UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

THE DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

ORDINARY PEOPLE LEADING EXTRAORDINARY LIVES

The Personalization of Politics on Swedish Party Leaders' Instagram

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Essay/Thesis:	30 hp
Program and/or course:	Master's Programme in Political Communication
Level:	Second Cycle
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Supervisor:	Marie Grusell
Examiner:	Orla Vigsö
Report no:	xx (not to be filled in by the student/students)

Abstract

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Purpose: To add to the existing research on political communication on Instagram. It will do so by studying the phenomena in a Swedish context and by focusing on the personalization of politics. The aim is to explore how political personalization manifest in the management of Swedish party leaders' Instagram accounts.

Theory: Personalization of politics is theorized as a process in which the focus of politics is changing from topics to people and from parties to politicians.

Method: Qualitative design by conducting semi-structured interviews with managers of party leaders' Instagram accounts.

Result: The results showed that personalization was an integral part of how Instagram was used. The two main dimensions of personalization, individualization and privatization, proposed by Van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer, could be found in the respondents' answers about how their respective party leader's account was managed. This establishes that the dimensions of personalization are present to a large degree. that the results point to Instagram not only being a personalized arena if one conceives of it as focusing on party leaders, but also from a privatization dimension of focusing on personal characteristics and the party leader's personal life. The results suggest that personalization manifested itself in how the account was managed, how it was used to portray the party leader as an" ordinary" person, how politics was presented through the personal life of the party leader, and in how authenticity served as the foundation for successfully personalizing the party leader.

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Table of contents

Introduction

On the 14th of May 2021, the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven of the Social Democrats made a post on Instagram. This is nothing unusual as posts are frequently made on his personal Instagram account. What was unusual was what he posted in relation to his usual posts. Instead of the professional photographs of him attending to his political duties, there was a sudden break as his followers now faced an unprofessional, amateur-like image, taken with a smartphone, of the Prime Minister's upper body as he swam in murky water. The caption read "The first dip of the year. Eleven refreshing degrees in the water. Have a nice weekend". This post got 27 000 likes and 720 comments. His five posts prior had around 2 360 likes and around 90 comments on average. Why is this post important?

The answer consists of two aspects. One is that the Prime minister had finally "caved" and posted an image in the style that is preferred on Instagram. Since Instagram is built around the features of a smartphone it favours a "snapshot aesthetic" which encourages users to share amateur pictures of mundane and intimate moments of lived lives "in the moment" (Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2). The picture certainly had those qualities, and as such, users perceived it to "belong" on Instagram. Moreover, Instagram is a highly personal platform to which its users are attuned. An image of personal nature, such as going for a swim, is thus appealing to the users of the platform. In this sense, the post is what they expect to see.

The other aspect is that of political personalization. This is a process in which the focus of politics is increasingly changing from parties to politicians and from topics to people. In such a process, the evaluation of interpretation of politics has become based on politicians as individuals with political or non-political traits (Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012:204). This blurs the political and the private, the public and the personal (Mcgregor, Lawrence & Cardona, 2017:265). Politicians want to convince people they are qualified for their jobs, that they can identify with them on a personal level, and that they understand them. In the digital era, politicians achieve this is by posting carefully selected images and messages, having little or no issue content, on platforms like Instagram, to construct a favourable image of themselves (O'Connell, 2018:1f). In this sense, the post is what Löfven is expected to post.

This study will dive deeper into both of these phenomena as it is concerned with political communication on Instagram in an increasingly personalized existence.

Societal Relevance

There is no denying that media is an integral part of human life in the 21st century. Over the course of the last decades the proliferation of means of communication, the amount of communication equipment and information channels as well as media abundance, reach, ubiquity, and speed have been increasing at an unprecedented pace. Media permeate all aspects of contemporary western life and have converged key areas of human existence as the use of, exposure to, and immersion in media have changed the categories of everyday life. This means that for all actors involved in the political communication process new patterns and adaptations of media use have ensued (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999:213; Deuze, 2011:137). For political actors, newer technologies such as the internet and social media have become decisive political battlegrounds as well as a fundamental part of political communication, mobilization, and organization. Hence, the strategic use of social media for political purposes has gained in importance (Larsson, 2019:1096; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019:889; Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:169). For the citizens, social media play an important part in the media lives they lead. 96 percent of Swedes above the age of 16 use the internet and out of those 71 percent are Instagram users (Internetstiftelsen, 2021a, 2021b). 60 percent of Instagram users in Sweden use the app every week and 50 percent every day, making it the second most used social media next to Facebook. As for social media in general there are gendered differences as 79 percent of the female internet users, and 63 percent of the male internet users, use Instagram. In political communication, Instagram is often thought of and aimed at younger demographics, as they have been identified to be the ones using the app (Pineda, Bellido-Pérez & Barragán-Romero, 2020:22). This is very much true in Sweden as 9 out of 10 internet users between the ages of 16-25 use Instagram (Internetstiftelsen, 2021b). Social media have been a part of our digital lives for a long time now but are sadly understudied concerning politics and this especially applies to Instagram. It is highly important to study the intersection of these two areas which play an integral part in people's lives.

In the digital era, it is not so much that newer media (e.g., Instagram) replace older media (e.g., newspapers), as it is what Chadwick (2017:4f) has termed a "hybrid media system" in which both older and newer media logics coexist. In such a system public spheres are always in flux as media and politics overlap, mix, and coevolve. Modern public spheres and representative democracies, at least in an idealised way, rely heavily on the media as a place for public deliberation. However, the mass commercialized media have repeatedly been deemed insufficient in offering this as media reduces complexity in a variety of ways (Schäfer, 2015:2). The commercialization of media has led to the pollution of mediated public spheres, as promotional and self-serving material, a rhetoric of self-interest, and passive consumerism has replaced rational debate concerning the common good (Davis, 2019:21). If this is true for media in general, it is certainly true for Instagram as images have severe

limitations in communicating complex political issues (Ekman & Widholm, 2017:28). Moreover, by communicating through Instagram, a medium that is self-promotional at its very core, politicians can, by and large, circumvent the traditional media, which means that no journalists are there to ask questions or to scrutinize (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:169). Instagram makes it easier than ever for politicians to "advertise" themselves, to promote the best version of themselves to the electorate through messages which have little or no issue content in a time when politicians must have competent control over cosmetics rather than ideology, and in which the selfie and the mundane everyday activities of politicians' personal lives have become the new self-constructed political photo op and spectacle (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019:190; O'Connell, 2018:2; Postman, 1985:4; Abidin, 2017:76). Bearing this in mind, how political actors relate to and use one of the newer additions to our public spheres can be of great importance.

As for social media platforms like Instagram, the possibilities to act on them depends on and is shaped by, the design features on that particular platform. Platforms gradually infiltrate and converge with societies' institutions and practices, which rob them of their supposedly revolutionary powers. In this sense, platforms do not reflect the social, they produce the social structures we live in (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018:2). Instagram is built on visual communication as all posts must contain some visual content, which more or less forces political actors to relate to this fact in using Instagram for their strategic purposes, one of them being to influence and persuade voters to win elections (Farkas & Bene, 2021:124; Filimonov, Russmann & Svensson, 2016:2). Visuals have always been important in political communication, but they have become increasingly important with technological advances, and political communication today could be considered to be built on a visual foundation (Farkas & Bene, 2021:120f). Furthermore, visuals are thought to have a strong influence on public opinion and attitude formation since people tend to believe more what they see than what they read (Filimonov, Russmann & Svensson, 2016:2; Farkas & Bene, 2021:120). In the current era, Instagram could redefine how citizens evaluate politicians, whose assessment of their own performance is, in turn, guided by altered public standards based on visual considerations (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019:916f). It is thus pertinent to further analyse how platforms like Instagram shape political communication that ultimately affects the democratic process, and, as in this study, how political actors approach a platform that is based on such an integral part of political communication such as visuals.

As opposed to some of the other social media platforms, Instagram does not encourage users to engage in a multitude of activities such as public discussions, forming interest groups, creating special pages, etc. Instagram's primary reason for existence is the sharing of photos and this visual emphasis makes users focus on self-presentation and self-promotion rather than building relationships (O'Connell, 2018:2). Political communication evolves according to changes in the communication field, and thus,

Instagram creates new conditions, as well as new techniques and modes, for political communication (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019:190; Ekman & Widholm, 2017:19). Researchers have noted that social media are furthering the personalization of politics as they offer a direct link between the politicians and the citizenry, creating a kind of personalized communication that cultivates expectations of a more authentic and intimate culture of communication (Grusell & Nord, 2020:2; Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019:190). This fosters the growing preoccupation with individuals in politics in general, pushing personality to the forefront of politics rather than topics while non-political topics gain influence, blurring the boundaries between the political and the non-political (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017:16). Instagram, strongly associated with celebrities and influencers who share intimate details of their personal lives, is the perfect tool for accomplishing the end of personalizing politicians in merging their professional and personal lives. Furthermore, the self-imagery on Instagram is not only part of the process of personalization but ultimately leads to political celebritization. Instagram furthers the blend of popular culture and political communication in which politicians lean on the styles and conventions of being well known in coming to terms with the evolving media and consumer culture, attempting to personalize and brand themselves, celebritizing their personal image (Farkas & Bene, 2021:125; O'Connell, 2018:2; Ekman & Widholm, 2017:16,19). The process of personalization is a contested concept but is mostly tied to its problematic reshaping of politics and what society values regarding politics. It is thus of interest to study how central political actors on Instagram reason about the use of the platform since this informs how political communication is practiced today.

Academic Relevance

Ten years after Instagram's conception research on political communication on Instagram is only starting to progress (Grusell & Nord, 2020:3), and could still be described as a fairly recent line of research (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:170) with little published to its name so far (O'Connell, 2018:2; Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2). In this study, I intend to add to the existing research on political communication on social media, specifically Instagram in a Swedish context.

Much of the research on Instagram makes use of the theory of personalization (for example, Larsson, 2019; Grusell & Nord, 2020; Filimonov, Russmann, & Svensson, 2016; Ekman & Widholm, 2017), the process in which individual political actors have become increasingly more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities. Changes in the media environment, which affect the political process, are considered one of the drivers of personalization, and when change happens, such as the advent of social media, it sparks new research with new opportunities to investigate concepts of political communication in a new setting (Otto, Glogger & Maier, 2019:360). This is grounds for exploration on how political personalization manifests on Instagram, which I want to add a qualitative understanding of. The design features of social media, such as the like button, allow for easy metrification of user affect and engagement by converting the features into numbers (Rathnayake & Irida, 2020:1). This has implications for social media research which is predominantly focused on quantitative analysis (Fuchs, 2017:39), which is not surprising as social media platforms are essentially built around metrics that could be taken as "the way things are", and hence describe the world "as it is". Instagram is an environment that offers rich possibilities for conducting social research, as it opens new ways for exploring sociocultural processes and provides the researcher with vast amounts of data (Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2). If applying a functionalist approach in traditional media research, in identifying and measuring empirical artefacts to explain social affairs (Burrell & Morgan, 1979:25f), seemed logical to researchers studying traditional media, then applying such an approach in studying social media is indeed enticing as social media platforms are built on this very notion of metrics. This sort of digital positivism advances the notion of a pure digital quantitative methodology free from the flawed limitations of human beings, as digital technologies offer "pure" unflawed data. This adds to what Fuchs (2017:39) sees as the obsession with quantification in social media research in which the focus is on big data analytics, failing to result in a broader analysis of human meanings, interpretations, experiences, attitudes, uses, contradictions, and larger implications of social media. Research on social media needs to move beyond what some scholars have labelled "vanity metrics" and the mere counting of likes, comments, views, etc., claiming that social media research can benefit from alternative approaches (Rathnayake & Irida, 2020:1). A qualitative approach

adds nuance to the research field of political communication on Instagram, which commonly uses quantitative content analysis.

Furthermore, this study will build on the existing research concerning the Swedish context, and particularly one of the latest contributions by Grusell and Nord (2020). In analysing party leaders Instagram posts prior to the 2018 election, they concluded that if personalization is viewed as a focus on the party leader, then Instagram is a personalized arena, but if it is conceived as a stronger focus on the non-political traits of the party leaders, then the answer is no. Findings also showed that there seems to be an established genre for party leaders' appearances on Instagram and a move towards a standard of use, that interactions with followers are few, and that Instagram is used during elections in a structured and strategic way that recognizes the impact of visual communication (Grusell & Nord, 2020:12f). The qualitative approach of this study will focus on Instagram use by interviewing professionals that are involved in the management of the party leaders' account, broaden the scope to non-election periods and the everyday use, and thus further the understanding of political communication on Instagram in a Swedish context.

