



Place Branding in the Gastro-populist Age. Navigating through Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini's Exploitation of the Symbolic Nature of Food

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ABSTRACT

Place Branding in the Gastro-populist Age. Navigating through Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini's Exploitation of the Symbolic Nature of Food

The role of gastronomic products and food tourism in place branding practices has been widely investigated. Researchers traced a variety of social phenomena indicating a connection between local gastronomy products and the territorial identities connected to these products. Most importantly, the spread of digital platforms paved the way for establishment of new narratives to represent localities. A practice strikingly similar to gastronomic place branding is performed by some right-wing politicians. Specifically, they have been observed to practice what is defined as "gastropopulism": the propagandistic usage of gastronomic products. Recently, Demuru (2021) measured the phenomenon empirically. His study shows that some populist politicians capitalize on the symbolic potential of gastronomic products. Specifically, gastropopulism helps populist leaders establish their proximity with the people on a localised level, appearing as particularly authentic in the eyes of their (potential) constituents.

The proposed article would expand current understandings of gastropopulism. Specifically, it would provide further empirical data on the role of gastropopulism in the Italian context. The final research objective is that of reflecting upon the dynamics underpinning gastropopulism, and on the issues that arise for place branding actors when both local territories and populist politicians capitalize on the identity element related to gastronomy. Specifically, I would provide a visual analysis of the practices of gastropopulism as performed by Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni on their official Instagram accounts. Both Salvini and Meloni are leaders of right-wing populist parties (respectively of Lega and Fratelli d'Italia). Specifically, I would draw from the semantic approach to visually coded messages developed by Kress and van Leeuwen in their work "Reading Images: The grammar of visual design" (2006) to individuate and analyse food related content. Arguably, this study can provide observations of high relevance for the fields of political communication and urban sociology. First, by showing the similarities between these two seemingly disconnected phenomena the article can help stake-holders design place branding strategies that fully consider the importance of external factors that can affect the promotion of local territories.

Second, this article would give additional insights useful to develop broader reflections on the evolution of place branding practices, in contemporary post-modern societies. Place branding strategies were initially developed by liberal institutional systems to integrate marketing practices in the touristic promotion of local territories. The adoption of similar practices by anti-globalist actors shows that branding mechanisms are now working independently from their liberal grounds. The proposed article would provide insights on the contemporary context as neo-liberal and anti-globalist politicians implement similar strategies in their campaigns.

Third, this article wants to pave the way for future research on the topic. Specifically, it would provide a set of methodological tools apt to the definition of semiotic elements in visually coded messages. This methodological framework can help scholars tackle questions related to the visual aspect of place-branding, an increasingly important aspect of this phenomenon. Moreover, as the proposed visual analysis approach can be applied to a variety of case-studies, it may help researchers develop comparative studies, testing the validity of their understandings of place branding in a broader perspective on the socio-cultural environment these practices are immersed in.

KEYWORDS

Political communication
Populism
Social media
Gastropopulism
Place branding

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Place Branding in the Gastro-populist Age. Navigating through Giorgia Meloni's and Matteo Salvini's exploitation of the symbolic nature of food²

Introduction

The role of gastronomy in the establishment of collective identities and communities has been a prolific research focus for researchers approaching the topic from many different theoretical perspectives. Thanks to works like Mennell's (1996) history of English and French food consumption habits spanning from the Middle Ages to the present, or to Simmel's (1997) sociological analysis of food consumption habits and their impact on popular customs, gastronomy has been kept in high regard as an insightful unit of research for social scientists. Place branding scholars are no different, and the study of gastronomic place branding contributed substantially to better understand the processes shaping place-brands. Still, place branding scholars tend to focus on how stakeholders in local or national communities exploit gastronomy to successfully establish place-brands.

