convey an image of the leader as someone who is extraordinarily popular and who has a relatable, approachable personality. Surely, political fandom can be seen as a sign of a demotic turn that has increasingly shaped Western politics—with the overlap of celebrity and politics, affect and personal connection have replaced traditional, rigidly codified ways of interacting with institutional actors. Nonetheless, the findings of this study indicate that with the mass adoption of social media, the boundaries between professional campaigning strategies and organic grassroots support can be blurred.

When the majority of fan-like content supporting a leader is strategically produced by political actors, as it was for the subject of the case study, the question of what a fan democracy would actually look like arises. This study suggests that the *fandomesque* functions as a strategy to simulate affectively charged support for a leader and in doing so simulates intimacy and authenticity, two core values of social media. Crucially, a key part of the argument is that the affordances of digital platforms such as Instagram can be leveraged to simulate a grassroots groundswell of support, with the ordinary user unable to distinguish it from what it pretends to be. For the individual political actor, producing *fandomesque* content fulfils a dual purpose: It enhances the leader's carefully curated image while simultaneously signalling the actor's own loyalty and commitment to the party hierarchy.

This 'double validation' process reinforces internal party cohesion and professional branding under the guise of affective, fan-like support. Furthermore, the results reveal a stark asymmetry in the performance of digital affect, thereby corroborating the results of the analysis previously carried out on this subject. While supportive content is frequently characterised by the *fandomesque*, the production of anti-fandom content remains largely the realm of ordinary users or other types of actors that have no personal investment in gathering consensus. Detractors tend to criticise Meloni in either personal or political terms; however, the communal hallmarks of *fandomesque* practices are only seldomly present in their interactions. By contrast, the practices of political actors supporting Meloni online display stronger communal dynamics, aligning more closely with what we might describe as organic fandom.

In sum, the study of the *fandomesque* highlights a significant mechanism in contemporary political communication: the strategic appropriation of seemingly spontaneous civic participation as a campaigning resource. By borrowing the vernacular of the fan, political actors can safely

navigate this new era of celebrity politics, where legitimacy is built through the simulation of interconnectedness and affective intimacy. This is even the case for high-visibility actors.

This dynamic necessitates a critical reappraisal of political fandom studies, as the simulation of grassroots support may prioritise leader-centric visibility over substantive democratic engagement. As we look towards the future of digital politics, the fandomesque stands as a testament to the sophistication of contemporary campaigning and to the challenges it poses to those who study it.

8.8 AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The analyses presented and discussed in this book have highlighted the importance of taking political fandom seriously. Our rich set of collected data allowed us to show that this phenomenon concerns, albeit with different nuances and gradations, a not insignificant segment of the population. Many individuals can be regarded as fans; many engage in typical fandom practices; many show a propensity to behave as fans. One could observe that we are still referring to a minority of citizens. However, given the propensity of political leaders to act as celebrities and create their own ‘political brands’ (Armannsdottir et al., 2019) that are not just a component of political parties’ brands (Shavit & Konrádová, 2025), we may presume that this phenomenon is destined to become more widespread.

It is also worth stressing that fandom is not just a frivolous way of approaching politics. The ‘entertainment’ factor that motivates people to be fans and have fun could lead to a dismissiveness about political fandom as not really relevant for political studies. However, if it is true that fandom relates to popular culture—in particular, forms of visual media culture that are not traditionally associated with politics—the emotional and affective sides are incontrovertibly key features of political phenomena, particularly within the framework of the ‘spectacularisation’ of political process and its related phenomena, including political populism, presidentialisation, celebrity politics and (social) media logic. For this reason, political fandom is a much more general phenomenon than one might think. It would be reductive to regard it as simply a way of connecting with previously detached people, as our findings about the profiles of fans showed. Indeed, fandom may also involve politically engaged citizens and potentially be a widespread phenomenon with no barriers around education and social status.