Not only does research on political communication on Instagram need to broaden its approach, but it must also begin to settle as a field and agree on certain common knowledge about what is studied. There is one aspect in the literature that is missing, and that is a broader understanding of Instagram. This is since mostly quantitative research has been conducted and the notion that social media (Instagram) is still new. However, the digital era has been viewed as new for a long time. This often manifests in comparisons of political communication in the broadcast era of newspapers, radio, or television and the digital era and how the new has disrupted the old. Such research is, of course, relevant in creating knowledge on how political communication evolves in tandem with changes in the media environment. It is important to study the digital era in relation to the digital era without pitting it against traditional media. Instagram of today is not the same as Instagram of 2016 or 2012 and is inherently a platform (medium) that is itself continuously being developed, and with it, norms, patterns, and relations are being constantly reworked (Karpf, 2020:87,93). In this respect, this study adds to the research field as it focuses on the present of a specific platform that is everchanging and can thus be placed in relation to earlier research to understand how it has evolved or how it's used now compared to the past.

Furthermore, research needs to focus more on platforms as distinct phenomena. Even if there are similarities between social media platforms, there are also differences. Social media should not be lumped together and studied as having common affordances. Some aspects of social media platforms are common (especially if compared to traditional media), but there are just as much that separate platforms from each other as it is that ties them together. By not treating Instagram as "social media"

but as Instagram, granular platform distinctions can be studied (Karpf, 2020:91). Research on Instagram can sometimes suffer from "Twitter-dependency", in so that it treats Instagram, due to its similarities with Twitter regarding features such as likes, hashtags, mentions, captions, geotags, etc., as Twitter. But a feature that appears across platforms still has different meanings on different platforms and has been designed for different functionality and is thus used differently. For example, the hashtag on Twitter serves mainly to aggregate conversations, but on Instagram, hashtags specify the content of pictures and connect to ad hoc communities. Therefore, there is a need to study different social media differently and not gather all social media under one umbrella. Focusing on a single social media platform is enormously useful in providing a better understanding of the use, content, and effects of a specific platform. Instagram research requires Instagram-native research strategies and understandings (Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017:15f). A deeper understanding, or context, is not completely absent in the current literature, but the basic tenets of Instagram and personalization must by now have been established. Generally, social media could be seen as strengthening the tendencies of personalization (Larsson, 2019:1097), as social media are personalized by default. Moreover, there are strong reasons to hypothesize that social media-based visual political communication, such as posts on Instagram, is inseparable from personalization, making it a central feature of democratic politics in the 21st century (Farkas & Bene, 2021:122).

Lastly, in reviewing the existing literature, several studies analyse political communication on Instagram during elections (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Filimonov, Russmann & Svensson, 2016; Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017; Bosetta, 2018; Muñoz & Towner, 2017; Kreiss, Lawrence & McGregor, 2018, Grusell & Nord, 2020), and less analyse the period between elections (Ekman & Widholm, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). It could be argued that the months or weeks leading up to an election is a decisive period in the democratic process and a period when politics is top of mind for the media and citizens alike, making it ideal for analysing political actor's behaviour "when it matters" the most. However, social media have fundamentally changed political communication, and politicians are now engaged in permanent campaigning independent from electoral cycles and the media (Metz, Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2020:1481). This fundamental change calls for research concerned with the everyday political communication on Instagram.

Instagram

Instagram is a free online social networking service in the form of an app launched in 2010 designed especially for visual content and smartphones. Since 2012, Instagram is owned by Facebook and the platform is valued at between 25 and 50 billion dollars. Instagram allows users to capture visuals, use filters to enhance these visuals, and instantly share (post) the content with an audience of friends or a wider audience of all Instagram users. A post can also be shared to other social media platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. The platform has developed new features over the years such as stories (a separate feed of content viewable for only 24 hours), IGTV (for video over 60 seconds and up to an hour), Instagram Live Video (live video streaming), Reels (more advanced short video clips), shoppable tags (businesses can tag their products in a photo), and Shop (a virtual shop tied to a brand) (Chen, 2018:23; Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2; Lee, 2019, December 3rd).

To explain "what Instagram is" is a difficult task since it is used in hundreds of different ways by its one billion monthly users worldwide (Manovich, 2017:11). A complete review of the myriad ways Instagram is used is thus not possible, nor necessary, considering the aim and scope of this study. However, I will provide a description of the platform to give a broad overview of what it is at its most basic level. Platforms are often claimed to be neutral infrastructures of communication, but they are quite the opposite as specific values and norms are inscribed in their architecture (van Dijck et al., 2018:3). Thus, a basic understanding of Instagram as a platform is crucial in analysing political communication thereon.

Instagram Vernaculars

One of Instagram's most important features distinguishing it from other social media platforms is the ability to apply filters to photographs which, by changing the colours or resolution of the photo, gives it a more appealing aesthetic touch (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:89; Mackson, Brochu & Schneider, 2019:2161). This is but one of Instagram's platform vernacular, but an important one as it points to the focus and value placed on visuals. Others are its square-framed, low-resolution images, its image feed, and its use of hashtags. The concept of platform vernacular concerns a platform's distinct combination of styles, grammars, and logics that constitute its genre of communication (Macdowall & De Souza, 2018:7f). The vernacular of a platform is continually (re)constructed by ongoing use, adaptation, and the interplay between the platform and its users. It's made up of forms of cultural participation, self-presentation, and creativity involving everyday communicative acts, and equally the architecture and affordances of the specific platform. Instagram's vernacular is closely tied to the origins of its name. The first part of the name comes from the Kodak Instamatic camera which came with a square image

format and low-resolution images as well as enabling point-and-shoot, ease-of-use, and cheap photography. This gave rise to “Kodak culture”, in which images of daily life were circulated and shared among networks of friends and family, in photo albums, home movies, and slideshows, bringing about the domestication of photography and the aestheticization of everyday life. These features and phenomena are carried on and constitute the architecture and affordances of Instagram. The second part of the name comes from the telegram, a technology that reshaped and compressed both spatial and temporal dimensions by allowing immediate transmission of communication. Instagram builds on this concept and ties into the cultural legacy and nostalgia of the immediacy and intimacy of the telegram (Macdowall & De Souza, 2018:8).

At its core, Instagram is a platform for self-promotion. Due to it being a highly visual platform and as visuals are better suited, and more credible due to the myth of photographic truth, than text for self-expression and impression management, Instagram is well-matched to present one’s personality, lifestyle, and taste (Lee et al., 2015:555; Pittman & Reich, 2016:157). This has largely to do with Instagram being a rich medium as it enables instant interaction, focuses on personal interests, and facilitates a wide range of various cues (such as images, texts, graphical symbols, etc), giving it capacities to emulate real-life communication (Lee & Borah, 2020:58). When a medium is rich, and thus equipped with more features, users perceive it as more functional (easy, enjoyable, effective, and flexible), in doing something for their social interaction. The features of a platform give users hints regarding the functions of this platform. In the case of Instagram, features for self-expression strengthen users’ perception of expressive opportunities and thus contribute to self-presentational behaviours. When users from individualistic cultures perceive Instagram as capable of broadcasting their desired attributes, they will be more likely to engage in self-presentation as both the culture and the perceived functionality of the platform work in tandem (Lee & Borah, 2020:58). This amounts to a platform used for the performance of identity construction and maintenance by highlighting personal styles and display “cool” aspects of one’s identity, taking it in the direction one wants. By posting visuals of oneself for self-expression, users manage their impressions and social identities among followers that fulfil both social and individual needs as well as for gaining social recognition in both online and offline worlds through Instagram (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:90; Chen, 2018:27,29). As such, focus and value are placed on one’s outside appearance when interacting on Instagram, as photographs are used as a valid means of expressing one’s identity and gaining social approval. The ability to posts visual content and to personalize the content through app features, distinct from other social media platforms, adds to use motivation being about self-expression, making it the number one platform for self-recording of one’s life, identification, recognition, and self-promotion (Lee et al., 2015:555; Wallace & Buil,2021:1; Alhabash & Ma, 2017:5; Chen, 2018:29). This makes Instagram in essence positive. Users have control of the posts they share with their followers, and as such, it is

implicitly encouraged to share positive images as this is more likely to generate positive feedback from one's followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017:2). Because of these vernaculars, an Instagram image now has its own signature look distinct from other social media images (Macdowall & De Souza, 2018:8). Part of this is the "snapshot aesthetic" of Instagram since the app is built around the affordances of the mobile (camera)phone and designed to encourage users to share amateur pictures of mundane and intimate moments and granular details of lives lived "in the moment". This means that an image on Instagram that is congruent with the platform's affordances (i.e., not staged and/or professional) makes users perceive it as "belonging" on the platform, making it credible and more appealing (Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2; Colliander & Marder, 2018:36,38).

Instagram, like all social media, is a source of perceived social support. This support is often ascribed to paralinguistic digital affordances such as likes, which act as one-click, lightweight, feedback cues that communicate through an icon (Wallace & Buil, 2021:2). In this way, likes and comments contribute to the intimacy that is needed for simulated social presence and feeling "connected" to other people (Pittman & Reich, 2016:157). However, the visual nature of Instagram, as well as its non-reciprocal following mechanism which revolve around weaker social ties, has been proven to be less effective in providing users with opportunities to develop strong and intimate connections with others compared to social media that support a variety of modalities for connection (Lee & Borah, 2020:59; Shane-Simpson, Manago, Gaggi & Gillespie-Lynch, 2018:284). It is possible to dig into these findings even further by taking Instagram's affordances and history into consideration. Instagram emerged in a post-Facebook, post-iPhone moment and was specifically optimized for use on a mobile device (Macdowall & De Souza, 2018:8). Previous photo-sharing platforms required users to snap a picture with a camera, transfer it to a computer and then log onto a desktop website. Instagram removed these detours as images are generated, edited, uploaded, and shared directly on a mobile phone, creating a form of industrialization of images. Images are now cheaper (easier) than ever, for an increasing number of people, to (mass)produce, distribute and consume. The affordances of Instagram make posts appear as fleeting digital objects in a never-ending visual flow where posts are given relative dates (e.g., 8 weeks ago) rather than fixed dates and users can delete posts at any time from the feed. Combined with the option to like a post by tapping a button, images and posts are produced to be mostly viewed for their immediate visual impact on a distracted viewer rather than as an object for careful consideration. Likes are aggregated as simple totals rather than qualitative interactions. As such, Instagram's vernaculars favour particular images and certain modes of distracted viewership within an increasingly visual culture in which the text is subjugated to the image (Macdowall & De Souza, 2018:9f).

Who's Who on Instagram

The most followed users on Instagram are primarily celebrities (Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015:555; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017:1). Users seek to communicate, stalk, or interact with celebrities whom they would not have the chance to interact with in the real world, creating an illusion of closeness between users and celebrities. Users also engage in building fame and reputation on Instagram to gain celebrity-like experiences (Chen, 2018:30). Instagram is a platform on which users can become celebrities in their own right by being "big" on the platform, giving rise to the term "instafamous" and the more general social media term "influencer" (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017:2). Influencers are prominent users who amassed a loyal following by crafting an authentic online persona, often by sharing highly personal content that revolves around their lifestyle and/or interests of which they are sometimes considered experts. This has led to an explosion in "influencer marketing" as companies, not unaware of the success of Instagram, try to connect with potential customers by leveraging the trust and connection which influencers have created with their followers. This, now multibillion-dollar, industry is a phenomenon that is closely linked to Instagram where 9 out of 10 influencers can be found and is the most popular platform for influencer marketing (Tafesse & Wood, 2021:1; Boerman, 2020:199; Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2; Kim & Kim, 2020:1; Casaló, Flavián & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020:511). For some, being an influencer has become a profession (Boerman, 2020:199) and as such, their income hinges upon being influential, mainly by being visible. This makes them "play the visibility game", as they are at the mercy of the algorithms that regulate visibility, and thus urge behavioural norms. As a consequence, there are many, what might be described as, theories on how the everchanging algorithms work including topics such as what hashtags to use, what time to post, and how to best increase engagement. Engagement consists of likes and comments and is viewed as a measure of one's success as well as a means of increasing visibility. Engagement fosters engagement, making it the means to an end, as well as the end itself (Cotter, 2019:896,902). There are two main categories of methods, or tactics, of gaining visibility/influence used by Instagram's most vivid "game-playing" users. The first category is the proponents of relational influence who believe in the "social" of social media. It is thought that broad, yet intimate, relationship building, which requires "real" or "human" relationships to be formed, results in the greatest return on investment. The best way to get the algorithms to perceive a user to have authentic connections is simply to build authentic connections through good original content that provides value to followers and other users and engaging in open communication with current and potential followers, thus showing that there is a reciprocal relationship and that they are listening. The second category is the proponents of simulated influence who believe in the entrepreneurial ideal, innovation, the ability to problem-solve, independent achievement, and accumulating capital. Metrics, such as likes, comments, and shares, are treated as a visible form of "social currency", documenting one's status and success. By trying to

figure out how the underlying code of Instagram works, they use this knowledge and use tricks that exploit strategic technical possibilities to simulate authentic relationships without having to build them to generate visibility (Cotter, 2019:905-907).