This article shows how two right-wing populist leaders (Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni) exploit the local gastronomies of Italy to fuel their populist narrative of the people as a monolithic community. My main contention is that this phenomenon results in a politicisation of gastronomy, as these leaders present food as a symbol connected to conservative, right-wing political values. Arguably, given the reach and fame of these politicians, their usage of food for campaigning influence the public perception of the relation between gastronomy and identity. The article is structured as follows. First, I introduce the key elements underpinning the empirical study. Specifically, I explain the relation between food, politics and place branding processes. Second, I describe the long-standing relationship between gastronomy and political communication. Most importantly, I focus on the studies showing how nationalist and populist actors have been using national and local gastronomy to fuel narratives of their constituencies as monolithic communities. Third, I outline the key elements useful to better understand the context in which the two Italian populist leaders Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini operate.

However, a premise on the reasons underpinning this unintuitive connection between a case study focused on political campaigning and gastronomic place branding is necessary. The individuation of the semantic elements composing the methodological framework and framing the analysis of this article is grounded in the literature on gastronomic place branding discussed in the first section. Nonetheless, the empirical analysis focuses on the visual self-presentation of two Italian populist leaders on their official Instagram profiles as politicians who value Italian gastronomic products for their socio-economic capital. For what concerns the focus on visual messages, it has been already shown that images and their analysis are a proficient approach to disentangle and better understand complex social phenomena (Peruzzi, Lombardi, 2020). Another field sharing the same interest for images is that of visual diplomacy (Manor, 2022). Moreover, the interdisciplinarity of this article has much in common with visual diplomacy studies (for example Constantinou, 2018).

It is important to clarify that the individuation of this empirical focus was based on two reasons. The first is that place branding and campaigning tend to share many thematic and strategic elements when it comes to their usage of gastronomy in communication. Most importantly, this article shows how analysed leaders use gastronomy to build communities, just as successful

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models of gastronomic place-brands do. The second reason is grounded in all the case-studies exposed in the first section. Synthetically, they all stress the variety of external, multi-levelled factors that participate in shaping a place-brand. Arguably, the exploitation of local gastronomic products as performed by party leaders Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini crucially influences the symbolic meanings attributed to food products in Italy. The public personae of high-visibility politicians like Meloni and Salvini often overlap with those of celebrities, and the archetype of the celebrity politician developed by Street's (2004) is a well-established trope in the Italian political landscape (Alomes, Mascitelli, 2012; Mazzoni, Ciaglia, 2014; Wood *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, Simon Anholt's (2007) influential theory of competitive identity considers celebrities and public figures to be actors shaping the image of a territory. Thus, it is arguably necessary for place branding scholars to consider the role of gastro-populists in shaping food related identities. In a nutshell, the analysis provided in this article can help place branding stakeholders and researchers better understand the influence that highly influential media figures like party leaders can play in shaping the public perception of gastronomy and of its territoriality. Moreover, I provide some key elements that policy makers can follow in their use of gastronomy to effectively strengthen place-brands in a politicised context such as the one covered in this article.

1. Place Branding, food and politics

1.1 Gastronomic place branding

The establishment of a place-brand involves an effort to control and influence the image of a geographically defined community. Place branding was first conceptualised as a process of commodification that capitalizes on the uniqueness of local territories to attract tourists and generate revenue. As a result, place branding initially mainly concerned mainly the marketisation of local territories by economically driven stakeholders (Kavaratzis *et al.*, 2014; Kotler, Gertner, 2002).

However, recent studies explore alternative approaches to this phenomenon. Specifically, they give more centrality to the social aspects related to the establishment of a place-brand. For example, Ren and Blichfeldt (2011) argue that place-brands benefit from their multiplicity and should not be subject to the simplification principles typically applied to company branding processes. Another example is the notion of landscape branding developed by de San Eugenio Vela, Nogué, and Govers (2017), that expands on established understandings of place-brands. With an innovative approach, the authors analyse the centrality of aesthetic and symbolic elements in place branding phenomena. Another example is Hansen's (2010) analysis of nationwide articles on the Danish town of Bornholm, that conceptualises place-brands as stories: narratives of a geographically and culturally defined community. According to Hansen, place branding policy-makers seeking to reform a place-brand should build narratives based on the territorial and cultural elements characterising that place. The methodology of this study draws from Hansen's conceptualisation of place branding as a narrative process. Specifically, this article builds upon the idea that place branding narratives should be built upon externally determined factors, that can resonate with targeted audiences. These elements generally have little to do with traditional branding strategies, and are rather rooted in the historical and cultural imprinting of a place.