In light of all this, there is no doubt that further research is needed to determine if political fandom will produce a relevant change in political participation in our democracies in the future. We conclude this book by highlighting some issues that, in our opinion, should be kept under special observation and be investigated further.

First, as the analyses in this book have shown, political fandom is a valuable resource for politicians. Leaders may depend on fans to do important things for them. Fans make leaders popular and visible online, especially by disseminating memes and visual content; defend them from attacks; and improve their images by showing them as worthy of admiration and love. Thus, fans are an army at the service of the politician. However, what is the relationship between political celebrities and fans? Is the creation and maintenance of a political fandom always a grassroots, spontaneous phenomenon? And how do politicians manage their fans?

The fact that politicians are becoming more similar to other types of celebrities means that political consultants and communication staff may find inspiration in how stars of the entertainment industry are managed. On the one hand, this means that political fandom can be nurtured by offering appropriate opportunities for consumption and production. On the other hand, it implies trying to control and orientate fans' activities. As observed above, fans may potentially play the role of influencers on a leader's behalf, as they help to disseminate favourable content and attack negative content. The most active fans could become 'super supporters' (Stromer-Galley, 2019)—campaign staff might identify and contact them to get them to undertake activities on social media, especially less formal and institutional activities.

If this happens, it will mean a clear shift from a bottom-up dimension—a community of people that has spontaneously engaged itself in support of a leader—to a top-down dimension, that is, a fandom that is at least partially orchestrated by the leaders' staff. For politicians, this perspective is extremely promising in terms of attracting a larger pool of voters, since it allows a refreshing of traditional propaganda with the inclusion of elements from popular culture. In some cases, political fandom could be ascribed to that set of digital participatory experimentation that is breathing new life into parties and political organisations (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016).

The price to pay, however, may be a loss of spontaneity that, until now, has been the most fascinating element of political fandom. From the point

of view of the researcher, this implies a further challenge in being able to distinguish grassroots networks from much more controlled contexts and, in particular, from what we have called the *fandomesque*—fan-like performances promoted by politicians, especially when campaign staff lack transparency and prefer to give the impression that orchestrated activities are more spontaneous than they actually are.

In general, our evaluation of political fandom is positive. Following the insights of pioneers like Van Zoonen (2005), we acknowledge its potential for building political identities. Perhaps not all cases of fandom are positive, but like Penny (2017, p. 16) we are inclined to see it as a ‘welcome addition’ even when it cannot be defined as a form of ‘the affective intelligence lauded by Van Zoonen (2005)’ or the emotional realism detected by Pels (2003). This does not mean to deny that some degeneration of the interplay between celebrity politics and fandom may lead to excessive depoliticisation in the sense that emotions and the media spectacle replace, almost completely, political content, as stressed by authors like Gamson (1994, p. 189) or Moffitt (2016, p. 85). Nonetheless, we believe that, even if fandom is born around the figure of a leader, the activation of such feelings and motivations increases engagement and interest in politics. An individual that approaches politics casually through memes and viral videos could become a loyal supporter over time.

However, not all mechanisms underpinning political fandom can be regarded without concern. In our opinion, anti-fandom should attract scholars’ attention and requires further investigation. Studies of fandom have long considered anti-fandom a part of their field of inquiry (Click, 2019). The conspicuous evidence on anti-fandom in our analyses has convinced us that there is also a need in political studies for anti-fandom scholarship—it can certainly offer interesting insights and broaden the reflections on the much more heavily investigated phenomenon of affective polarisation. Starting from the awareness that anti-fandom and fandom are woven from a similar fabric of affectivity and even pleasure (if fans love to like, anti-fans love to hate),¹ political studies should invest further effort in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of anti-fandom.

¹ On the resemblance between fan and anti-fan behaviours see Gray (2019).

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APPENDIX

NOTE ON METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project was funded by the European Union (NextGenerationEU), under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.1, call PRIN 2022 D.D. 104 published on 2 February 2022 by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca), CUP F53D2300634006.