Even though “ordinary” users can play the visibility game within their small group of followers based more on real-world social ties, their use motivation is built around other factors far from gaining celebrity or pursuing a career on Instagram. Instagram tends to benefit social connection, as images may facilitate social presence, making the users feel as if they are socially interacting with real people and may thus satisfy the need to belong (Mackson et al., 2019:2164; Alhabash & Ma, 2017:8; Wallace & Buil, 2021:1). Maintaining and establishing social relationships with other people on Instagram is thus a common use motivation. This could be family and friends, but also people whom one has never met offline but share similar interests with. It could even be parasocial relationships with celebrities (Lee et al., 2015:555; Chen, 2018:30). Another common motivation for Instagram use is to keep up with, gain knowledge about, or “peek at” what others (family, friends, and strangers) are doing. This information seeking is suitable on Instagram where users' profiles can provide visual cues to one’s socio-economic status, relationship status, number of friends, etc. (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:94; Chen, 2018:30; Lee et al., 2015:555). Moreover, with its emphasis on visuals, Instagram is an opportune platform to document and store moments of one’s life conveniently and to relive those moments in the future. Many users engage with Instagram as a way of recording and archiving daily events, milestones in their lives, or more personal moments in a sort of virtual photo album or personal cyber documentary, both for themselves but also for the public. People that have high levels of social activity, such as traveling, going to sporting events, visiting friends, etc, tend to use Instagram in this way to a larger extent (Chen, 2018:28; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:94; Alhabash & Ma, 2017:8; Lee et al., 2015:555). Another reason for using Instagram is that it is a popular “cool” platform, and users of social media are typically interested in being on platforms that are popular with their peers. The ability to apply aesthetic filters to photos, to showcase interests, lifestyles, values, or beliefs, to explore posts relevant to one’s interest, or to follow popular celebrities could be considered to add to the “coolness” of Instagram. Moreover, the self-promotion combined with the ability to like posts, make it an ample opportunity to gain popularity. A goal of many users is to gain a substantial amount of likes on their posts, or followers to their account, which is seen as validating one’s popularity (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:94f; Chen, 2018:28f; Alhabash & Ma, 2017:8). Users seeking social support may therefore engage in like-seeking behaviour to gain attention and approval through likes (Wallace & Buil, 2021:1f; Lee et al., 2015:555). Passing time (Alhabash & Ma, 2017:8), escapism (Lee et al., 2015:555), or entertainment (Chen, 2018:29f) are also motivations for using Instagram. Instagram can be used to relax or to escape the troubles of everyday reality for a while (Lee et al., 2015:555). Users often use Instagram, mainly to browse content rather than post it, several times a day during work

breaks, commutes, or whenever a moment of free time appears. This has to do with the convenience of Instagram's format and content, as it requires little cognitive effort to gaze upon images, making Instagram a "mindless" social medium. All users have to do is easily "scroll down" to get entertained or kill time (Chen, 2018:29f).

Literature Review

As previously mentioned, the research field of political communication on Instagram is, at best, starting to develop into a field of its own and has commonly been described as scarce. In this literature review, I will account for much of the research on political communication on Instagram. Important to note is that this review does not only include party leaders but also other politicians on a national level to get a wider scope of how Instagram is used in a political context. Some of the studies included have analysed the Instagram use of parties, which, however, often include a focus on the party leader. Social media is not the subject under review, but sometimes existing research puts Instagram in relation to other social media to show how it is different. I have chosen to include some of these comparisons to establish what distinguishes Instagram from other social media as this informs Instagram use.

To begin with, since Instagram is a personal medium used by individuals, individual use differs. How an individual politician and/or how his or her staff chooses to engage with Instagram hinges on the politician's public persona, political biography, policy stances, ideology, temperament, and comfort with engagement on social media in general. How politicians view what they can or should do concerning use depends on these factors, which ultimately comes down to "authenticity", whether this means letting the politicians be themselves and direct their own posts, or if a staff craft a presence they deem fitting to the politician. "Authentic" politicians enjoy success in terms of engagement, even if audiences can never truly discern what is actually an "authentic" or contrived persona as authenticity is performative (Kreiss, Lawrence & McGregor, 2018:13ff). How different politicians embrace Instagram can be seen in the vast differences regarding the frequency of posting. During the US presidential primaries in 2016, candidates' use of Instagram varied significantly ranging from 122 posts to 449 posts over a six-month period (Muñoz and Towner, 2017:298). Grusell and Nord (2020:6) also found that, in the case of party leaders in Sweden, the number of total posts on the accounts ranged from 72 to 1656, corroborating that the use of, and the prominence given to, Instagram differs.

Building an Image

When political actors do use Instagram, it is overwhelmingly to build their image. In using Instagram, politicians and their staff can control the image of the politician without the "interference" of the media in posting polished content at scheduled times (Bosetta, 2018:491). In this sense, politicians' use of Instagram can be thought of as political storytelling as visual imagery is strategically selected and presented. The selection of certain types of images, whether it be aspects of politicians' personality, their qualifications for office, or their understanding of politics, reveals how the candidate

wants to be seen and which policies they want to advocate (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017:17,22). In Ekman and Widholm's (2017:25) analysis of Swedish politicians' Instagram posts, the authors concluded that two-thirds of all posts dealt with other aspects of political life than policy or political messages. Instagram use revolves around exhibiting a successful life, by the construction of performances of networked ties between politicians, public actors, and followers, while simultaneously creating a form of visual communication that creates an imaginary accountability by showing the politician to be a well-groomed, professional, and hard-working elected representative. Thus, communication on Instagram is mainly a tool for professional visual branding of the politician through the display of professional and private practices that are to be understood by audiences as authentic everyday political life. Work practices and private life becomes visible as the politician enters celebrity culture, in which they must perform their stage persona and create intimacy and authentic self-presentation (Ekman & Widholm, 2017:28f; Grusell & Nord, 2020:11f). Instagram allows politicians to build a more personal relationship with the public than is offered by traditional media. Party leaders' posts often use a combination of the political and the personal sphere as pictures often display what happens behind-the-scenes or shows who the party leader is (Jungselius & Grusell, 2018:99). The extent of this can be highly strategic and specific as Armannsdottir, Carnell & Pich (2020:88) found when analysing a younger Icelandic politician who used Instagram to brand herself towards voters below 40 years of age and to display her personal life and personality to a larger extent, for example, holiday pictures and pictures of family and friends, than on other social media. As politicians use Instagram to build their image the literature shows that there are two distinct aspects of this that reappear: the professional politician and the personal politician.

The Professional Politician

Politicians mainly use visuals on Instagram to focus on the politicians' political work (Farkas & Bene, 2021:121). Party leaders are shown in professional contexts ranging from office work to public events in most posts (Pineda, Bellido-Pérez & Barragán-Romero's, 2020:21). In the case of Canadian Prime minister Justin Trudeau's Instagram account, posts showed almost exclusively a hard-working politician attending his official duties as Prime minister, posting about his work in the Parliament and his office, making official international trips, and attending events and meetings (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019:914). O'Connell (2018:12) described Instagram use among members of the US Congress as "business-like", as nearly 70 percent of all analysed posts showed members working, or in a work-related setting. Likewise, in analysing 172 US politicians' Instagram accounts, Peng (2021:155) found that 62 percent of all posts were related to the professional political context. Poulakidakos and Giannouli (2019:199) found that posts of Greek party leaders in a professional context mainly consisted of them participating in political events, such as speeches, meeting with

ordinary people, and visiting places as politicians in order to promote their political leadership skills and hard work. Bosetta (2018:483) made similar findings in analysing the candidates of the US presidential primary campaigns in which the candidates were often shown interacting with enthusiastic supporters. This display of interacting with other actors from different areas of society is something that Ekman and Widholm (2017:22-24) labelled connectivity and it is aimed at increasing the notion of one's legitimacy as a politician as well as the embodiment of the ideological structure of Instagram as a visual social media platform.

In a Swedish context, analysis of the party leaders' Instagram posts during the three weeks leading up to national election day in Sweden showed that almost 70 percent of the images exhibited the party leader in a professional manner undertaking representative acts or representative actions (25 percent) with voters. Furthermore, party leaders were shown in everyday professional settings in 96 percent of the posts. In most of the images, the party leaders did not look at the camera, which could be interpreted as showing the party leader busy at work or as a sign of not wanting to have emotional contact with the viewer. The politicians seem to want to uphold a professional relationship with their followers (Grusell & Nord, 2020:8,11f). Similarly, during the 2014 general election, Filimonov et al. (2016:7f) found that posts in which the party leader was visible almost 95 percent could be categorized as a professional or a political context, turning the parties accounts into "personal blogs" for their party leaders. These posts concentrated on what the party leaders did and whom they met rather than conveying their political position on various issues to the voters. This also applied to the Norwegian context when the study was extended to include Norwegian parties during the 2017 election campaign, as nearly 75 percent of parties' posts included the party leader in a professional political context (Russman, Svensson & Larsson, 2019:131).

The Personal Politician

Second to the professional political context is the personal context, although posts in this context are rare in comparison. O'Connell's (2018:8) research showed that only 8 percent of an average US Congress member's posts were of personal nature and that only around 7 percent included their family. However, younger Congress members posted higher percentages of photos of personal nature of them at home, with their family, with their pets, and selfies. Similarly, Santiago Abascal of the Spanish party Vox, posted photos of family members in 10 percent of his posts during an election period (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:174). Party leaders' posts in Sweden prior to the 2018 election contained photos of everyday private life in about 4 percent of all posts analysed (Grusell & Nord, 2021:8). The Instagram posts of Trudeau featured little of his personal life. His wife appeared in about 16 percent of the posts, and his children in about 2 percent. However, in these photos, their

presence was almost always tied to Trudeau's duties as Prime Minister and thus, they contributed more to create a professional and political ethos (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019:902f).

However, there is more to being personal than displaying one's family or private moments. The showcasing of personal aspects of politicians is one of the most notable visual strategies that often include highlighting their personal biography. Liebhart and Bernhardt's (2017:23) analysis of Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen's Instagram posts found that background stories that displayed his experiences, personal qualities, and competencies were used to establish his aptness as Federal President. His family's refugee background and him as an intellectual university professor were two aspects that were showcased to achieve this. The personal in Abascal's Instagram posts were not about gaining access to the Goffmanesque "backstage" by disclosing his personal life, but to strategically highlight aspects of his persona by showing him in his leisure time enjoying sports, outdoor activities, exercising, or bullfighting. These activities displayed another kind of "backstage" in showing off his physical strength whilst at the same time merging his persona with his political agenda (the VOX party's defence of bullfighting) to construct a strategic authenticity (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:175f,179f). In a similar vein, the Singaporean member of parliament Baey Yam Keng used Instagram to construct an autobiography and a narrative that invites followers to interact with him through parasocial relations by showing personal aspects of the "backstage" in his daily work. This enables users to connect with him as a political figure, a personal brand, but first and foremost as an "ordinary person" (Abidin, 2017:85). This was echoed by Hungarian politicians who used Instagram as a tool to display their "human" side by posting photos of them wearing casual clothing, photos of family members, conveying personal and non-political messages, as well as frequent use of selfies (Farkas & Bene, 2021:134). Similarly, Norwegian politicians portrayed themselves as "regular people" by posting images of themselves involved in winter sports, something that is of high cultural value in Norway, showing off their personal preferences regarding these activities (Larsson, 2019:1105).

The professional political context and the personal context are the two sides of the same image-building coin that make up Instagram use by politicians. As the professional political context dominates over the personal context Pineda, Bellido-Pérez, and Barragán-Romero (2020:21) concluded that the potential of the emotional and personal-driven nature of Instagram was thus left unused by most politicians. However, as earlier noted, O'Connell (2018:14) concluded that younger members were far more comfortable in showcasing themselves out of the office in a more personal way, pointing to the fact that they showed more understanding of, and made better use of, Instagram than their older peers. However, Russman, Svensson, and Larsson (2019:133) found that there was an increase regarding posts displaying the personal context between 2014 and 2017 in total, suggesting

that the conventions of Instagram are making their way into the minds of politicians leading to more personalized posts.

Personalization and Instagram

Instagram has frequently been studied through the lens of personalization as the strategic use of visuals is strongly connected to the personalization of political communication (Farkas & Bene, 2021:120). In this section, the major conclusions of Instagram use and personalization will be presented.