This article builds upon this more sociological approach and contributes to the scholarship on gastronomic place branding, showing the influence of high-visibility politicians on the symbolism of local and national cuisines in Italy. This choice is in line with numerous other gastronomic place branding studies, as they often investigate the non-economic nature of place-brands, and the role of cuisines in shaping cultural and territorial identities beyond economic aims (Berg, Sevón, 2014; Montanari, 2006). An example is Rabbiosi's (2016) analysis of local food shops in

the Italian town of Verucchio. Their main contention is that place-brands can only be established based on the limited local elements that can resonate with tourists. Most importantly, the author focuses on the non-economic and unpredictable nature of the performances that end up shaping the image of a place. Thus, Rabbiosi suggests that the classic top-down approach of place branding strategies clashes with the bottom-up process that actually shapes a place-brand. Blichfeldt and Halkier (2014) analysed how the establishment of food related events helped the Danish town of Løgstør establish its brand not only externally but also in the eyes of local citizens, fostering a sense of community. Most importantly, the authors argue that food festivals played a key role in negotiating the tension between conflicting ideas of what the community of Løgstør is and how it should project itself externally. These are two examples showing the strict relation between food and community. This connection makes gastronomic place branding a topic that cannot be analysed without considering the political and identarian dynamics connected to it. In other words, gastronomic place branding studies show that there is a strict connection between gastronomy and politics.

1.2 From food culture to food politics

To better understand the connection between food and politics, we have to look at how food consumption habits are closely tied to the establishment of collective identities. An example is provided by Muñiz-Martinez and Florek (2021) as they explored this topic in the Basque Country. Specifically, the authors observed the key role played by local gastronomic products in establishing a place-brand resonating not only externally but also within the local community. This allowed the Basque Country to project an image of their community that was appealing to foreigners and could benefit from their location within Spain despite a long history of conflict with the Spanish government. Similarly, Donovan (2018) observed the key role of culinary practices in the ways Canada self-projects, both internally and externally, as a country of “uncontaminated” wilderness. Most importantly, the author analyses the strong resonance that wild food products have in the Canadian people, as they see it as a manifestation of the uniqueness of Canada. According to Donovan, this idealised image of Canadian wilderness helped unite a fragmented political community, providing a uniting identarian element.

Another example of the strong ties between food and identity is provided by Capuzzo (2020), who shows that a variety of gastro-alimentary Italian companies have shaped their branding strategies to appeal to the nostalgia, widespread among Italians, for culinary traditions rooted in the history of the country. Moreover, the author argues that these companies banalize this history, proposing an idealized and simplified version of it to their audiences. Surely, this expands the potential audience to Italians who may not have strong ties with these histories. Still, it limits the resonance of these brands among consumers that value such history. Similarly, Pujol (2009) described the complex interactions and setting that brought traditional cuisine in Catalonia to symbolise a globalised local identity. According to the author, this mixture is representative of the radical changes in the socio-economics of the region, whose economic growth is connected to global economic trends. Interestingly, Pujol argues that Catalan cuisine has become a symbol of the model of citizenry that Catalan nationalists support. Thus, in Pujol's study gastronomy is at the epicentre of radical socio-economic changes. However, it is also representative of the identarian struggles that those participating in the shaping of the image of Catalan cuisine share. Hence, gastronomies can be a shaping force in the formation of collective identities, just as they can become symbols of these developments.

In other words, scholars looking at gastronomic place branding have shown that the connection between gastronomy and identity is pivotal. Most importantly, the authors mentioned above describe food as potentially representative of the complex mixture of various socio-economic

and political factors that can play a role at local and national levels. Hence, for these authors gastronomic products are not just empty signifiers filled with carefully picked identarian elements. Rather, they are units of analysis useful for reaching a better understanding of how all these elements conflict, mix and build on top of each other. As I show in the following sections, in the Italian context, right-wing populist party leaders greatly influence how their audiences perceive food and its symbolical connection with local and national identity. Still, before exposing the case-study a few observations on the state of the art on food politics are necessary.