The project, entitled *Fandom Democracy? Celebrity and New Forms of Citizens' Engagement* (Fandom Democracy Project; FanDem; <https://www.fandomdemocracyproject.eu/>), involved a research team from three Italian academic institutions: the University of Bergamo, the University of Perugia, and the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. Rosanna De Rosa from the University of Naples Federico II joined the Urbino unit.

The research design comprised two intertwined empirical lines of inquiry. The mixed-methods approach comprised a multi-country survey and a systematic content analysis of posts authored by citizens and political actors on a digital platform. The following pages outline the main research methods and techniques adopted by the working group.

Opinion Survey Design and Sampling Strategy

Ethical Approval

The *Fandem Project*'s, overall research design received ethical approval from the Committee for Integrity and Ethics of Research at the University of Bergamo (communication of 26 June 2024). Its questionnaire, sampling procedure, and the overall research design, received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee for Human Research (CESU) at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo, as documented in the meeting minutes no. 83 dated 27 June 2024. The research protocol was determined to be in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU Regulation 2016/679), which establishes the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data as a fundamental right (<https://www.uniurb.it/ateneo/identita/portale-web-di-ateneo/privacy-policy-english-version>).

Furthermore, the procedures concerning the retrieval, storage, and access of social media data were approved by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Perugia (minutes of meeting no. 31, of 26 June 2024), in accordance with its regulatory standards and the University's policies (<https://www.unipg.it/files/statuto-regolamenti/statuti/statuto-comitato-bioetica.pdf>).

Data Collection and Sampling Design

Data collection was conducted by the Italian polling organization Demetra [Opinioni.net](https://www.opinioni.net) from 29 July to 7 August 2024, utilizing the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) technique. Respondents were selected through quota sampling to ensure representation across key sociodemographic variables, such as gender, age group, educational attainment level, and geographical area.

Table A1 Sample size by country

<i>Country</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Bulgaria	1,044
France	1,026
Germany	1,006
Italy	1,021
Poland	1,049
Spain	1,011
UK	1,004
Total	7,161

The seven nationally representative samples (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom [UK]) comprised just over 1,000 cases each, ranging from $n = 1,004$ (UK) to $n = 1,049$ (Poland), as detailed in Table A1, for an overall sample size of $N = 7,161$. The margin of sampling error for country-level estimates is approximately $\pm 2.6\%$ at the 95% confidence level. Using a maximum of two contact attempts, the final achieved sample sizes were as follows:

Weighting Procedure

A post-stratification weighting procedure was implemented to align sample distributions with known population parameters. This approach reduced non-response bias and improved the precision of overall survey estimates. The weighting procedure also incorporated the relative population size of each country, so that aggregated figures represent the combined population of the seven countries when total values are presented in the analyses.

The Fandom Democracy Project Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised seven thematic sections: (A) standard sociodemographic variables; (B) respondents' media consumption styles; (C) socio-political orientation, core values, and voting choice; (D) political fandom affective engagement, including associated consumption and production practices; (E) anti-fandom orientations; (F) entertainment celebrity fandom attitudes and practices; and (G) political attitudes and participation behaviour.

Translated versions of the questionnaire were circulated among members of the FanDem Research Project International Board and country-specific subject-matter experts from each participating nation to ensure terminological and linguistic consistency across comparative contexts. The preliminary draft of the questionnaire was pilot-tested ($n = 208$) across the seven countries included in the Fandom Democracy Project to assess the validity and appropriateness of both the questions and response formats. The pilot responses were not included in the final dataset.