Poulakidakos and Giannouli (2019:196f, 202) argue that Instagram is a self-oriented platform and found that party leaders conformed to this rationale as posts mainly consisted of personalized political content aimed at constructing a positive self-image. When political issues arise on Instagram, they do so through the persona or achievements of the individual politician which makes their private persona and personal life "politicized". This is also evident in party use of Instagram as Instagram is used to personalize their messages, often through the display of the party leader or individual politicians. Social media directors told Kreiss, Lawrence, and McGregor (2018:23) that their campaigns adapted to the conventions of Instagram, by posting personal or intimate pictures while linking these photographed events to policy issues in the captions. They went from an "issue-first" strategy to a more personalized form of communication, which they perceived that their Instagram audiences expected. As politicians adapt to the sociotechnical affordances of Instagram, where style, looks, and visual performativity are central features, they become somewhat celebritized, which contributes to the depoliticization of public discourse in which focus shifts from ideological questions to lifestyle politics (Ekman & Widholm, 2017:28; Russman et al., 2019:141; Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019:202). A prime example of this is Justin Trudeau's Instagram feed. Although Trudeau's posts rarely show him in intimate settings or personal activities, the structure and composition of images and text in his posts still convey a highly personal feel. Trudeau's posts convey a positive political image of him by presenting and constructing, his personal traits, such as honesty, sincerity, trustworthiness, friendliness, and leadership to reinforce his credibility and likeability as a politician and as an individual. As such, the dynamics of personalization in Trudeau's Instagram posts are strictly related to the political realm regardless of posts depict him in a professional political setting or a less formal or festive setting (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019:908,911f, 916).

In a Scandinavian context, Filimonov et al. (2016:6,8) argue that personalization was a campaign strategy for the Swedish parties in 2014 on Instagram as 67 percent of all analysed posting displayed a single person or in some cases few people. There were differences as the smaller grassroots parties used personalization to a lesser extent than the bigger parties. In posts that were categorized as

personalized, the party leaders were visible in 55 percent of these posts. The image management of Instagram campaigning could overall be labelled as personalized in professional settings. In a Norwegian context (Larsson, 2019:1102,1105), party leaders were more successful in gaining comments and likes than their respective parties. A finding that points to the fact that citizens might favour the person over the party on Instagram, something which can be related to the concept of personalization. However, Larsson found that parties gained higher levels of likes and comments when posting about elections and policy issues, while party leaders got the same effect by providing personalized content, which might be interpreted as accounts of parties and party leaders have different expectations in the eyes of the followers. In analysing party leaders' Instagram posts during the 2018 election in Sweden, Grusell and Nord (2020:12) argue that if personalization of politics is to be interpreted as a focus on the party leader, then Instagram is a personalized arena, but if personalization of politics is interpreted as a focus on politicians' personal and non-political characteristics, then Instagram is not a personalized arena.

Campaigns and Instagram

Much of the research on political communication on Instagram has focused on elections. In a sense Instagram use during election campaigns is virtually equated to, and what informs, academic understandings of the political sphere and Instagram. Thus, Instagram use during elections is the political use of Instagram. As such, it is pertinent to highlight what research has concluded so far on the matter.

Instagram has become a campaign instrument in its own right, as it is increasingly used strategically and professionally by political parties, and not only to reproduce information that's published on other campaign instruments (Russman, Svensson & Larsson, 2019:140). Instagram is commonly used as a personal visual diary revolving around campaign activities with references to, or comments on, upcoming campaign events such as press conferences, interviews, meetings, and other public appearances (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017:19; Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:179f; Grusell & Nord, 2020:9). Places that candidates visit are commonly (geo)tagged and the candidate is shown "campaigning" through photos of them meeting voters, posing with other politicians, celebrities, or businesspeople, or giving speeches. As such, Instagram allows for the creation of a synergy between online and offline activities. This way of using Instagram during campaigning can be viewed as "metacampaigning", as in communication about the state of the campaign, often by showcasing backstage moments of campaign work, often in a personalized, informal, and spontaneous kind of way when compared to posts on other social media platforms (Farkas & Bene, 2021:134; Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019:200; Pineda, Bellido-Pérez & Barragán-Romero, 2020:20f; Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:176,179).

One of the most common ways of using Instagram during campaigns is that of traditional broadcast thinking, which could be seen in the number of posts that resemble traditional election posters conveying well-chosen pictures and messages (Grusell & Nord, 2020:12). Instagram was mainly used for broadcasting information, that is images in which the distribution of information, such as political opinions and statements, takes centre stage in a sort of digital pamphlet (Filimonov, Russmann & Svensson, 2016:6; (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019:908; Pineda, Bellido-Pérez & Barragán-Romero, 2020:20). Instagram use of this kind can also be likened to that of a virtual billboard to visually present candidates and to spread information that does not expect a response from followers. As such, Instagram as a campaign tool is used to manage and present an attractive image in front of the voters (Muñoz and Towner, 2017:311,297; Filimonov, Russmann & Svensson, 2016:8). Instagram could be said to play second fiddle to "real" campaigning in this respect, indicating that the use of Instagram is heavily informed by traditional political campaigning. However, what Instagram affords campaigns is the datafication of users' activity which generates possibilities never before seen for the strategic targeting of specific audiences with the intent of persuasion or mobilization. Analytics becomes crucial for campaign consultants to assess the effectiveness of their digital communication strategy (Bosetta, 2018:489f). Campaigns use analytics from posts, to gauge, assess and evaluate different types of posts and the engagement, or lack there off, to realign or rethink their Instagram strategy (Kreiss, Lawrence & McGregor, 2018:18).

Being one of the few studies conducted in a non-campaign context, Lalancette and Raynauld (2019:916f) concluded that Justin Trudeau's Instagram account was used to strategically manage and build his image visually in what could be described as nonstop, and increasingly personalized, campaigning. As such, Instagram allowed for the continuous campaigning that aimed to strengthen Trudeau's legitimacy and credibility as Prime Minister and to offer and reinforce a positive image of him and his government.

Use of Instagram Vernacular

Instagram can be used in many ways but one distinction, previously hinted at during the presentation of campaign use, is the differences regarding how well political actors adopt Instagram as a platform of its own. Research has shown how politicians use the affordances and conventions of Instagram, its vernaculars, but that it differs as some incorporate these more and some less.

One of the most apparent findings is that politicians often stick to the convention of informal and spontaneous photos that is the style of Instagram pictures (Farkas and Bene, 2021:137). Kreiss et al. (2018:21,23) found that social media directors noted that they were most successful when producing content that was "native" to a particular platform. In the case of Instagram, this meant sticking to

Instagram's original mission, conceived as being great photos, storytelling, and "millennial lingo", and not so much official campaign statements. Thus, the perceived genre expectations of Instagram make campaigns try to capture spontaneous up-close, on-the-go, behind-the-scenes, and intimate campaign photos and videos of the candidate. Posts often seem to be "snapshots" of everyday life that provided a dynamic and informal feel to them, as the images could have been taken by anyone (Russman et al., 2019:139; Filimonov et al., 2016:7). However, at the same time, the pictures can mostly be described as professional in every sense (Grusell and Nord, 2020:8,12) of which Justin Trudeau's posts are a great example. All photos posted on Trudeau's Instagram were taken by the official photographer of the prime minister, but still many pictures appeared as unscripted and spontaneous (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019:899,909).

The modus operandi on Instagram is often kinder than on other platforms with a heavy focus on the visual communication through which politicians appear to be genuine and hence come "closer" to voters than on other media platforms (Jungselius & Grusell, 2018:99). This is reflected in the pictures posted which often are in the style of the personal feel that Instagram fosters. Several studies have shown that a clear majority of party leaders' posts are of themselves (Sampietro & Sánchez-Castillo, 2020:174; Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019:196; Farkas and Bene, 2021:134; Grusell and Nord (2020:9f). Ekman and Widholm (2017:27f) established that selfies generated more attention in the form of likes and comments than other photos, concluding that adapting to Instagram's aesthetic conventions seems to garner more followers and likes.

Being a social medium, Instagram is based around sociality, whether it's likes, comments, following, photos of friends and family, or tagging. Instagram provides politicians with the opportunity to connect and build relationships with stakeholders of different kinds. This basic tenet of Instagram is however given little attention by most politicians. Politicians' interaction on Instagram differs immensely in a Swedish context according to Ekman and Widholm (2017:25) who measured politicians' responses to comments. They found that the response rate ranged from 2 percent to 86 percent. The two politicians that had the highest interactivity also had the highest number of followers which could mean that interactivity is a way to obtain and sustain user traffic. Filimonov et al. (2016:8) came to the same conclusion when studying parties in Sweden. The more parties interacted, the more followers they had and the more feedback they got on their posts. In a more recent study of Swedish party leaders' Instagram posts, Grusell and Nord (2020:12) briefly noted that there is virtually no interaction with followers and that interactions on Instagram seem to be developing more towards monologue than dialogue. In a study of Spanish party leaders, Pineda, Bellido-Pérez, and Barragán-Romero (2020:11,19f) found that the party leader that engaged the most with followers only had a reply rate of about 10 percent, while the least engaged party leader did not offer a single reply

whatsoever. In general, the reply rate of the party leaders was almost 2,4 percent. Interesting to note is that during the election period the level of interaction was even lower than during the non-election period, concluding that the interactive political potential of Instagram is virtually non-existent. This could be because Instagram is a visual platform where showcasing pictures is more important than interacting, but also a hint that a new technology, and its new affordances and opportunities, is used as the media that precede it. In this respect, it would be used as television, which promotes displaying favourable images in front of a passive mass audience with no way of interacting, thus explaining why Instagram often is used as a virtual billboard. Moreover, regarding the effects of interaction, they concluded that a correlation between high activity on Instagram and high popularity, as in higher numbers of followers, did not exist. One politician that has been found to actively seek engagement with his followers is the Singaporean Member of Parliament Baey who implemented a hashtag (#BYKlookalike) to prompt users to submit photos of themselves in which they look like the MP. This serves as a light-hearted way to promote interaction and engagement but also to show that Baey is comfortable with the platform's vernacular (Abidin, 2017:78). It should be noted that this has nothing to do with politics, but it suits as appropriate interaction creating behaviour congruent with the platform.

Personalization

What Is Personalization?

Personalization, or the personalization of politics, has by many been categorised as one of the most important developments in understanding how political news and election coverage has changed over time in industrial democracies. The process of the personalization of politics is one in which the focus of politics is changing from topics to people and from parties to politicians. Hence, the base of interpretations and evaluations in the political process have become politicians as individuals with political or non-political traits. The dynamics of personalization strengthen the power of individual politicians versus parties and institutions as well as intimate and individualized lifestyle-based modes of interaction with politics. Political personalization creates human pseudo-events in which the political and social become secondary to individual triumphs and tragedies (Van Aelst et al., 2012:204; Adam & Maier, 2010:213f; Mcgregor et al., 2017:265). The personalization of politics and the simultaneous politicization of the private persona blur the lines between the political and the private, the public and the personal (Mcgregor et al., 2017:265). These changes to candidate-centered politics are often seen as a consequence of two interconnected factors: the weakening of traditional ties between voters and parties and the growing role of television in political communication. Thus, personalization is used in relation to voters, political actors, and the media and how they relate to each other. The concept of personalization broadly proposes that voters increasingly decide on electoral choices based on party leaders or candidates, that parties put their leader at the core of their communication while these politicians behave more like individual actors and less as a member of a party, and that the media represent politics as individual confrontations more than collective ones (Van Aelst et al., 2012:204). It should be noted that the first of these three propositions are highly contested. Moreover, several researchers argue that research on the personalization of politics has major shortcomings (Adam & Maier, 2010; Van Santen & Zoonen, 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Lack of conceptual clarity, definition, and absence of common operationalizations are reasons for the mixed results and conclusions. However, what most researchers agree on is that personalization refers to a process of change over time (an argument of degree), that it's a consequence of media technologies and strategies of political actors, and that it's multidimensional (Van Aelst et al., 2012:204f; Adam & Maier, 2010: 216).

Moving forward, I will present research on two of the three actors tied to the personalization of politics: the media and the political actors. The reason for this being that it is relevant to understand how these actors have affected the concept of political personalization in symbiosis. Moreover, in the era of digital (social) media, the political actors themselves are producers of media content, blurring

the lines between the two actors. This aspect will be covered separately in a review of personalization and social media.

The Media

The concept of political personalization is closely tied to the news media. Research has studied how the focus of news coverage has shifted from parties and organizations to candidates and leaders, increasingly portrayed as private individuals. In relation to the news media, observers have claimed that personalization is generating less substantial or even "depoliticized" news coverage that detracts voters' attention from political issues and policy decisions (Van Aelst et al., 2012:204,206; Van Santen & Zoonen, 2010:46). Television, with its embedded value of visuals (along with its problems in presenting complex information) which promote a focus on personalities rather than abstract entities such as parties, along with the values of privately owned media organizations is often blamed for affecting the process of personalization (Van Aelst et al., 2012:205; Adam & Maier, 2010: 219). Research on the media dimension of personalization has mostly been concerned with exploring longitudinal trends, with mixed results as some findings point to positive trends and some to negative trends regarding an increase in personalization over time (Langer & Sagarzazu, 2018:473).