2. Gastronationalism or Gastropopulism? Food as fuel for political narratives

2.1 Building bridges between place branding and politics through gastronomy

When it comes to the relation between food and politics, researchers in the field have been able to build their studies on solid analytical and theoretical frameworks for more than twenty years. In particular, the scholarship on food politics has been largely influenced by Bourdieu's (1984) topical work on the sociology of taste. Synthetically, Bourdieu observed that food production and consumption makes it intrinsically connected to the public sphere, and that food related habits are strong indicators of and contribute to the establishment of communities. Hence, it should not come as a surprise that a prolific sector within food studies focuses on its political dimensions. Resultingly, scholars have used Bourdieu's writings to develop empirical analyses of gastronomy products used for political aims (i.e. Colás, 2018). Many studies on the topic share an object of interest with place branding actors: local cuisines, and their potential as tools to build and strengthen communities. Hence, cuisines are important to political scientists and to place branding scholars for the same reason: they can symbolise and shape collective identities (Ferguson, 2004; Mennell, 1996). In other words, gastronomic products can be powerful symbols, helping those who identify with them connect and relate with communities whose definition may otherwise be unclear or conflictual.

Interestingly, for political scientists the interest in local gastronomy also lies in its exploitation as performed by institutional actors or politicians to gather consensus and promote a politically defined (often) national community (Ichijo, 2020). Hence, it should not come as a surprise that a key notion in recent studies in the field is gastronationalism. Gastronationalism was first defined by Michaela DeSoucey as *"the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to create and sustain the emotive power of national attachment"* (2012, p. 1). Initially, studies employing gastronationalism did so to reach a better understanding of how institutional actors shape national identities. However, the recent success of Billig's *"Banal Nationalism"* (1995) and Fox and Miller-Idriss' *"Everyday Nationhood"* (2008) influenced gastronationalism researchers to focus more on how high-visibility characters influence the public perception of local and national cuisines. Notable examples are: Leer's (2019) focus on how cooking shows hosted by celebrity chefs contribute to shape culinary identities, stressing the divisions shaping different culinary identities or presenting them as part of a multicultural environment; and Stagi's (2016) broad reflections on the impact of the increasing attention to food aesthetics (namely food porn) on our society include insightful reflections on the dual role of gastronomy in Italy, as it can codify differences but it can also become a symbol of unity among groups with different socio-economic statuses. In a nutshell, recent gastronationalism studies focus on how some actors exploit food to substantiate their depiction of the Nation as a monolithic community (i.e.: Baron, Press-Barnathan, 2021; Colás, 2018; Ichijo, Ranta, 2016; Karaosmanoglu, 2020). Crucially, their usage of local and national gastronomies can support their division of the people between a righteous national community and supranational, globalist actors, presented as a threat for food traditions and the national community.

Particularly relevant for this article is Iocco *et al.*'s (2020) analysis of how the Italian public debate on migration and food production is deeply influenced by the narrative on the exceptionality of Italian gastronomy on a global scale fuelled by one of the two party leaders this paper focuses on: Matteo Salvini. According to the authors, Salvini re-framed the debate on the state of Italian gastronomy as a crisis. Specifically, he depicted the European Union regulations on food production as threatening traditional processes of production and conservation of traditional Italian foods. Hence, Salvini's depiction of the EU as a threat for the "exceptional" made in Italy food perfectly fits the Eurosceptic stance of his party and its construction of Salvini as a stark defender of the Italian people and their traditions.

Arguably, these studies on food politics and media share two key elements with the place branding studies mentioned above. First, both fields consider food to be a particularly interesting object of study because it influences the establishment of collective identities. Second, they share a need to look at how this exploitation of cuisines as social and political symbols is materialised and constructed by influential actors. Arguably, these processes of symbolisation of food contaminate each other. In other words, both place branding and political actors influencing the public perception of gastronomies and cuisines shape how the public understands gastronomic place brands and food politics. Consequentially, it is crucial for the two fields to share a set of tools in their research designs to reach a deeper understanding of the processes that influence the symbolization of cuisines. This study wants to provide a starting point, by showing the consequences of gastro-populism as performed by the Italian party leaders Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini.