A. STANDARD SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

1. **Country**
2. **Municipality**
3. **Gender**
4. **Year of birth**

5. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- None or primary school leaving certificate
- Secondary School up to the compulsory school leaving age
- Secondary education diploma (beyond the compulsory school leaving age)
- University/Higher Education

6. What is your current job?

- Labourer
- Technician, office worker, civil servant
- Manager
- Trader
- Craftsman
- Freelancer (Lawyer, doctor, quantity surveyor...)
- Businessman
- Student (including students who work)
- Housewife, Homemaker, Home duties
- Unemployed
- Retired
- Armed forces/Voluntary civil service
- Other

7. In which sector do you work/did you work?

- Public
- Private

B. RESPONDENTS' MEDIA CONSUMPTION STYLES

8. To keep up-to-date, what media have you most frequently used recently?

All your answers must be different and you must rank in order. Please select at most 2 answers.

- Websites/apps or social media pages of daily newspapers or news magazines
- Social media such as Facebook-Meta, X-Twitter, Instagram or others

- Printed newspapers and magazines
- Television: news or talk shows
- Radio news broadcasts or radio programs
- Information podcasts
- I have tried to avoid news

C. SOCIO-POLITICAL ORIENTATION AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR

9. How interested would you say you are in politics? Are you very interested, somewhat interested, not very interested, or not at all interested?

Please choose only one of the following.

- Very interested
- Somewhat interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested

10. Many people use the terms "left" and "right" when talking about politics. The following is a row of boxes running from left to right. When thinking about your political views, in which box would you place yourself?

- 0=Left
- 10=Right
- I would not position myself

11. Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?

Please choose only one of the following.

- Yes
- No

12. What is the party you feel close to?

Answer only if "Yes" at question #11. Please choose only one of the following.

- List of political parties by country.

13. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means very distant and 10 means very close, how close would you say you are to this political party?

- 0=Very distant
- 10=Very close

14. In the [date and name of the country] general elections, which party did you vote for?

Please choose only one of the following.

- List of political parties by country.
- Other party [*Specify*]
- Blank ballot / null ballot
- I did not vote
- I was not old enough to vote

15. Would you say you voted mainly for [name of the political party voted] or for [name of the political party leader]?

Answer only if “a political party” was indicated in question #14. Please choose only one of the following.

- Political party voted
- Leader of political party voted

16. You will find a list of the names of some political figures below. If you know them, please indicate how you rate them, giving them a grade from 0 to 10, where 0 means a completely negative rating and 10 a completely positive rating. If you do not know them, please indicate "I do not know him/her". On the other hand, if you cannot make a judgement, please state "I don't know".

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

- List of political party leaders by country
- 0=Completely negative opinion
- 10=Completely positive opinion
- I do not know him/her
- I don't know

17. In your opinion, is it important for politicians and the media to disclose details of the private lives of politicians?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, it helps to know and judge politicians better
- Yes, I am curious
- No, it is not important to me
- No, because it distracts from the things that matter

D. POLITICAL FANDOM, AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT, CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION PRACTICES

18. Thinking of people who have a political role in the [name of the country] right now, is there a leader or political figure you feel close to?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

19. Who is this [name of the country] leader or political figure to whom you feel close?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18

- Please write your answer here: [_____]

20. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means very distant and 10 means very close, how close would you say you are to this [name of the country] leader or political figure?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18

- 0=Very distant
- 10=Very close

21. For what reasons do you like this leader or political figure?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order. Please select at most 3 answers.

- For being competent and capable
- For understanding the problems of the people
- For sharing his/her ideas and political vision

- For being likeable
- For being a real, authentic person
- For being an honest person
- For being the only one who can save [name of the country]

22. Referring to this leader or political figure, would you say that...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- he/she is a charming person
- I like the way he/she dresses
- I like his/her lifestyle

23. Also, regarding this leader or political figure, have you recently...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed?
- in particular, have you read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines?
- read a biography/autobiography about him/her?
- seen and/or heard him/her in person at a public event?

