

The rise of the celebrity politician: an effect of social media?

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Abstract

In recent political literature, many have raised concerns about a growth in the ‘celebritization of politics’, whereby politicians increasingly borrow from celebrity culture to represent themselves and communicate with their electorate. While many have studied the impact of this trend on politics, relatively few have sought to explain its origins. In this paper, using theories from communication and celebrity studies, I will show some of the ways in which this rise of celebrity culture as a form of political communication was and is aided amplified by the rise of social media within public discourse. Given his vast popularity on social media platforms, I use Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as a case study to support my claim. Based on empirical studies done on his social media presence, I will demonstrate that he uses social media to capitalize on recent socio-cultural trends to showcase his political work in newly personalized ways.

Keywords: social media, political communication, celebrity politics, Justin Trudeau

Numerous scholars have identified a rise in “celebrity politics” (Street, 2004; Marsh, Hart & Tindall, 2010; Wheeler, 2013; Lalancette & Raynault, 2017). This umbrella term is used within the grey and academic political literature to describe a variety of trends. These can range from phenomenon such as a growing overlap between popular culture and politics (e.g. a politician appearing on a talk show) to an increase of celebrities running for office (e.g. the candidacy and election of Donald Trump). For the purpose of this paper, I will use it to refer to a growing form of political communication where politicians increasingly borrow elements from celebrity culture to communicate with their electorate, which Driessens defines as the “celebritization of politics” (2013). The literature on the phenomenon has largely focused on analyzing its impacts on the forms and qualities of modern politics (Nolan & Brookes, 2013; Wheeler, 2012; Marsha, Hart & Tindall, 2010), and there have been relatively few studies trying to identify its root causes (Street, 2004; Marshall, 2014). While the ones that have have studied the relation between the celebritization of politics and other trends such as the rise of digital culture and a global intensification of celebrity culture, there is still a need for more systemic studies of the phenomenon. My paper contributes to this literature as it seeks to answer the following question: Which socio-cultural trends can help explain the rise of celebrity politics?

Central to my argument is the claim that many of the trends noted by observers of political communication were already prominent in celebrity culture but were in our modern context largely amplified and normalized by the rise of social media. Marshall McLuhan’s theory of ‘the medium is the message’ is especially helpful in supporting this claim (1967). While avoiding completely deterministic claims, he argues that the modes of communication we use have an effect on the nature and content of our communications. While many observers have

supported the claim that the very architecture of social media platforms restrains and shapes its users' behavior (Bossetta, 2018 as cited in Vossen, 2019) others have described it more broadly as a 'new communication paradigm' to illustrate the scale of its ongoing impact (Khosravinik, 2014).

Following this argument, I argue that celebrity politics are (at least partially) the results of new social and cultural conventions of communication brought forward by social media, through which some elements of celebrity culture are becoming more central to political communication. My goal is not to say that the celebritization of politics is attributable only to social media. Rather, it is to demonstrate how the logics and conventions of these communication platforms are especially favorable or conducive to the spread of celebrity culture as a form of political communication. Although many have attributed the beginnings of celebrity politics to the use of Facebook by Barack Obama during his campaign and his roaring success (Towner et Muñoz, 2017 cited in Vesson, 2019), it is becoming a global phenomenon that goes beyond democratic or parliamentary systems and demands more case studies to be better understood. In order to support my claim, I will use another well-known example of a politician using social media in a way that relies heavily on celebrity culture: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. While empirical studies on his social media use have not been numerous, I will use the ones that were done on his use of Instagram. This platform combines visual and discursive elements but remains a primarily visual medium. This makes it especially interesting to study to understand new trends in political communication, which are becoming increasingly visual (Vossen, 2019). The time period covered is one of the most mediatized on social media of his political career, covering his first campaign running for office (Vossen, 2019) and his first year in office as prime minister (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). Albeit somewhat limited, this corpus highlights in a systematic

and substantive manner the ways in which Trudeau actively borrows from celebrity culture to conduct his politics. It therefore allows me to explicitly and concretely show how politics and celebrity culture come to coexist within the social media communication paradigm.

This will be demonstrated by an exploration of Trudeau's social media use through three elements of celebrity culture which are especially fitting to the logics of social media and represent growing socio-cultural and political communication trends: personalization, aestheticization and branding. I will explain how they were part of our existing celebrity culture. I will then discuss how the rise of social media has contributed to their continued migration into the world of politics. Finally, I will demonstrate how they can serve political interests by explaining how Trudeau's use of social media has been capitalizing on them.