2.2 *Gastro-populism and Italian populism*

Iocco *et al.*'s study frames Salvini's public persona as a gastronationalist. However, most studies frame Matteo Salvini as a right-wing populist leader who exploits ethno-nationalist elements to foster his people-centrist agenda (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018), in line with other European right-wing populist leaders (Alomes, Mascitelli, 2012; Biorcio, 2015; Wodak, 2015). I focus on the reasons underpinning this framing in the next section. For now, suffice it to say that in line with this trend, Paolo Demuru's (2021) article on Salvini's and Bolsonaro's digital personae defines them as gastropopulists, rather than as gastronationalists. Synthetically, the author describes how these two politicians "*manage not only to corroborate their people-centrism, anti-elitism and praise of national mythologies, but also to communicate right-wing populism as a soft, fun and enjoyable political ideology*" (Demuru, 2021, p. 523). Specifically, Demuru argues that the alternation of posts related to ordinary activities with content related to the extraordinariness of the life of a high visibility politician softens the nationalist element and strengthens the claim to be one of the people, typical of populist leaders.

Hence, according to Demuru Salvini is a gastro-populist and not a gastro-nationalist because he does not use food to stress the horizontal divisions typical of nationalism. Rather, Salvini uses food to give substance to his definition of the People. Hence, gastronomy is used to strengthen the element of unity typical of nationalisms, rather than its opposition to foreign communities. Nonetheless, many of the observations and studies focusing on gastronationalism that I just exposed are still relevant for the case-study and some of their insights were crucial in the development of the methodology. That is because populism and nationalism share some key ideological elements (Stewart, 1969) and throughout their respective evolutions they have contaminated each other (De Cleen, 2017). My empirical analysis builds on these premises, framing both Meloni and Salvini as (gastro)populists. Still, their usage of right-wing values and ideas is to be measured and taken into account to fully understand the scope of their gastro-populism.

3. Italian populisms: from Berlusconi to Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini

The Italian political system has experienced a popularisation in the last 30 years, which is strictly connected to a process of mediatisation of the political debate in the Country (Biorcio, 2015). Specifically, the corruption scandal “Mani Pulite” crippled a party system that had governed the country for almost fifty years (Vannucci, 2016). One of the most influential political characters in this transition was the businessman turned politician Silvio Berlusconi with his party Forza Italia. Berlusconi implemented marketing principles in his campaigning strategies (D’Agresti, 2008). Resultingly, he constructed a public persona with a strong populist element seeking to represent the Italian middle class. The businessman turned politician relied mainly on visual media to present his personal story of a successful businessman, reducing the space dedicated to the party agenda and to his role as a party leader (Alomes, Mascitelli, 2012; Cosentino, Doyle, 2010). In particular, the centrality of television in his public performances makes him one of the first examples of mediatised populism in Europe (Campus, 2010). In other words, Berlusconi’s public performances, the language he used and even the policies he proposed, were adapted to the affordances of an increasingly commercialized media (Mazzoleni, 2008). In fact, Berlusconi’s mediatic appearances have largely influenced not only the public debate, but also popular culture (Boni, 2008), which he often referred to in his speeches (Ginsborg, 2005; Mancini, 2011). Hence, it is no surprise that elements of Berlusconi’s campaigning strategies and dialectics have been observed to be present in other politicians’ careers. The former leader of the left-wing Democratic party, Matteo Renzi, and the founder of the 5 Star Movement, Beppe Grillo have been observed by scholars to share some elements with Berlusconi’s style of communication (Bordignon, 2014; Castaldo, Verzichelli, 2020; Ruggiero, 2012). As a result of this spread of populist rhetoric, the Italian political landscape has undergone processes of polarization and popularisation. Bracciale and Martella (2017) defined Italy as a country of endemic populism, as they observed that even non-populist politicians adopt a populist rhetoric.