To define the concept, I will use the conceptual models proposed by Van Aelst et al. (2012) and Van Santen and Zoonen (2010). Van Aelst et al. (2012:208) distinguish between two main dimensions, each with two sub-dimensions, of personalization in the news media based on previous research: individualization and privatization.

Figure 1.

Personalization			
Individualization: **Politicians versus Institutions**		**Privatization:** **Politician as Role Occupant versus Politician as Private Individual**	
General Visibility Focus: Shifts to individual politicians	**Concentrated Visibility** Focus: Shifts to leaders	**Personal Characteristics** Focus: Shifts to non-political traits	**Personal Life** Focus: Shifts to private life and personal interests

(Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012:207, *Dimensions of personalization in the news*)

The first form of personalization is labelled individualization and concerns the focus on individual politicians, along with their ideas, capacities, and policies, as central actors in the political arena. The political arena is conceived of as a battlefield of individual actors while providing little insight into

overarching power structures. This implies a shift from parties, institutions, and organizations to individual politicians. Concerning the two sub-dimensions, general visibility addresses the visibility of politicians, instead of parties, in the news media, while concentrated visibility addresses the visibility of a limited number of political leaders (Van Aelst et al., 2012:204-206). Van Aelst et al. (2012:215) argue that individualization does not necessarily contrast with substantive political news, since a focus on policy issues can occur alongside a focus on individual politicians.

The second form of personalization is labelled privatization and concerns the shift of focus from the politician as occupier of a public role to the politician as a private individual, separate from their public role, giving rising importance to the politician as an "ordinary" person. The two sub-dimensions concerns the attention given to the personal characteristics of politicians and their personal life (Van Aelst et al., 2012:204-207). These sub-dimensions are sometimes hard to distinguish and require further distinction. Personal characteristics can relate to the politician's political life inside the political arena, as in behaviour towards party members, or to the politician's personal life outside the political arena, as in behaviour towards a partner, and how these characteristics are presented in the news media. Regarding the personal life of politicians, it includes coverage of the politician's family, past life and upbringing, leisure time, and love life (Van Aelst et al., 2012:213f).

Turning to the conceptual model of Van Santen and Zoonen (2010:49), the authors argue that personalization encompasses three dimensions: professional qualities, private persona, and personal emotions.

Figure 2.

Personalization		
Professional Qualities	Private Persona	Personal Emotions
↓	↓	↓
Individualization	Privatization	Emotionalization

(Van Santen & Zoonen, 2010:50, Visual reproduction of personalization).

The dimension of individualization comprises the presentation of the individual competence of the politician. Rhetorical skills, eloquence, integrity, and popularity are highlighted in relation to the politician. The dimensions of privatization comprise the private lives and pursuits of politicians. Family in the form of upbringing and parents (as well as being a good parent oneself), partners, and hobbies are highlighted. The dimension of emotionalization comprises of the emotions and feelings of politicians, often tied to the two former dimensions (Van Santen & Zoonen, 2010:58f,60f,64).

The Political Actors

In much of the literature on the personalization of politics, changes in the journalistic and media systems have been connected to increasing personalization. However, these changes do not happen in a vacuum but affect the actors of politics since they are the ones being subjected to personalization in the news media. It has been argued that changes in the political dimension often come first, but in turn, the degree of personalization in the media dimension affects the political behaviour, standing, and legitimacy of political actors (Langer & Sagarzazu, 2018:473). Politicians and parties alike have adapted to the phenomena of personalization, creating events that emphasize personalities over parties (Van Aelst et al., 2012:205), making it difficult to determine if the media or the political actors are most important in increasing the personalization of politics (Adam & Maier, 2010: 219).

Looking at personalization from a historical perspective it could be argued that personalized politics is nothing new, that it's as old as politics itself. Politicians have, maybe always and more so than other people, been aware of their self-presentation and have consciously been trying to manipulate it to form the impression of themselves as empathic, competent, and in touch with their constituents. Personalization has, in many respects, been thought of as something that is "done to" politics as a consequence of institutional changes in the news media, but it should not be forgotten that it is also something that politicians "do to" themselves as the political self has been, and continually is, partly constructed through the intermingling of narratives of public and private life (Mcgregor et al., 2017:265). Van Santen and Zoonen (2010:47) argue that the tensions between public and private aspects of personal narratives of politicians occur whenever such narratives are found, irrespective of whether they are produced by actors in the media or by politicians themselves. What differs today is the degree of emphasis on politicians' identity, family, lifestyle, and character over their policy stances or leadership abilities. As the political arena is increasingly being mediatized, and thus favours personal narratives over abstract policy discussions, personalization is one adaptation political actors make to gain votes, which demands of them to cultivate and project their favoured individual "self" to audiences (Mcgregor et al., 2017:265f). As the traditional ties weaken between the political system and the citizens, party identification declines, ideological differences dissipate, and the number of floating voters increase, personalization is used as a strategy by parties to win votes. This is assumed to change parties from mass or catch-all parties to media parties, minimal parties, or professional parties (Adam & Maier, 2010: 218).

In such a political environment, the political parties change their communication, particularly in election campaigns, from focusing on themselves and policy to party leaders or top candidates, which speaks to the logic of the media, enabling media visibility. Candidates are also given more freedom to present themselves as relatively independent from their parties (Adam & Maier, 2010: 217). Whether

politicians like this or not, it is increasingly required of them to introduce aspects of their private lives into their political personas (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2016:405). Van Santen and Zoonen (2010:46,59) note this trend when concluding that the main contenders find creative ways to insert personal narratives in their campaigns while increasingly seizing the opportunity to strategically speak about their own competence and positive qualities. This has become easier for political actors over the last couple of decades as they increasingly are in a position of control over audio-visual material and narratives about themselves. Politicians implement the techniques afforded by the media while balancing between their performative identity and their social identity in producing their own narratives of themselves to be more competitive in the political marketplace. Consequently, conveying the personal narratives of politicians through a medium brings about the discussion if these narratives are authentic or strategic means to gain new voters (Van Santen & Zoonen, 2010:48), and this is more prevalent than ever in the era of social media.

Personalization and Social Media

With the advent of social media, which by its nature fits the long-term ongoing process of personalization, the phenomenon of the personalization of politics has been infused with new provocations while bringing about different ways to understand and gauge personalization. Social media accelerate, intensify, and add to the process of personalization as a result of their designs and affordances, their interplay with other media, and their opportunities to create intimate relations with voters (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013:757f; McGregor et al., 2017:265; Metz et al., 2020:1483). Therefore, social media platforms which are essentially built for the sharing of personal information, offer a highly personalized point of entry into politics as politicians' personal identities, families, and lifestyles are increasingly emphasized in social media (McGregor, 2018:1139-1141). In a social media environment, in which the individual politician, arguably by default, become the central communicator, the perspective of parties lessens, and the promotion of a more personalized agenda and the sharing of more intimate and private perspectives increase. Using social media like most of the general public does, that is, adhering to the logic of social media in general but also the logic of the platform at hand, personalization is exacerbated almost by default, as politicians position themselves as "ordinary" people behind the official office, people that share emotional feelings and narratives, as well as professionals with individual qualities which are used in engaging in political tasks and activities (Metz, Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2020:1482; McGregor, 2018:1140). As such, social media enables politicians to create a sense of closeness with the voters in providing them the feeling of getting to know politicians as individuals in private settings without news media filtering the impression (Starke & Marcinkowski, 2020:7f). By the same logic, the use of social media allows politicians to circumvent traditional news media when enabled with the opportunity to directly create,

choose, and send content to voters, leading to permanent campaigning detached from election cycles and their party (Metz et al., 2020:1481). Moreover, as politicians (and citizens alike) have no choice but to represent themselves in a highly individualized and personalized way, especially through the display of everyday life by the sharing of photos, required by social media, this also creates an arena for the equally permanent construction of personal identity that is at once both private and public. These mediated, seemingly spontaneous and genuine, images of politicians are used to cultivate authenticity and intimate relationships with voters, with the intention to foster long-term engagement and support (Mcgregor et al., 2017:265f; McGregor, 2018:1140,1142,1155).

Using social media to strategically self-personalize oneself as a politician is a logical choice as voters are primed to experience personal characteristics on social media platforms. This behaviour is even furthered in close, competitive electoral races as candidates see strategic value in distinguishing themselves from their competitors by self-personalizing more on social media (McGregor, 2018:1141; McGregor, et al. 2017:265). However, research has shown that politicians mostly apply the strategy of professional self-personalization (focusing on professional qualities), but this strategy does not exert any effect on audience engagement on social media. On the other hand, private self-personalization (focusing on intimate private persona qualities), affects audience engagement but is rarely used (Metz et al., 2020:1491f). In this sense, politicians using social media to present their professional qualities is more a case of "politics as usual", adapting social media to traditional political communication that essentially collide with the social nature of social media, than taking advantage of social media's unique affordances (Mcgregor et al., 2017:266; Metz et al., 2020:1485). This sentiment is echoed by young social media users that are concerned with politicians' digital illiteracy and objecting to politicians not being able to use social media appropriately and being unaware of the participative capabilities of social media (Loader et al., 2016:408). However, what personalized communication in general on social media does is that it allows for "controlled interactivity" by connecting with the voters. Images of politicians being relaxed, having a sense of humour, and having a life beyond politics make them appear more human which creates a parasocial relationship between politicians and voters. This pseudo-relationship that an audience can create with a mediated personality is "intimacy at a distance" as it is nonreciprocal and unidirectional, but it can nonetheless evoke feelings of closeness and a sense of truly knowing the mediated personality (McGregor, 2018:1156,1142; Loader et al., 2016:409). This does not lead to politicians being viewed as compassionate, responsive, and capable leaders, but allows for personal assessments of politicians to be made by voters that are hesitant to professionally scripted promotion, but open to what they perceive to be more open, truthful, and personal expressions of political values on social media. As such, personalization becomes a legitimate basis for political judgment as it renders politicians more likeable and makes the electorate feel like they are connected to the politicians and that they are speaking to them. Even if this is purely

unidirectional, it may still affect support for politicians (Loader et al., 2016:416; Starke & Marcinkowski, 2020:8; McGregor, 2018:1156), making personalization a relevant strategy in the eyes of political actors.

Aim and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to add to the existing research on political communication on Instagram. It will do so by studying the phenomena in a Swedish context and by focusing on the personalization of politics. The intention is to build on Grusell and Nord's 2020 study which analysed party leaders' Instagram posts prior to the 2018 election. However, this study will have a qualitative approach in interviewing the managers of the party leaders' Instagram accounts and it will also provide data from a non-election period, which compliments Grusell and Nord's study but is also scarce in the existing literature.

The aim is to explore (RQ) how political personalization manifests in the management of Swedish party leaders' Instagram accounts.

Methodology

In this section, the methodological choices made in crafting this study will be presented. It includes discussions on the choice of approach, the sample, how the empirical data have been gathered and handled, and ethical considerations. The strengths and weaknesses of the study will be presented throughout the section.

A Qualitative Design

For this study, I have chosen a qualitative research approach, which focuses on context and interpretation of the meanings people bring to a particular phenomenon to better understand it. Compared to quantitative research, the empirical material can be conceived of as more open, or even vague, as it departs from the perspective and actions of the subjects studied. As such, the phenomena under study must be approached holistically, using multifaceted and iterative reasoning and systematic inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:2; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009:7). The reasons for applying a qualitative approach are twofold. First, I wanted to fill a gap in the research literature. Many studies on both political communication on Instagram and personalization uses content analysis, as visuals and texts are analysed. For example, how common the presence of the party leader is in his or her Instagram posts. However, there are virtually no studies that talk to the people involved in that which the studies are about, whether it be personalization or political communication on Instagram. Especially in studies combining the two. Second, I wanted to build on the study of Grusell and Nord (2020) to contribute to the analysis of personalization on Instagram in a Swedish context. The approach of their study was that of quantitative content analysis to, among other objectives, analyse how the party leaders were portrayed on Instagram prior to the 2018 general election, and to what extent the posts could be considered personalized. This study intends to focus on the same context but to add a qualitative understanding.