24. Again, regarding this leader or political figure, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18.

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

25. In respect of his/her social media accounts, have you ever...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #24. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- “like” or repost his/her content
- follow one of his/her live video
- comment on one of his/her posts (even with an emoticon)

26. Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other social media accounts or pages dedicated to your favourite leader or political figure

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and I follow it
- Yes, but I don't follow it
- No

27. Why do you follow these social accounts or pages?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #26. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order. Please select at most 2 answers.

- I find it entertaining
- I am interested in following pages about the leader
- I enjoy interacting with like-minded people about the leader
- I feel part of a community

28. Regarding this leader or political figure, have you ever...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18.

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- ...reposted/retweeted memes about him/her
- ...used hashtags with his/her name
- ...written posts/tweets about him/her?
- ...created and circulated a meme, hashtag or social media page about him/her?

29. Still considering this leader or political figure, how much do you identify with each of the following sentences, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not identify with it at all and 10 that you identify with it completely?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #18.

0=I don't identify with it all

10= I identify with it completely

- I love him/her as if he/she were my friend
- When the media or other politicians or network users criticise him/her in a way that seems unfair to me, it is almost as if they were doing it to me
- I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do
- I would like to have a coffee/beer with him/her
- I would like to take a selfie with him/her
- I would buy merchandise (a T-shirt/mug/something else) with his/her name or face on it

E. ANTI-FANDOM ORIENTATIONS

30. Thinking about the people who have a political role in [name of the country] right now, is there a leader or a political figure you really dislike?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

31. Who is this [name of the country] leader or political figure that you really dislike?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30.

- Please write your answer here: [_____]

32. Regarding this leader or political figure you really dislike, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

33. In respect of his/her social media accounts, have you ever...

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30.

- comment negatively on one of his/her posts (even with an emoticon)

34. Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other account or page critical of this leader or political figure that you really dislike?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #30. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, I also follow it and leave comments
- Yes, I follow it but don't leave any comments
- Yes, but I don't follow it
- No

F. STAR FANDOM ORIENTATIONS

35. Is there a current celebrity or star in sport, entertainment (film, music, etc.), media (TV personality, social media, etc.), fashion or culture who you admire or are a fan of?

Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes
- No

36. Who is this celebrity or star? (if more than one, please indicate the celebrity you relate to the most)

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35.

- Please write your answer here: [_____]

37. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means very distant and 10 means very close, how close would you say you are to this celebrity or star?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35.

- 0=Very distant
- 10=Very close

38. For what reasons do you like this celebrity or star?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order.

Please select at most 3 answers.

- For being good at his/her job
- For being one of us

- For sharing his/her ideas
- For being likeable
- For being a real, authentic person
- For being a good person
- For being unique and extraordinary

39. About this celebrity or star, would you say that...?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- he/she is a charming person
- I like how he/she dresses
- I like his/her lifestyle

40. Also speaking about this celebrity or star, have you recently...

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Yes/No.

- read an article or watched TV programmes where his/her private life was discussed?
- in particular, have you read articles in gossip, fashion or news magazines?
- read a biography/autobiography about him/her?
- seen and/or heard him/her in person at a public event?

41. Again, regarding this celebrity or star, do you follow his/her personal social media accounts/pages?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35.

- Yes
- No

42. Besides the official accounts, do you know of any other social accounts or pages dedicated to the celebrity or star we have talked about so far?

Answer only if “Yes” at question #35. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and I follow it
- Yes, but I don’t follow it
- No

43. As regards these unofficial pages or social media accounts, you follow them because...

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #42. All your answers must be different, and you must rank in order.

Please select at most 2 answers.

- I find it entertaining
- I am interested in following pages about him/her
- I enjoy interacting with like-minded people about him/her
- I feel part of a community

44. Still considering this celebrity or political star, how much do you identify with each of the following sentences, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not identify with it at all and 10 that you identify with it completely?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #35.