Within this setting, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini are no exception. Salvini successfully turned Lega, his party, from an ethno-regionalist force into an ethno-nationalist one very quickly (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2018). His rhetoric relies on the populist division between a righteous, ethnically defined People of “true” Italians and the corrupt, liberal elite. Most importantly, he self-presents as the embodiment of this People, an ordinary Italian man who shares little with other professional politicians (Carone, Cavallaro, 2019; Mazzoni, Mincigrucchi, 2020; Starita, Trillò, 2022). The agenda of Fratelli d’Italia and the communicational style of its leader Giorgia Meloni have much in common with Salvini’s (Mazzoleni, Bracciale, 2018). Still, it is more strongly tied with its right-wing component as many members of Meloni’s party, herself included, started their political career in neo-fascist groups (De Giorgi, Tronconi, 2018). Hence, despite some peculiarities differently characterising the two parties, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini are exponents of what Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) define as exclusionary populisms. According to the authors, exclusionary populists tend to focus their agendas on two elements: the defence of traditions, and the ostracization of the Other. These two elements were empirically measured in this article to verify their presence, discerning their articulation in the visual communication of these two leaders. In conclusion, these elements motivate the framing of the two leaders analysed in this case-study as populists, thus I define their usage of gastronomy gastro-populist.

4. Methods

Phase 1: Data gathering and cleaning - Through the python-based package *Instaloader* ([instaloader.github.io](https://github.com/instaloader/instaloader)), I retrieved the metadata of the posts published on Giorgia Meloni’s (@giorgiameloni) and Matteo Salvini’s (@matteosalviniofficial) Instagram accounts during the year

2020 (1 January - 31 December). Then, I selected all the self-portraits and portraits published by the two politicians, resulting in an unclean dataset of 1027 images, 267 for Meloni and 760 for Salvini. Thereafter, I filtered the dataset further, and selected only the portraits showing the leaders with food. The clean dataset comprises 39 portraits of Giorgia Meloni and 111 portraits of Matteo Salvini.

Phase 2: Coding - I proceeded with an informal coding of the selected sample based on the key elements individuated in the previous sections as proper of both place branding and gastro-populist processes. A detailed codebook is attached as an appendix, the key elements are:

- The food types present in the images;
- Their importance for the message channelled by the Instagram post;
- The presence or absence of a reference to the national or localised origin of the products;
- Where the reference is present, if it was in the caption, in the image itself or in both;
- What narrative is constructed in these images and the related captions;
- If any, what elements typical of populist stances are present.

Another methodological tool used in the development of the codebook is Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) "Reading Images". Specifically, their reflections on how composition and framing shape visually coded messages in images were central in my determination of food as cosmetic or a central element in the analysed images. Additionally, I referred to Kress and Van Leeuwen's work to identify the visual references to food as a political symbol. Due to the differences in the datasets of the two politicians (the analysed portraits published by Salvini are almost 3 times those published by Meloni), I also analysed Meloni's gastro-populism separately.

Phase 3: qualitative focus – Based on the coding results, I identified 4 key posts useful to identify the logic underlying the analysed gastro-populist posts, and to show the potential influence of these images on the symbolisation of gastronomic products in the Italian context. This qualitative analysis was based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) analyses of how hue, location, composition, modality, and colour shape visually codified messages.

Additionally, I enriched the analysis with Itten's (1970) reflections on the meanings codified by colours and with Ravelli and Van Leeuwen's (2018) study on multimodality, to analyse the textual elements present in the images and captions.

5. Analysis and Discussion

In this section, I focus on the dominant elements shown by the coding results synthesized in Tables 1 and 2 below. These results should be analysed together with the 4 examples of gastro-populist posts I provide in the next section. The results represented in Table 1 partially seem to confirm the fact that food is generally (88.7%) a central element in the visually coded messages that Meloni and Salvini's portraits channel. Moreover, almost half (49%) of the analysed photographs show the leader with locally produced, fresh products. This is also a key part of the local identity and thus of the establishment of place-brands of many communities (Karaosmanoglu, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2015). The second most common type of food present in the sample is beverages, and within this category the recurring (72.8%) element is espresso or cappuccino cups. As I will show with two examples, this is a crucial element to fully understand how gastronomy is repurposed by leaders as a tool to fuel their claim to be part of the People.