When politicians get personal

In the context of politics, personalization refers to the process by which an increased importance is given to individual politicians at the expense of political groups or institutions (Balmas et al., 2014). This is directly related to the idea of celebrity culture, the cult of personality being a central aspect of how celebrities and their audiences interact. Indeed, for Marshall, "celebrity culture articulates a way of thinking about individuality and producing the individual self through the public world" (2010). Thus, we can advance that politicians participate in celebrity culture when they use their public presence to produce their personalities rather than their politics.

But why would politicians seek to put their individual selves at the very center of their political strategies? There are numerous advantages for a politician to choose to present themselves in this way, and Weber's theory on the charismatic leader offers an interesting, if incomplete, answer. Weber describes charisma as a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with special skills (2007). Even when based on seemingly evasive or unexplainable personality traits, charisma can play an important role in conveying authority to someone and lead others to trust them to hold power (Weber, 2007). Although other scholars (Alberoni, 2007) have nuanced the idea of charisma as a stand-alone authoritative factor, it remains an important aspect to consider. Additionally, Wood et al. make a distinction between "superstar celebrity politicians" who behave as charismatic leaders and "everyday celebrity politicians" who behave as "flawed" individuals (2016). In this sense, they can use social media "to appear as both ordinary and extraordinary" (Ekman & Widholm, 2014).

Regardless of the reasons that may help explain it, the personalization of politics is nothing new. Numerous politicians were and are renowned for reasons that go beyond their politics. A well-known example is that of John F. Kennedy, who enjoyed a strong reputation and notoriety in popular culture. That which is new, however, is the extent to which social media facilitate and amplify this phenomenon. According to Marshall, "what is constructed via [social media] is a construction of character for a kind of ritual of the performance of the self" (2014). This means that these platforms offer an especially powerful way for politicians and celebrities to carefully construct the presentation of their personalities and to emphasize its importance. Ekman & Widholm go even further, arguing that "the social media logic [...] advances personalization and reify political discourses" and that "political communication and the staging of political identities on [social media] are inseparable from both entertainment and celebrity discourses"

(2014). In other words, the format of social media facilitates making most interactions by politicians centered on their personalities. This goes back to the idea of social media as a new communication paradigm. According to Khosravini, their very formats and logics have tended to increasingly collapse and make undistinguishable both public and private communications (2014). Because of this, social media make it much easier for politicians to put at the forefront of their public lives their personal “charismatic” traits.

In the case of Justin Trudeau, I suggest that it is precisely his “flaws” that became portrayed as the source of his charismatic self, capable of demonstrating traditional leadership qualities. A focus on his personality rather than his political platform started relatively early in his political career. It was notably emphasized in the 2015 federal election campaign by the conservatives, who attacked various aspects of his person such as his youth, his celebrity status and his perceived lack of masculinity in order to discredit him as a valid or capable political candidate (Lalancette & Cormack, 2018). However, instead of shifting the focus away from his personality and emphasizing the strength of his party or platform, Trudeau’s appearances on platforms such as Instagram were used to recuperate this narrative and turn it to his advantage. His youth and physical shape became symbols of vitality and change; his “new masculinity” and body, vehicles for progress and social advancement (Lalancette & Cormack, 2018; Vossen, 2019). For example, 94% of his Instagram posts during the 2015 campaign showed him being in movement, emphasizing his youth and dynamism (Vossen, 2019)

Even beyond the 2015 campaign, the presence of Trudeau on social media often emphasizes aspects of himself such as his dynamism and charisma (Proudfoot, 2018; Vossen, 2019). His regular posting of selfies and the enthusiasm of Canadians, especially youth, to take them with him got him the nickname of “Prime Minister Selfie” (Akin, 2015). Although not

technically selfies, about 20% of his posts throughout 2015 pictured him with ordinary citizens and about 17% with children under 12 years old (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019)

So emphasized were Trudeau's presence and charm that the response to it on social media and in physical interactions was one of wide enthusiasm, which was dubbed by mainstream news outlets as "Trudeaumania 2.0" (Beaulieu, 2017), in reference to his father for whom an intense adulation had also taken place throughout his political career. Ultimately, Trudeau's strategy was to capitalize on sociocultural trends whereby public personalities, from actors to politicians, are judged on their personal traits rather than on their ideas or actions. There is also something noticeable about how this rhetoric was recuperated and amplified by social media and its users. Although this focus on his personality has been central to Trudeau's presence on social media, as we will see shortly, it has also been strongly aided by his use of images, and by the aesthetics and intimacy logic that social media facilitate.