Interviews

In keeping with the study's aim, I have chosen to gather empirical data by conducting interviews. In-depth Interviews are a staple of qualitative research which can easily be understood as a construction site of knowledge where, at least two individuals discuss a theme of mutual interest as well as being concerned with descriptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:147; Brinkmann, 2013:21). Qualitative interviewing lends itself well to study how an individual experiences a phenomenon and how it is done, how an individual reason about it, or act in relation to it (Brinkmann, 2013:47,49). From the researchers' perspective, as an interviewer, the general idea of the interview(er) can be conceptualized as a miner, a traveller, or a relationship. In thinking about the interview as a mine, one is obliged to

think about the interview partner as a "site" where knowledge and ideas exist. It's the researcher's aim to, in this case, "mine" the subjects' pure experiences. This could be conceived of as an objective approach to gaining knowledge. As for approaching the interview as a traveller it is more of a collective endeavour. The researcher and the interview partner are on a journey together into unknown lands, either with or without maps. This approach contains more involvement from the interviewer and knowledge is thus co-constructed. In approaching the interview as a kind of relationship, one has to balance between being friendly and developing friendship. Words like respect, interest, attention and good manners are central in building this relationship. However, it is always the case of sharing just enough about oneself as an interviewer not to influence the interview partner. It is his or her experience that's the reason for being in the interview in the first place (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:148). It could, however, be questioned if it is possible to "unearth" truths from the psyche of the interviewee or if interviews can be an unbiased method. In a neo-positivistic approach to the interview, the conversation can be used to reveal "the true self" of the interview participant. The interviewer has a noninterfering role and solid, trustworthy data is produced. A romantic conception conceives the interviewer as a midwife that by intimacy facilitate, and obtain, revelations and confessions from the interviewee. From a constructionist approach, these earlier conceptions are rejected. Data are hence not "nuggets" to be "mined", but a subject is locally produced in the situation. The interviewer is here the "traveller" mentioned earlier, that is co-constructing whatever happens in conversation with the interviewee (Brinkmann, 2013:12). I would argue that the constructivist conception of an interview, and how knowledge is produced, is something that I subscribe to in this study.

The downsides of interviews are that they are intimate in nature which makes them dependent on trust, and building trust takes time. Interview partners can also be unwilling or uncomfortable in sharing that which the researcher hopes to explore, as well as struggling to find the words to convey their thoughts. It is also possible that they are unaware of patterns in their lives or even have good reason not to be truthful (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:151). In interviewing elite individuals from a highly competitive political landscape, one can argue that in certain areas they would not be comfortable, or unwilling, to share how they go about things, or what their strategies are. This is something that can inhibit and affect the data collection of this study. The matter of trust is also of importance since I reached out as a stranger to the interview subjects and as a, at best, junior researcher with no merits to my name. Trust was built as much as it could by emails, a few phone calls, and during the interviews themselves that were scheduled to be fairly short and only a one-time event making trust-building difficult.

By conducting interviews, one is engaged in interpretations of the descriptions of people's experiences and actions as described by them. Lifeworld phenomena are seldom transparent or "monovocal", but

rather “polyvocal” and even contradictory permitting multiple readings and interpretations. The meanings that qualitative interviewers are after are often multiple, perspectival, and contradictory and thus demand careful interpretation (Brinkmann, 2013:23f). Furthermore, the researcher’s skills in asking follow-up, or elaborating, questions in the form of open-ended elaborations, open-ended clarifications, or detailed elaborations, are crucial. Oftentimes the richness of the interview is dependent on these types of questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:150). Regarding these aspects of interviewing, it should be made clear that it is my first time conducting interviews at this scale and depth and to bear in mind that I am not a seasoned interviewer which can affect the quality of the data produced. However, during the interviews and from one interview to the next, my experience and confidence grew which I trust also affected the quality of the data.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are oftentimes conceptualized as three major categories: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. However, this should more be thought of as a matter of a continuum ranging from relatively structured to relatively unstructured. The looseness of the concepts is due to a line of thinking in which no interviews are completely structured, since a conversation always spills beyond the structure, nor are they completely unstructured, as the interviewer always has an idea of what should take place in the interview which leads to questions that structure the interview. Therefore, it is generally preferable to lead the participants to talk about certain themes, rather than opinions about these themes (Brinkmann, 2013:18). I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews as they offer a middle ground using the earlier conception. They can make use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing for much more flexibility in following up on what goes on in the conversation. The interviewer also becomes visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself and, in relation to unstructured interviews, can focus the conversation on issues of importance to the research (Brinkmann, 2013:21). Moreover, research in digital environments requires more, not less, traditional (qualitative) methods to avoid the pitfalls of digital positivism. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are part of the traditional methods that can generate knowledge about what political communication on Instagram is, but also generate a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Fuchs, 2017:43), which is in line with the aim of the study.

Sample

I had my goal set to interview one person involved in, or in charge of, the party leaders’ Instagram account from every major party in Sweden. It became obvious that getting access to the right person was rather difficult and the management of the party leader’s account varied from party to party. As such, the initial intention of the study was to interview few critical cases, of which there are few to

begin with due to the number of party leaders in Sweden, but after reaching out to these few cases, the number of people available to interview became even fewer. Some party leaders oversaw their own Instagram account, which made it hard to get an interview with them, and some had a staff, or some form of collaboration between staff and party leader, which made it easier to get an interview. This could be considered problematic conserving the quality of the study. However, the aim was never statistical representativeness, but to engage in careful analysis of how a selected group of expert individuals experience political communication on Instagram (Brinkmann, 2013:59). While interviewing just one individual might not be fruitful, interviewing several regarding the object of study will hopefully give insights as to what is going on (Luker, 2008:167). Looking at the selection from this perspective I interviewed representatives of four out of nine party leaders. On one hand, that number is a significant part of the total population as there are only nine Instagram accounts of party leaders in Sweden. On the other hand, there are several people involved in the party leaders' account, not to mention the party leaders themselves, possibly making the handling of the account a complex interaction of several agents and putting extra significance on talking to the "right" person. However, the individuals that I did end up interviewing had a lot of insight into the respective party leader's Instagram account due to their professional role. I will now present the respondents of my study and account for the ones that didn't respond to my interview requests. At the request of the respondents, their names have been left out.

Respondent 1 is the political secretary of the Left Party and manages the Instagram account of the party leader, Nooshi Dadgostar, in collaboration with the party leader.

Respondent 2 is the chief information officer of the Christian Democrats who have been closely involved in the party leader's, Ebba Busch, Instagram account over the last couple of years. The party leader manages the Instagram account on her own, but with support from the communication department.

Respondent 3 is a political communicator for the Moderate Party and manages the social media accounts of the party leader. The party leader is highly involved in the accounts, but the staff manages it on a day-to-day basis.

Respondent 4 is the communications manager for the Sweden Democrats. The party leader's, Jimmie Åkesson, Instagram account is mostly managed by himself in collaboration with his staff and the communications department.

Regarding the other parties, the Social Democrats answered that they would be happy to be interviewed about the party's Instagram account, but that the party leader's (current prime minister Stefan Löfven) staff managed his account, and they did not do interviews like this one. The Green

Party has two party leaders (one was being replaced during the time period of the study) and I was in contact with the communications manager who directed me to each of the party leaders' staff, but I did never get a response from them. As for the Centre Party, I got in contact with the staff of the party leader and got the answer that it is the party leader, Annie Lööf, that is very much in control of her own Instagram account and they felt that they would not be able to provide me with answers to the questions I wanted to ask. The Liberals answered one of my first emails and answered that there might be a possibility to get an interview, but despite several attempts to contact them again I never got a reply.

Elite individuals

Interviews with elites is a particular branch of qualitative interviewing applicable to the interview subjects of this study. An elite person inhabits a position of power, prominence, and influence, within an organization or community and is thus well-informed. This is precisely why they were chosen as interview subjects, as they can provide expertise, and valuable information, concerning a specialized area in which they hold an important position. In an organizational setting, they can often discuss their organization's policies, histories, and plans concerning a specific area, or provide their view on the development within their area of expertise. As such, high-quality information can be obtained (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:159).

Challenges in interviewing elite individuals can easily appear. The planned structure of the interview might have to be adapted due to the wishes or preferences of the interview participant. It is also worth noting that elite individuals are oftentimes used to being interviewed and thus sophisticated in managing the interview process, wanting an active interplay with the interviewer. Experienced in meeting the public and the media while being in control, elite individuals may turn the interview around and take charge of it. This is increasingly probable when there is an apparent status differential between the interviewer and the elite interview participant. In such instances and in general, there is a challenge, and an opportunity, in using the elite subject's momentum to one's advantage. For example, elites often respond well to open-ended questions that give them the opportunity to use their knowledge and imagination. Further challenges in interviewing elites are that it places a demand on the interviewer to convey competence and credibility by displaying knowledge of the topic through thoughtful questioning (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:160). Being well-read on the subject and having an interview guide as well as conducting semi-structured interviews gave me a chance to balance these difficulties in interviewing elite individuals. I did not experience that the respondents took charge of the interview, but they were open to my questions and seemed thoughtful about the questions as they appeared to want to convey their thoughts and provide good answers to the questions.

The Interview Guide

The interview guide translates the research questions into questions that can be posed to the interviewees in a language that makes sense to them. A well-prepared interview guide allows the researcher to focus on the conversation while being able to ensure that the relevant themes are covered. The guide also makes it possible to be flexible regarding the order of the questions if the interviewee unexpectedly covers something in an answer that was "planned" to be covered later on (Brinkmann, 2013:59f).

In constructing the interview guide I started by putting questions, which I had written down throughout the research process, that fit together into broad themes (Luker, 2008:169). I added questions that emerged when engaging in this process as it sparked a lot of thoughts and hunches. As this study's aim and research questions are fairly broad, the questions making up a theme were designed to capture different aspects of and make the respondents talk about, this theme to try to cover it more comprehensively. I tried to imagine how the natural flow of a conversation would evolve when conversing, starting with the more general and moving to the more specific. This pre-emptive approach will not work perfectly in an interview situation and getting the answers one needs might require moving from one theme to another in as smooth a matter as possible. One way of achieving this is to control the conversation by saying "up to now we've been talking about x. Now I would like to ask you about x" (Luker, 2008:171). I found these strategies useful during the interviews as they allowed me to make sure that what I wanted to know was covered, but at the same time not constraining the respondents' answers. An interview guide is important in making sure that the themes of interest are covered, but it is equally important not to guide the person being interviewed too much and letting that person talk, which might lead to interesting and surprising findings. The interview guide proved to be very useful and something to "hold on to" during the interviews in this respect, especially with regards to interviewing elite individuals. The interview guide can be found in the appendix.

Conducting the Interviews

After contacting the respondents over e-mail and telephone we decided on a date and time suitable for a 30-minute interview, which eventually became around 40 minutes for all the interviews. The current Covid-19 pandemic restricted the interviews to an online setting, and as such the interviews were conducted using the Zoom software. There is no doubt that face-to-face interviews are preferable as they provide the richest source of knowledge available in interviewing. Information can be garnered not just from two people conversing, but also from body language, facial expressions, and gestures (Brinkmann, 2013:28). All interviews are, in some sense, mediated even if it's only by the spoken

word. One medium doesn't enhance the "objectiveness" of the results over another. Even if doing interviews using real-time audio-visual software over the internet can resemble face-to-face interviews (Brinkmann, 2013:30), there is no denying the fact that it is not the same as actually sitting down face-to-face with someone. Our demeanour is inherently different when talking to someone using a screen and a microphone. There are yet to be social and cultural norms established in using these kinds of communication tools, which the pandemic has made excruciatingly evident, making people decide on their own what they make of it. Compared to a face-to-face conversation, certain body language and gestures almost entirely disappear (and new ones appear) when conversing online via computers, and there is also the case of lag or technical problems, which doesn't make it easier to communicate or interpret the conversation. However, I found that the interviews ran smoothly using Zoom and it appeared that the people I was interviewing, after almost a year of working from home, were comfortable in using digital tools.

As mentioned earlier, I tried to formulate questions and design the interview guide with the study's aim in mind. This also applied to the interviews as I used a receptive approach (Brinkmann, 2013:31), allowing the respondents to be in control of how they answer the mostly open questions. I would not consider, nor claim, that I used an assertive approach as much, but some (follow-up) questions enabled me more control and provoked self-reflexivity among the respondents. This was not intended to provoke self-contradiction to afford analysis of such behaviour, but to aid in reaching the objectives of the study.

After getting permission from the interview subjects the interviews were recorded using the "record" feature available on Zoom which allows for the recording of both video and audio as well as a backup in using a smartphone recording the audio. This allowed for capturing as much as possible of the interview subject's body language and getting a coherent picture of the interview. It also made possible the digital labelling of the data gathered and made it easy to copy and store on different devices to ensure that the data was protected and well organized.

Transcribing and Translation

The interviews were conducted in Swedish and then transcribed in extenso. I found it sensible to follow the logic presented by Brinkmann (2013:124) stating that interview quotes should be rendered into a written style. This means that oral speech with repetitions, digressions, pauses, "hmms" etc. have been rendered into readable textual form to ease comprehension in the final report. Unrelated to this decision, it is always the case that transcribing and translation, both requiring judgement and interpretation transforms raw data into "processed" data. It is a difficult task to convert spoken words into written words and the word "processes" correctly implies that something happens when this is

done. Decisions on where to place punctuation or a semicolon are complex and shape the meaning of the written word that is later analysed. To counteract this, I have shared the parts of the transcription that I have intended to use as quotes with the respondents to allow them to confirm that their meaning and intent have been captured correctly (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:208f).