0=I don’t identify with it all

10= I identify with it completely

- I love him/her as if he/she were my friend
- When the media or other people or network users criticise him/her in a way that seems unfair to me, it is almost as if they were doing it to me
- I like talking to other people who admire him/her as much as I do
- I would like to have a coffee/beer with him/her
- I would like to take a selfie with him/her
- I would buy merchandising (a T-shirt/mug/something else) with his/her name or face on it

45. Do you know if this celebrity or star has ever supported any political or social causes?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #35. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and I shared his/her position
- Yes, but I did not share his/her position
- No, but if he/she did, I would consider his/her opinion
- No, but if he/she did it would not be relevant to me

46. Has this celebrity or star ever aligned him/herself with a candidate or politician?

Answer only if “Yes, and I follow it” at question #35. Please choose only one of the following:

- Yes, and his/her opinion was important to me
- Yes, but his/her opinion did not matter to me
- No, but if he/she did, I would consider his/her opinion
- No, but if he/she did it would not be relevant to me

G. POLITICAL ATTITUDES AND PARTICIPATION

47. How often in the last year have you participated in the following activities?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Every month, Two or Three times a year, Once a year, Never.

- Political / party demonstrations
- Public protest demonstrations
- Political discussions via the Internet (websites, blogs, discussion groups, Facebook, X, etc.)

48. Have you ever...

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

- gone out canvassing or campaigning for a candidate, list or party (leafleting, stalls, etc.)?

49. How much do you trust the following institutions?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Very much, Somewhat, Not Much, Not at all

- European Union
- [Name of the country] parliament

50. On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with...

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

- the economic situation in the [name of the country]
- the economic situation of your family
- how democracy works in the [name of the country]

51. I will now present some views on very topical issues. Can you tell me how much you agree with each of them?

Please choose the appropriate response for each item: Very much, Somewhat, Not Much, Not at all

- Immigrants are a danger to public order and safety
- People like me matter little in today's society
- Today's world causes me anxiety

52. Which of these statements do you agree with most?

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

- Democracy is preferable to any other form of government
- In some circumstances, an authoritarian regime might be preferable to a democratic system
- Whether authoritarian or democratic, it makes little difference to me

53. Which of these statements would you agree with most?

Please choose the appropriate response: Yes/No.

- The country needs to be led by a strong leader
- Strong leaders are a danger to democracy

Submit your survey. Thank you for completing this survey!

Content Analysis of Instagram Posts

The Exploratory Study

The first field analysis was conducted using Meta's proprietary data extraction tools for Facebook and Instagram, and it focused on Italy as a pilot case-study. An exploration of the digital landscape of political fan-pages and accounts was conducted, revealing that relevant activity throughout the previous year (from 22/05/2023 to 22/05/2024) was infrequent and that most fan-pages related to high-profile Italian leaders were virtually inactive (see Table A2 and Table A3).

Moreover, a qualitative focus on the most active pages employing netnographic approaches revealed that the grassroots nature of their content and purpose was questionable, as they seemed to reproduce and disseminate content similar to that circulated by party and politicians' accounts in

Table A2 Active fan-pages (22/05/2023–22/05/2024)

<i>Page name</i>	<i>Posts in the last year</i>	<i>Followers</i>
Lebimbedigiuseppeconte I	114	207,994
Fanpage su Giuseppe Conte		
Giuseppe Conte Fanpage ♥	83	5,594
Giuseppe Conte Brazil Support	58	71,217
Elly Schlein Biella	19	2,591
Giorgia Meloni News	4	1,254
Elly Schlein combatte la povertà	2	329
Giuseppe Conte Fanpage	1	5,564
Giuseppe Conte Premier	1	3,245
Lucca per Elly Schlein	1	229
Parte da Noi - Massa Carrara per Elly Schlein	1	109

Table A3 Fan-pages
for each leader as of
22/05/24

<i>Leader</i>	<i>N. of fan-pages on Instagram</i>
Elly Schlein	34
Matteo Salvini	19
Giuseppe Conte	16
Giorgia Meloni	5
Total	74

their campaigning activities. Hence, we devised a method of data collection that was not dependent upon the study of fan-pages that were identified to be highly contingent, volatile phenomena.