The power of images

One aspect of the personalization of Trudeau's social media which is worth taking a more ample look at is that it is aided by an existing trend toward aestheticization. The concept of "aestheticization of politics" was first developed by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in an attempt to partially explain the apparent success and appeal of fascism (Jay, 1992). While aestheticization is now widely recognized as one of the central attributes of fascism, the aestheticization I refer to here is a

different one. It refers to a socio-cultural shift whereby the visual quality of cultural objects or actors gains significant importance. In this way, I refer to a context of aestheticization such as described by Rojek, where sensuous perceptions of what is considered “beautiful” to the eye is becoming central to our society’s way of ascribing value to things and people (Rojek, 2001).

There is also something to be said for the ways in which images circulated on social media impact those viewing it, beyond mere aesthetic pleasure. As cited in Gamson et al. (1992), Baudrillard argued that “dramatic changes in the technology of reproduction have led to the implosion of representation and reality” (1988). As we come to be constantly surrounded, even bombarded by visual images, including photographic reproductions of events, the limits to how we come to experience these images in relation to the events that they represent become blurred, and they come to gain a newly significant meaning.

As argued by Jameson (1984), “because there is no contextual constraint for the reception of images, the media spectacle is experienced with ‘heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect’” (Gamson et al., 1992). In short, applying these theories allows us to partially understand the power that images can hold in conveying meaning and impacting their audiences. In the age of social media, images are constantly accompanying us, and their content becomes intimate and personal. Not only do social media allow us to bypass traditional forms of media and therefore offer images that seem less mediated to an audience. Images also have an often more powerful effect than words (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017). This augmented by the large amount and constant proximity of visual content that social media permit.

The large impact that images and text can have, when found on social media, has been heavily relied upon in celebrity culture as a way for celebrities to convey a sense of connection that is as direct as possible with their audience. Rojek refers to this artificial relationship of intimacy that representation on mass media such as social media allows instead of face-to-face

meetings as “para-social interactions” (Rojek, 2007), where the reproductive quality and power of images found on social media contribute to building quasi-relationships between the object and the viewer.

Now, in terms of politicians, we can imagine how they seek to recuperate these existing “para-social infrastructures” and use social media to reach out to their electorate in a way that becomes profoundly personal. Indeed, through their presence on social media, and especially when posting or sharing pictures and photo-ops, “politicians endorse the public desire of celebrities, and these performances narrow the boundaries between the public and the private life of politicians and between the politician and the public” (Ekhman & Widholm, 2014).

In the case of Trudeau, he regularly uses such visual communication strategies, being an avid taker and sharer of both selfies and media photo-ops. Relying heavily on visual representation helps to contribute to the construction of his image (both literal and conceptual) as a charismatic leader who naturally possesses leadership qualities. It also helps to create closer “relationships” with his audience than traditional, more explicitly mediated media allow.

Trudeau has social media communication strategy has successfully capitalized on this trend toward aestheticization. The very choice of Instagram as a campaign tool demonstrates the recognition of a primarily visual medium as a powerful platform. Additionally, an emphasis on his looks was also very present in his 2015 campaign. While there were not always direct references to it, his body was repeatedly used to convey specific meanings about his capacities. Trudeau and his team often used pictures of him moving to emphasize that he represented change, and had a vigorous nature and energy (Vossen, 2019). His physical features were thus endowed with significant meaning and served to reaffirm his status as a charismatic leader. For example, about 18% of his Instagram posts during the 2015 campaign emphasized his physical condition (Vossen, 2019).

Finally, while there has been relatively few qualitative and quantitative study specifically on the visual embodiment of Trudeau's political message and strategies, one of the recurrent conclusions was that one of the main messages sent by Trudeau and his pictures on social media is one of authenticity (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017; Vossen, 2019). There are evidently efforts made to ensure the aesthetic quality of the picture he takes and shares, for example with his personal photographer selecting and lightly retouching pictures before they are used (Andrew-Gee, 2016).