Adding translation to the mix murk's the waters of connotation and meaning even more than transcribing. In translating Swedish into English, my imprint on the data is undeniable. However, my efforts in translating should be viewed as that of an interpreter who processes the vocabulary and grammatical structure of the words while considering the individual situation and the overall cultural context (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:210), rather than a pure transferring of data from one language to another. It's important to note that an interpreter interprets and can never provide absolute accuracy in translating (and transcribing as well). Subtle nuances in meaning, paragraphing, phrases, and concepts in one language are almost impossible to convey in another when translating. What one can do is to aim for a reasonable approximation of the respondent's words and intent when translating. Finally, it should be noted that I have only translated the quotes that I intended to use in this study, and thus not the entire interview transcript.

Analysis

In analysing the data, I used an immersion strategy and relied on my intuitive and interpretive capabilities to engage the text without a prefigured template to search for segments of text to illustrate and categorize meaning. The process of analysis started as soon as the data collection started as it is hard to separate the two as one immediately starts to build a coherent interpretation guided by emerging understandings and initial concepts. The research questions and the related literature developed earlier in the research process guided the analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:215f).

Transcribing the interviews proved an effective way to get a first intimate engagement with the data. Aside from the interviews themselves, this was an inspiring period for the analysis. After transcribing the interviews, I progressed to read the transcripts to further explore the data to identify salient themes/categories as recurring ideas, language, or patterns of thought emerged. I started coding by assigning categories, concepts, and theoretical ideas while assigning and writing down thoughts and ideas associated with given codes and thinking about what they meant in a larger context (O'Reilly, 2008:34; Marshall & Rossman, 2016:222). The coding into categories was done by reading the texts and continuingly asking under which category the data could be placed, using both in vivo and in vitro coding, comparing newly coded data in a category to previously coded data in the same category to develop the category's properties (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009:62,65). Many categories ended up as modifications of concepts derived from the conceptual and literature review, making up categories in

which segments of text are placed. In practice, this process was done by copying and pasting data in between documents on a computer and by making notes and memos using pen and paper, which in my opinion makes it easier to "think". This way of analysis could be conceived of as clustering in which one "plays" with constructions of how the data fit together in a sort of conceptual or situational mapping. This process was done until I had categories well described by and fitting with the data, in what could be labelled theoretical sufficiency, when additional analysis no longer contributes to discovering anything new about a category (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:223f,229; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009:65).

Ethical Considerations

Interviews lay open, to both the interviewer and the interviewee, thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience, which make most of the ethical considerations revolve around the relationship between these two actors (Marshall & Rossman, 2016:164). One must consider if the relationship is nonmanipulative and the intrinsic power relations. Even though I interviewed elite individuals with key expertise within a specific field, which might give them the upper hand since I am after their knowledge and experiences, I am still in a position of power as I am the one choosing what topics to talk about, decide what to record and how, decide what to ignore or overlook, and determine what is eventually written and presented as research (O'Reilly, 2008:59f). Another aspect pertinent to this study is that of confidentiality. It is always best to use people's real names and details if possible, but also to bear in mind that comments, thoughts, feelings, and experiences are deeply personal and as such people might want to stay anonymous (O'Reilly, 2008:62). The participants of this study allowed me to use their title and what party they work for but not their names. This gives credibility to the study, but it also needs to be taken into account how comfortable in sharing information participants are when they're "on record" as opposed to "off-record".

Findings

A Professional Personal Account

It is useful to establish who manages the party leaders' Instagram account to get an understanding of how it is practically used. In this respect, the respondents gave a rather coherent picture. The common praxis is that the management of the party leader's account is a collective effort, although with some variances. Generally, there is at least one person on the party leader's staff or a communications department that manages the account. They are the ones who make sure that there is a plan for the account, that posts get posted, that many of the pictures get taken, that copy gets written, that graphics are added, and who keep track of how the account is doing. It is mostly the case that suggestions and posts come from these people and that the party leader then signs off on every post, but it can also be the case that the party leader comes up with suggestions and ideas for posts that the person on the staff or communications department helped to realize. These people essentially acted both as drivers and support concerning the account. However, all the respondents made sure to point out that it was the party leader's account and that they virtually had full autonomy over it themselves. This meant that since it is the party leaders' account, they are free to do what they want with it. However, this notion came with a caveat. It is not a truly personal account but a personal account for a person in a political role, or semi-personal as one respondent expressed this notion. It is not conceived as a channel where the party leader shares their private lives as "regular" Instagram users do. The respondent from the Moderates made a clear distinction when talking about the party leader Ulf Kristersson's account in stating that:

> *Instagram is part of his external communication as party leader and there is a balance to be struck regarding every post, but it is fundamentally a channel for the party leader where Ulf is a representative for a big political party in Sweden. This doesn't mean that he can't share personal things, but the approach is that it's not the other way around. It is not his personal account where he sometimes posts about politics, but the basic idea is that it's Ulf's account as the party leader of the Moderates.*

Or as the respondent of the Left Party stated when explaining their approach to party leader Nooshi Dadgostar's account:

> *People do not follow her because she has an interesting private life and drink nice looking café lattes, but it's because she is a party leader and people expect her to post on political positions.*

The chief information officer of the Christian Democrats explained the following regarding the party leader's autonomy:

> *In my role as chief information officer, has it happened that I wake up in the morning and open up Instagram to see a post that we hadn't planned for? Absolutely. It happens almost every week.*

There are a few interesting findings regarding the basic notions about the account of the party leader in respect to personalization. The very existence of an account belonging to the party leader can be conceived of as individualization through general visibility (van Aelst et al., 2012:207) as this furthers the focus on politicians over parties. In this sense, personalization is very much present. However, this does not clash with the promotion of policy issues, which can exist parallel to a focus on an individual politician, and the respondents echo this sentiment to a large degree in wanting the account first and foremost to be a manifestation of their role as a leader for a political party. In this respect, there is a notion of professionalism and a higher purpose in using Instagram linked to the policies, and being a representative, of the party. This also adds to individualisation as individual politicians are seen as the central actors in the political arena (van Aelst et al., 2012:206) and the individual politician is conceived of as a relevant way of presenting policy. The Instagram account of the party leader is thus a personalized conduit for presenting the party's policies and positions. There is also the question of the platform itself playing a part in the personalization of politics. Since Instagram is a self-oriented platform based on visual presentation (O'Connell, 2018:1), it tends to suit self-presentation. Bearing this in mind, personalization is not just an expression of a process in political communication which becomes evident on Instagram, personalization should also be understood as the price of admission to, the raison d'être of, the platform in the first place, regardless of one being a politician or not. The prominence given to the autonomy of the party leader in managing the account, although professionals are highly involved, as well as the presentation of policy through a person, can best be explained by the notion of Instagram being an inherently personal platform. And this seems to be a general view held by the respondents.

Moreover, the idea that a party leaders' account is a personal account belonging to an individual, denotes that it would be misguided, inappropriate, or even defeat the purpose of the platform, if the party leaders themselves were not involved in the management of the account or were restricted in their autonomy. The most basic notions of how party leaders' Instagram accounts are managed provide two different aspects of the personalization of politics on Instagram. Account managers want to strategically convey policy and positions through personalization of politics but also having the account be about the party leader as an individual.

Getting to Know the Politician as an Ordinary Person

According to the respondents, Instagram is considered a platform that, often in relation to other social media, is thought of as a great facilitator of direct personal communication with publics, whether they are described as people, voters, or followers. Respondents had the impression that out of all the social media channels at their disposal, Instagram is the one that is most personal and allows for direct contact. This personal direct communication is conceived of as a way to communicate without having to go through the "filter" of the traditional media, which the respondents argue bring with it a sense of closeness. The notion of getting close to the politician and being more personal since Instagram is a platform designed around photos, and that photos are personal in themselves. Instagram is seen as an easy way to foster engagement with relatively small means as the belief is that a picture is always very effective. The respondents found that Instagram allows for possibilities to interact and build relationships with followers on an easy-to-use and easily accessible platform that is not necessarily first and foremost political. It's a chance to get to know the party leader.

The respondent from the Sweden Democrats expressed that they thought that there are a lot of people and actors who make prejudiced claims about what kind of party they are and who they are as people, and that they in this regard stood out from other parties. As such, Instagram serves as an opportunity to, without interference, show that Jimmie is an "ordinary" person. Instagram is used to:

> *To show that Jimmie is, in quotation marks, a rather normal person with normal interests, living a normal life is interesting to showcase. He is not evil, nor does he participate in torch marches or anything like that. He is a normal person with a genuine concern regarding the society he's living in. He likes his family and to socialise with friends like everyone else. I believe that, for us, it's rather important to show that we too are merely people.*

Similarly, the respondent from the Christian Democrats stated that the Instagram account of the party leader Ebba is closely tied to her as she "owns it", and it is used very little to post about politics. It is more about following Ebba. By using Instagram as an opportunity to provide:

> *An additional view of, not only certain news stories, but the actual person behind them, which you get to see. To make politicians more human. It's an opportunity to show that politicians are ordinary people. They too eat Falun-sausage on Wednesdays.*

These findings provide another aspect of personalization as they are tied to the dimension of privatization. The focus is shifted from the public role of the politician to the politician as a private individual separate from their public role. This gives rising prominence to the private lives of

politicians and the politician as an “ordinary” person (Van Aelst et al., 2012:206, Van Santen & Zoonen,2010:50). These findings show that it is considered relevant to promote the private life of the party leader to convey an image of them being like everyone else. The folksy and modest Falun-sausage dinner is something that many Swedes can relate to and such a post brings the party leader to the level of “ordinary” people. In a similar vein, the respondent from the Sweden Democrats stated that the images on Åkesson’s Instagram account aims at providing a personal touch and to display a person that you “would want to have a beer with”. The respondent from the Sweden Democrats believed that we as human beings have a genuine need to feel a connection with a person that we place trust in and that it is hard to have trust in a person that you do not have a connection, or sympathise, with. By showcasing the party leader’s personal life, self-personalization can be viewed as a strategy of “controlled interactivity” by connecting with voters to create a parasocial relationship (McGregor, 2018:1156,1142). To bring the audience “closer” and thus get a sense of knowing the party leader by building a connection and trust. These findings also relate to two aspects of Instagram’s vernaculars. First, as celebrities, in both offline and online worlds, they are primarily the type of people that are followed on Instagram. The adaptation to the sociotechnical affordances of Instagram, where visual performativity, style, and looks, are important features, increasingly add to the celebritization of the party leaders (Ekman & Widholm, 2017:28), which allows them to build even more celebrity capital, but now by being “big” on Instagram like influencers. Second, just like influencers, the account managers of the party leaders have chosen one of the two tactics of fostering engagement and visibility. They are proponents of relational influence, believing in the “social” of social media by building authentic connections through good original content that provides value to followers (Cotter, 2019:905). Furthermore, this is a strategy that make use of Instagram’s vernacular by posting self-expressive visuals to manage social identity and impressions to gain social recognition both online and offline on a platform on which audiences are primed to experience personal characteristics. Such behaviour is congruent with the social nature of Instagram, opposed to applying “politics as usual” by promoting professional qualities, as politicians oftentimes do on social media (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:90; Chen, 2018:27,29; McGregor, 2018:1141; Mcgregor et al., 2017:266). As such, account managers are keeping with the vernacular of Instagram in personalizing the party leaders through the display of their personal lives. “Good content” on Instagram ultimately comes down to personalized content.

Using Instagram to self-personalize is closely tied to what the respondents believe what Instagram is all about. The respondent from the Left Party:

> *Instagram is pretty much about establishing Nooshi as a person and to provide a space for her to be personal and more direct in her communication as opposed to Facebook or Twitter which have an entirely different audience and way of working.*

To reach many people in such a direct manner, and as close as one does on Instagram, was seen as something of great value to the respondent of the Left Party and an opportunity to create a relationship between Nooshi and those who are interested in her. The political communicator of the Moderates expressed that Instagram is about visually crafting a persona and building identity. To establish the party leader as a person. It's an opportunity for those who follow the party leader to get to know him in a different way than one would if one only followed the official channels offered by the party. This aspect of getting to know the party leader was emphasized by the respondent of the Moderates:

> *This dimension of getting to know a person is something that I really want to stress. It provides trust in a person, a feeling of knowing what drives the person, what questions that are closest to their heart. You get insight to things that you can't get anywhere else. It could be Ulf preparing for a debate or something that he does outside of politics. This duality in politicians and Ulf as a person is a way to come close to people. Creating something people can recognize themselves in but above all trust.*

It was furthermore stated that:

> *The aim is less about how we want to portray Ulf, and more about making him an accessible party leader. It should be a sense of one experiencing that you "get" Ulf.*

These statements are tied to personalization in different ways other than those described earlier. They speak to a broad implication of personalization in which politicians become the base of interpretations and evaluations in the political process (Adam & Maier, 2010:213). It's the party leaders' ideas, capacities, and policies that are being highlighted which is a form of individualization, but it is also privatization in focusing on the personal characteristics of the party leaders both on a political level and a personal level to "get to know them" (Van Aelst et al., 2012:204-207). The statements convey how it is required to present aspects of the party leaders' private lives into their political personas to be more competitive in the political marketplace (Loader et al., 2016:405; Van Santen & Zoonen, 2010:48). In this respect, account managers use the myth of photographic truth (Lee et al., 2015:555) to self-promote the party leaders in a personalized manner.