The Data Collection Process

Our approach to the digital landscape is informed by Zizi Papacharissi’s *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics* (2014), in which hashtags are framed as contested spaces. In these spaces, collective meanings are co-constructed through the alignment of affective and cognitive processes manifesting in the production and circulation of social media content. Accordingly, we employed the software 4k Stogram to extract all metadata of the posts published with the hashtags containing the name and surname of four prominent leaders from each country¹. Because the literature on political fandom—notably the work of Jonathan Dean and

¹Specifically, for Italy, we selected #GiorgiaMeloni, #MatteoSalvini, #GiuseppeConte, #EllySchlein. For Spain, #PedroSanchez, #yolandadiaz, #SantiagoAbascal, #isabeldiazayuso. For France, #raphaelglucksmann, #MarineLePen, #EmmanuelMacron, #Melenchon. The

Cornel Sandvoss—identifies election campaigns as pivotal moments for the emergence of fan-like behaviours, we focused our data extraction on May and the first ten days of June 2024, leading up to the EU elections.

Analytical Framework

Following the extraction of the metadata, we developed a codebook deductively, based on the existing literature on political fandom. We then piloted the codebook on a preliminary dataset to fine-tune the categories and ensure that our theoretical framework aligned with the empirical data. Table A4 presents the final codebook used for the entire dataset, including definitions for each category.

To identify several of the categories presented in Table A4, we used a multimodal² approach. This involved analysing biographical descriptions to determine the account-holder's background as well as examining super-imposed text and captions to infer the meaning and origin of the posted images.

Finally, to gain a deeper understanding of fan-like content, we employed a qualitative approach, applying a social semiotic framework for visual analysis.³ Specifically, we examined the symbolic processes attributed to the posts through four key analytical concepts:

- Represented subjects: all human and non-human subjects occupying a prominent part of the frame. Key aspects shaping their significance include their compositional placement and their positioning relative to the camera.
- Modality: the degree of representational accuracy, where high modality indicates an accurate depiction of the subject, while low modality suggests the representation has been altered.
- Circumstances of accompaniment: the social or symbolic relationships between the participants shown in the shot and between them and the leader.
- Spatial circumstances: the setting and background elements discernible in a shot, which may provide additional layers of meaning to the image.

last hashtag was selected after using #JeanLucMelenchon returned much lower results as compared to the other French leaders analysed.

²The multimodal analysis was conducted following Kress, G. (2013). Multimodal discourse analysis. In *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 61–76). Routledge.

³Specifically, we based our visual approach on the categories devised by Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.

Table A4 Codebook used for the entire dataset, including the categories employed and their definitions

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Attitude towards the leader (entire post)	
Personal admiration of the leader	Expressions of personal admiration unrelated to political roles. Includes vague or nonspecific praise focusing on the leader's character, appearance, or personality rather than on political substance
Approval of political performance	Expressions of approval of the results achieved by the politician
Participation in the leader's "supporter community"	Expressions of satisfaction with the experience of undertaking supporter activities, either alone or with others
Disapproval of political performance	Expressions of disagreement with the leader's political actions
Personal dislike	Expressions of dislike of the leader based on their personal characteristics
Antagonism towards the leader's "supporter community"	Expressions of opposition to the leader's supporters or to the group/party the leader belongs to (often personified by the leader)
N.A. (stop coding)	
Apparent affective stimulus towards the leader	
Love, esteem, or admiration	Explicit expressions of attachment, admiration, or personal support
Anger, hatred, or contempt	Expressions of hostility towards the leader
Interest or approval	Positive comments on specific actions or characteristics of the leader
Hope, trust, or encouragement	Expressions of support or invitations to support someone/something
Indignation, dissatisfaction, or shame	Explicit criticism or grievances directed at specific actors or general political conditions
Other	Contains nonspecific emotional content or general affective markers
N.A. (stop coding)	
Post theme	
Leader off-duty	The post shows the leader engaged in activities unrelated to their work or public role
Leader at work	Visual or textual evidence of the leader performing official functions or participating in formal policy-making
External networking	The leader is depicted with other politicians outside of routine office or work environments