Nonetheless, there are also deliberate efforts to take and share pictures that feel "authentic". This refers to images they appear to have been taken candidly, not staged and untouched. It demonstrates the desire to use images in a way that can help create a closer relation and a deeper impact on its viewer due to its unmediated nature. For example, in images where he is shown taking part in celebratory events of certain cultural communities, a form of post which accounted for about 34% of his posts in 2015, he is shown wearing casual attire instead of his usual formal clothing (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017), and only 11% of his post during the campaign appear to be posed (Vossen, 2019). What becomes important, then, is not so much the content of the picture but rather the extent to which its viewer gets "invited" into the moment it represents. The impact of these images relies on the representational power that images on social media hold and which helps to create intimacy (no matter how artificial), a logic that also reinforces the intense personalization of his platform described earlier.

In other words, because communications on social media exist at the intersection between the public and the private sphere (which Stanyer refers to as a process of intimisation) (2013 as cited by Vossen, 2019), its users feel a specific, more personal relation to the images and message relayed on it. Consequently, a central aspect of Trudeau's social media use is to create and share content on social media that takes advantage of this. Although Lalancette & Raynauld have

concluded that Trudeau did not use his Instagram deliberately to create a form of intimisation of his politics (2017), Vossen on the opposite viewed it as a central strategy of his social media use, especially during his campaign (2019).

Politics as products

Highly personalized content and highly visual content are two markers of contemporary celebrity culture which have been brought forward by the logics of social media. Although it is vital to understand the effects and implications of these strategies, one must also recognize another social media convention of celebrity culture that has come to define political communication: branding.

While a brand is “an evoked image that resonates on an emotional level and which stimulates customer loyalty,” branding refers to the marketing and sales techniques used to build a brand either around products, services, or people, so as to “add value to [it] so that a consumer develops an emotional preference for that choice over the alternatives” (Marland, 2013). This idea of branding is intimately linked to celebrity culture and exploring this relationship between the two helps us not only to better understand the context and intended functions of the various forms of communication present on social media, as well as their effects and implications. Within the context of celebrity culture, as explored by Turner, celebrities are made in order to sell products (2007). As their recognition and fame spread, the emotional connection between them and their “consumers” grow, so does their capacity to secure high profitability.

If we look at branding as an efficient way to market or sell goods or services, we can understand how similar techniques may be used by celebrities who seek to market themselves, either to sell their services or to help sell the cultural products they are a part of. Although the

marketing techniques evidently cannot be exactly the same, given that people are not static in the way goods or services are, the general idea remains the same: associate the celebrity to certain ideals or values so as to create emotional responses and attachments that will lead to the desired consumption patterns.

This goes beyond the techniques of putting a celebrity's personal or physical traits at the forefront of what they communicate to their audience through content and discourses, or of blurring the distinction between the public and the private to build "para-social" relationships. It requires ensuring that a celebrity gets associated with specific values or ideals susceptible of creating desirability or admiration on a strong emotional level. Celebrities as individuals are traversed and transformed by the brand that comes to be associated with their image or presentation, be it one of success, youth, talent, greatness, etc. This is now truer than ever, as "the marketing of, and the markets for, celebrities have increased dramatically over the last few decades" (Turner, 2007), an effect amplified in our contemporary context as a repercussion of social media (Diressens, 2013).

Indeed, the conventions and codes of social media allow for the marketing and branding of celebrities on a new level. Because of the highly "intimate" relations that celebrities come to have with their audiences through social media platforms, where viewers and audiences have constant access to their favourite celebrities and where, in a way, their favourite celebrities accompany them everywhere, strong emotional relationships are more easily and more likely to be built. No matter how constructed it may be, an emotional appeal is far easier to obtain on social media, because of the feeling of "authenticity" that social media and the seemingly unmediated nature of its content offer.

It seems that social media only extended conventions of emotional appeal that already existed in celebrity culture because celebrities have had to brand and sell themselves since the

beginnings of modern celebrity culture. What is rather newer and more noticeable now is the extent to which these strategies or conventions are being recuperated by politicians, a transfer also largely driven by the rise of social media. For Street, this transfer is partially caused by “mass media whose generic conventions favour this form of politic” (2004). For him, “the new styles of political communication are logical extensions of this reality. The advertisement (and the conventions of advertising) come to define political communication. Politicians become stars, politics becomes a series of spectacles and the citizens become spectators” (Street, 2004). It would be perhaps rather cynical to draw too close a comparison between the branding of politicians and the branding of celebrities, whereby politicians are merely “selling” political platforms that will need to be “bought” by votes. Nonetheless, we can understand how politicians may come to adapt the habitual rhetoric of politics, seeking to convince an electorate of the value and worth of their ideas through discourse, to a more visual form of rhetoric, better adapted to the format of social media.