Personalized Politics

One of the major implications of the personalization of politics, as well as the politicization of the private persona, is that it blurs the lines between the political and the private, the public and the personal (Mcgregor et al., 2017:265). This blurring is apparent in how Instagram is used, both because of Instagram's design and vernacular but also how managers try to use Instagram for political purposes. The Left Party expressed that there's a balance between personal and politics and that politics was what was expected from followers as it's the account of a party leader and not a private person. The account of the party leader of the Left Party wants to showcase her political interest and engagement in her own words. Instagram is not conceived as ideal for conveying the party's most important issues, but it can give a sense of how Nooshi's commitment to the party's policies looks and feels. As such, the personal was used to present something political in most cases. This is what the respondent felt worked best on Instagram:

> *I think we have some sort of all-time high in engagement on a post on maternity care. It's a picture of Nooshi and her child, a very cute picture of the child eating chocolate getting it all over her face and Nooshi describes how she gave birth at the Söder Hospital which is now facing major cutbacks.*

The Sweden Democrats provided a distinction that points to the inherent use value of Instagram in relation to other social media, in this case Facebook, when stating that:

> *On Facebook we post "this is our budget and it's a big thing". On Instagram we post "I'm on my way to present the budget. It's going to be great.*

For the Christian Democrats, the management of the account had recently started to test a more "campaign like" approach which they called "elderly news". Usually, it consisted of a photo of Ebba, maybe meeting an elderly person, and then a text about a political issue that concerns the elderly specifically. They experimented with a logotype and a small symbol of "elderly focus", communicating that this is a political post connected to a certain topic. This was to make it blatantly clear that it is Ebba and politics in the post, making a purely political statement.

Each of these examples has do to with the notion that Instagram is a personal medium at its core and that this personalized nature of Instagram contributes to the political on Instagram emanating from the personal. As Instagram is self-oriented party leaders' posts tend to consist of personalized political content and when political issues are present, they are so by politicizing the private persona and personal life of the party leader (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019:196f, 202). In this sense, political communication on Instagram is highly personalized. Yet again, individualisation is evident as the

focus is on the individual politician, which is not surprising considering it is a personal account. However, the political on Instagram begins with the personal. The individual politician is thus placed at the centre of the political arena (Van Aelst et al., 2012:206).

Authenticity

What all prior results boil down to hand hinges upon is authenticity. All the respondents believed that being authentic was the most important thing on Instagram. The belief is that followers will notice if the party leader is doing something out of character. The account must build on the personal commitment of the person who owns the account and it's apparent when this is not the case. It should never feel like a PR product or something that one is not. Something forced. The respondent meant that it is fairly apparent who is engaged in their accounts and are drivers behind it and who has a lot of help from professional communicators, and that this does something to how the account is perceived, how close one gets to the person, and how exciting it ultimately is to follow the account. As a politician, it is about being personal but not private and being yourself. If you're not, then you are not genuine and then you are going to stand out but for the wrong reasons. The respondent from the Christian Democrats expressed that the social is naturally an important part of social media and bearing this in mind it should be "felt" that it is a person behind the account. It should be real and genuine:

> *The basic notion is that Ebba should be perceived/come across as Ebba. Meaning that it's a glimpse into her reality and her person. You get a little closer to her as a person. There is no strategy to get her to be perceived in a certain way. And I believe that of you look at her account it is relatively down to earth. It can provide a behind-the-scenes look at the harsh debate with the Prime minister, but the next photo can be of Falun-sausage breakdown on a Wednesday afternoon. Unvarnished with a messy background. And there is no strategy in that. It is just who Ebba is as a person and it's her account.*

The Left Party had similar sentiments:

> *There is nothing more cringing than politicians who try to pose as something they are not. You know, you try to be a funny person even though you are really boring. Then it's better to be the serious type as that also has its charm. And if you are a funny type you should not try to tone it down. You should use your strengths and your real personality. It will show if it's not genuine.*

These notions connect to the privatization dimension of personalization as they concern the personal characteristics of politicians and the politician as a private individual (Van Aelst et al., 2012:206) and

this needs to build on authenticity. In presenting personal narratives of authentic everyday political life consisting of both private and public identity on Instagram, politicians must perform their stage persona, create intimacy and authentic self-presentation (Ekman & Widholm, 2017:28f; Grusell & Nord, 2020:11f). Hence, the seemingly spontaneous and genuine pictures posted to Instagram are used to cultivate authenticity and to build relationships with voters to gain engagement and support even if authenticity is performative and followers can never really know what is "authentic" or contrived (McGregor, 2018:1140; Kreiss, Lawrence & McGregor, 2018:13ff). Furthermore, the adherence to Instagram vernacular is evident in this case. It includes being built on a "snapshot aesthetic" of informal photos that could have been taken by anyone using a smartphone. This prompts users to share mundane and intimate moments detailing lives lived "in the moment". In posting such images as a "Falun-sausage breakdown on a Wednesday afternoon. Unvarnished with a messy background" one is being true to Instagram's affordances, making the post credible and appealing (Caliandro & Graham, 2020:2; Colliander & Marder, 2018:36,38).

Concerning building an image and an authentic persona, respondents expressed that posting on Instagram was somewhat harder during the Covid-19 pandemic. Posting was described as a dynamic process that is a mix of the party leader posting about themselves, their spare time, their work, or comments on something of political nature. As the world keeps turning it motivates updates and posts "naturally". There are often no pre-constructed templates. The Christian Democrats stated that:

> *It's been harder during corona because everything has become more static. Under normal circumstances, the party leader meets a lot of people and it's easier to follow the everyday professional activities. As it is now, it's not all that great to post about zoom-meeting after zoom-meeting. It gets kind of boring and harder to balance the account and the image it provides. At normal times it kind of takes care of itself.*

In this respect, it is the missed opportunity to engage in personalization that points to the prominence of personalization on Instagram. The ability to post about the everyday political life, behaviour towards part members, the competence, and popularity of the politician (Van Aelst et al., 2012:206, Van Santen & Zoonen,2010:50) is missing during the pandemic. As politicians mainly use Instagram to build their image, political storytelling in which the strategic selection of certain types of images to highlight how the politician wants to be seen, is an integral part of that image building (Liebhart & Bernhardt, 2017:17,22). Moreover, Instagram is used to display a successful life, often by performances of networked ties between politicians, public actors, and the public, creating an imaginary accountability in showing the well-groomed, professional, and hard-working elected official engaging in everyday political life (Ekman & Widholm, 2017:28f; Grusell & Nord, 2020:11f). In this sense, the party leaders have been interrupted in their permanent construction of personal identity as

well as the permanent campaigning (Metz et al., 2020:1481; Mcgregor et al., 2017:265f) which is a large part of what political communication on Instagram consists of.

Discussion

This study set out with the aim to explore how political personalization manifests in the management of Swedish party leaders' Instagram accounts. The results showed that personalization was an integral part of how Instagram was used. The two main dimensions of personalization, individualization and privatization, proposed by Van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer, could be found in the respondents' answers about how their respective party leader's account was managed. What was not found was the third dimension of personalization, emotionalization, proposed by Van Santen and Zoonen. This would be a first important finding as it establishes that the dimensions of personalization are present to a large degree.

Individualization puts focus on individual politicians, their ideas, and capacities, making them central actors in the political arena. This manifested itself in the answers given about the management of the account. The management of the party leaders' account was clearly a collective undertaking, although at different lengths, clashed somewhat with the basic tenet of Instagram, as it's a personal platform, but also with the notion of the individual politician as the central actor in the political arena. Policy issues can occur simultaneously as a focus on the individual politician, and managers certainly wanted it to do so, but in giving the party leader almost full autonomy over the account, however true this was, showed that the party leader as a central actor should be the base of interpretation in the political arena. It should not be interpreted as a team behind the party leader and thus removes the genuine presentation of his or her ideas, capacities, and policies.

The most appreciated aspect of Instagram by the respondents was that it facilitated direct and close contact with people as one can be more personal on Instagram. Privatization manifested itself in this manner as Instagram was seen as an opportune platform to showcase the party leader as an "ordinary" person as Instagram allows for shifting the focus from the party leader as occupier of a public role to the party leader as a private individual. Personal characteristics and personal life can be put on display to allow the audience to come "closer" to the party leader. To show that they are "ordinary" people in order to connect and build trust with (potential) voters. In assigning this possibility great value, it is highlighted how much emphasis is put on the privatization of the party leader and how "getting to know" the party leader is seen as having a value in the political marketplace.

Another way that personalization manifested itself was in how the respondents tried to blur the lines between the political and the private when presenting policy issues. The individual politician, and his or her personal life, become politicized in order to convey a successful message on Instagram. This also highlights how politicians try to infuse their private persona into the political sphere and how they

are placed at the centre of the political arena. In this sense, the notion is that what works best on Instagram politically, is the presentation of it through personal struggles or achievements.

As the base of interpretation and evaluation of politics in a personalized political arena is the individual politician, being authentic is what all other personalized behaviour builds on. The party leader must be perceived as having full autonomy over his or her account and thus keeping the account "authentic". The "ordinary" person that followers get to learn must come across as authentic to build trust and closeness. In presenting policy issues, the individual politician must have an authentic connection to the issue if it is going to foster engagement. The everyday political life must seem authentic. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the activities that are viewed as building authenticity were somewhat taken away, which points to the fact that political communication on Instagram is to an extent guided by the ability to continually market the politician in a permanent campaign.

Turning to how this study relates to the study by Grusell and Nord (2020), it has provided evidence of a move toward a standard of use as the respondents shared similar thoughts regarding how to use Instagram, but also by establishing that use is tied to personalization. It also provides insight into how Instagram is used in non-election periods as respondents have answered from the perspective of everyday use. Furthermore, it also adds to Grusell and Nord's notion that Instagram is used in a strategic way that recognizes the impact of visual communication, and how this applies to not only campaign use. As for labelling Instagram as a personalized arena, I would argue that the results point to Instagram not only being a personalized arena if one conceives of it as focusing on party leaders, but also from a privatization dimension of focusing on personal characteristics and the party leader's personal life.

Implications

For political actors, being in charge and having an "unfiltered" channel to connect directly with people, means that they now have a media outlet of their own. This in turn means that they have to produce material if that outlet is going to be relevant and this forces them to play the "visibility game" as they adhere to the vernaculars of Instagram to be successful. These vernaculars are by and large about being personal, which make personalization and Instagram the equivalent of each other. Political actors must then play by the rules, which furthers political personalization. In connection to this, the results also imply that, when offered the chance to personalize to promote the party leader, this is a logical choice, and it expands to permanent campaigning.

Another implication is that the personalization of politics on Instagram fosters the notion that politics is needed to be understood through an individual politician. If politics is understood as performed traits of individual politicians and not issues, the political process could suffer.

Further Research

Suggestions for further research would generally be to continue to add qualitative approaches to the study of political communication on Instagram. It would also be interesting to broaden the scope of quantitative studies to include non-election periods as this might be when politicians hope to influence followers on Instagram the most. It's also pertinent to apply a more nuanced approach to how images and posts are interpreted. Many studies count if aspects of the politician's personal life, such as family, are present in posts, but this is not the only way of being personalized. There are more subtle ways in which a post can be personalized.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

Could you describe your role in the management of the part leader's Instagram account?

Could you describe how you view Instagram in relation to your professional role?

In your opinion, what is the purpose of the party leader having an Instagram account?

How would you like the party leader to be perceived on Instagram?

Would you describe the party leader's Instagram account as part of a bigger communication strategy tied to the party?

How do you manage the account on a day-to-day basis? Is there a scheduled plan for posts?

Is there a balance in presenting the party leader as professional versus personal or private? If so, do you see any pros or cons tied to such a balance?

Could you describe if there is a balance between person and politics? If so, do you see any pros or cons tied to such a balance?

What are your thoughts on interaction on Instagram?

Concerning the images on Instagram, what do you want them to convey?

If you are to share a vision regarding the future of the party leader's Instagram account, what would that vision look like?

What is your single most important advice to be successful on Instagram?