(continued)

Table A4 (continued)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Celebrity association	The leader is shown alongside famous non-political figures
Civic interaction	The leader is shown interacting with supporters and ordinary citizens
Public performance	Captures the leader in high-profile public roles, such as addressing rallies or leading protests
Decontextualized leader	Representation of the leader without indications of the context
Fan self-representation	Activities by the page owner reflecting their dedication to the leader (e.g., fan-made content) without direct interaction
Stance (public debate)	Comments on speeches, interviews, or statements by/about the leader or their political group
Promotional content (non-commercial)	Promoting the leader's activities to increase online/offline visibility
Commercial content	Promotion of products for sale
Other	A relevant fandom-related theme not yet identified
Representation of the leader	
Successful/skilled	Highlights the leader's specific skills, professional competencies, or leadership traits
Party/candidate support	Depicts the leader engaged in partisan advocacy or supporting fellow party members
Honest/consistent	Illustrates consistency between the leader's personal conduct and their stated political values
Aesthetically attractive	Expressions of admiration for the leader's physical appearance or aesthetic style
Energetic/aggressive	Captures the leader exhibiting affective intensity, passion, or charismatic energy
Close to the people/"one of us"	Portrays the leader in relatable, everyday settings or engaging in routine interactions with citizens
Incompetent/weak/ineffective	Claims the leader is incompetent, unfit, or otherwise unqualified for their institutional role
Inconsistent	Emphasizes a perceived disconnect between the leader's public values and their private actions
Unattractive/grotesque	Features a satirical or distorted representation of the leader's physical traits
Snobbish	Portrays the leader as elitist, out of touch, or detached from the concerns of ordinary citizens
N.A.	The leader is entirely absent from the content (textual and visual)
Does the post contain irony?	
Celebratory/positive	Affirmative humour or jokes intended to enhance the leader's public image

(continued)

Table A4 (continued)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Denigrating/negative N.A.	Mockery directed at the leader
Leader's attire	
Formal	Suit and tie (men) or business suit (women)
Smart casual	Shirt without tie (men) and/or without jacket (women)
Informal	Informal or casual attire (e.g., sportswear, t-shirts, or workwear)
Explicit comparison	
Political opposition	Political antagonism or conflict between the leader and other political actors
Media opposition	Media antagonism or conflict between the leader and journalists/media outlets
Media support	Consensus or alignment between the leader's stance and media actors
Political support	Shared goals or proximity with other political actors
N.A.	No reference to other actors
Party symbol present?	Yes / No
Visual cultural references	
Pop	References to contemporary popular culture
Intrinsically political	Political symbols (flags, EU, non-partisan political orgs)
Religious	References to religion
Gastronomic	Food, beverages, or agricultural products
Sporting	Symbols of sports organizations, personalities, or events
Law enforcement/military N.A.	References to the police or armed forces
Publisher profile	
Ordinary user	Ordinary individual not fitting other categories
Hashtag leader	The leader the hashtag refers to
Other political actor	Professional politician (not the hashtag leader)
Party (national/local)	Official page of a political party
News or meme pages	General interest, news, or meme-focused pages
Political (anti-)fan-page	Page focused on a politician or political cause (positive or negative)
Media actors	Journalist or news website page
Non-political celebrity	High-profile, non-political figure
Media extracts?	Yes (direct/indirect quotes)/no
Post type	Photo, photo with text, collage, screenshot, infographic, caricature, text only
Selfie	Yes/no