Although political branding itself has been the subject of insufficient scholarly interest to fully understand the extent and reach of the phenomenon (Marland, 2013), Justin Trudeau’s use of social media gives us a glimpse of how politicians may borrow from celebrity culture to create an emotional appeal to their political message. In his case, through his use of social media, the core brand of the Liberal Party of Canada precisely became Justin Trudeau’s personal brand (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019).

Although, according to Lalancette and Raynauld, and contrary to what we may be tempted to believe, Trudeau’s use of Instagram is not mostly used to reveal aspects of his personal life (2017). Rather, it seeks to associate aspects of his personality with core liberal values (2017). The emphasis on his personality traits and his physical appearance allowed to link him to broader values held dear by most Canadians and presented as central to the Liberal’s

political platform such as progress, success and greatness (2017). This is not only about showing Trudeau as a charismatic leader and the embodiment of specific, desirable qualities, but also, indirectly, that his politics—regardless of their specificities—would be imbued and driven by such values and qualities. Even though the emphasis is on him, voting for him means voting for what he *represents*, and this may be more or less convincing depending on the emotional value these principles hold for us. In sum, Trudeau’s long-standing personal brand, “which is anchored in his youth, athleticism, open-mindedness, interpersonal skills, and support of feminist causes” (Marland, 2013) is strongly supported by his use of social media and recuperation of existing codes and strategies facilitating the construction of such a brand. With 46% during the campaign and 56% after the campaign of his posts serving to showcase his work as a politician, we understand that by and large his use of social media and is used primarily to reinforce his credibility as a serious leader, using the channels of social media to highlight his commitment to issues such as multiculturalism and national unity (Vossen, 2019).

Celebrity politicians: A useful political tool?

At the beginning of this essay I posited that politicians use celebrity culture codes or strategies to adapt contemporary politics to already changing modes of public discourses, largely shaped by the rise of social media. The main takeaway from this paper is that the trends that explain the rise of celebrity politics go beyond changes in political ideologies. The ongoing changes in political communication have more to do with global socio-cultural changes.

However, it would be worth asking if instead of merely capitalizing on these new trends to spread their message and grow their voting base, politicians should assure that they conduct their activities on social media in a way that will benefit its citizens the most, instead of their brand. It’s also important to highlight that while social media are having an important impact on

our society, not everyone has access or uses them. With Instagram specifically, given that about 56% of users are between the ages of 18 and 25 (Statistica), there is a strong limit to how much politicians can benefit from focusing and adapting their communication strategies on these platforms. An interesting study could be to compare the use of social media from a politician known to co-opt elements of celebrity culture such as Justin Trudeau, and compare it to the strategies they use in traditional media, to see whether there is overlap.

As I have shown, Justin Trudeau's use of highly personalized and visual modes of communication through social media content, have allowed him to construct and solidify his political "brand". Arguably, this has also allowed him to reach out to citizens in innovative ways, but this is often done at the expense of substantive political discourse and does not suffice to reach all voters. While this is not to suggest that Trudeau's communication strategies completely evacuate the political out of his discourse, interesting questions have been raised about the extent to which this kind of strategies can ensure meaningful and serious political engagement on the part of citizens on the longer term (Wheeler, 2012). Others have even directly associated this form of politics and political communication with a rise in populism (Nolan & Brookes, 2013).

Furthermore, it is important to note that I also have not explored the extent to which Trudeau's pre-existing status as a celebrity may have played a role in his choices of political communication and strategies. This could be an interesting exercise, given the specificities of the Canadian context. While such considerations are beyond the scope of this paper, it would greatly contribute to deepening our understanding of how political communications is affected by social media, celebrity culture and popular culture but limited by the confines of the socio-cultural and historical contexts within which they operate. Although this study focuses on a democratic system, it could also be interesting for future studies to compare with other political systems to see how celebrity politics may differ in its presentation and usage.

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