Table 1 – Total results

Role of food in the picture	Food type	Geographical reference of the product	Method of reference	Narrative	Right-wing component
central 88.7%	fresh products 49%	national 16%	textual 38%	personal 78.67%	defining Us 24%
	beverages ¹ 36.7%	local 26.7%	visual 4%		contrasting Them 5.3%
cosmetic 11.3%	desserts 13.3%	local & national 1.3%	textual & visual 2.7%	politicised 21.3%	absent 70.7%
	other 17.3%	no reference 56%	none 55.3%		

¹ 26.7% of the total sample is showing coffee or coffee related products

Nonetheless, there are some strong indicators that many portraits do not have a strong connection with the elements constructing place-brand narratives. First, only 28% of the images make a direct reference to the locality of the food, whereas 56% of the analysed sample contain no reference to the local or national origin of the products. Second, there is a visual reference contributing to the narrative fuelling the message only in 6.7% of the analysed sample. Third, the narrative constructed by these images is mostly based on the personal, ordinary aspects of the politicians' everyday life. Fourth, the right-wing element is absent in 70.7% of the analysed images. Those images in which this right-wing populist element is present, mostly contain (24%) visual and textual statements to define the People these leaders seek to represent, and fuel their self-presentation as embodiment of the popular will. Hence, they seem to be more connected to the populist internal division between the People and the elites. In other words, gastronomy is used to strengthen the definition of the "authentic" Italian community that the politicians seek to represent.

Table 2 – Meloni's results

Role of food in the picture	Food type	Geographical reference of the product	Method of reference	Narrative	Right-wing component
central 82.05%	fresh products 41.03%	national 17.95%	textual 58.97%	personal 71.79%	defining us 51.28%
	beverages ¹ 28.21%	local 43.95%	visual 2.56%		opposing them 2.56%
cosmetic 17.95%	desserts 23.08%	local & national 0	textual & visual 0	politicised 28.21%	absent 46.15%
	other 7.69%	no reference 38.46%	none 38.46%		

¹12.8% of the total sample is showing coffee or coffee related products

Meloni's communication is slightly different from Salvini's, even though it shares the same overall trend. Interestingly, desserts are more present in Meloni's visual communication. Comparatively, the presence of coffee in her pictures is negligible (12.8%). Additionally, there is often a reference to the national (18%) or local (44%) origin of the product. Most importantly, a political element is present in a significant portion (28%) of Meloni's portraits. Connectedly, almost half of the pictures contain an implicit or explicit reference to the Italian People. Nonetheless, most images still show an element of reference to the locality of the gastronomic product. In other words, Meloni's often refers to the local origin of a product and makes appeals to her ethno-nationalist community in the same post.

5.1 Salvini: the ordinariness of Made in Italy



Image 1 (Source, Instagram: @matteosalviniofficial)

Image 1 is a clear example of the capitalization performed especially by Salvini of the symbolic element of Espresso, a coffee-brewing of Italian origin that has strong ties with Italian history and identity (Morris, 2010). In the picture, the leader poses as he shows an Espresso (plastic) cup to his audience. This symbolical offering is strengthened by Salvini's eyes directed towards the camera, as if he was looking directly at his followers. In the caption, Salvini addresses his audience informally, calling his followers friends and informing them he will attend to a radio broadcasting that same day.

Additionally, the picture shows Salvini wearing a t-shirt with the writing "Itali'amo", a made up word that works as a pun to communicate the politician's love for Italy and at the same time stating his belonging to the Italian population as an individual. This is a crucial element for my

analysis for two interconnected reasons. The first is that Salvini is making here a visual reference to coffee as a national symbol. From a compositional point of view this reference is powerfully exposed: the colourful writing on the black background of the rest of the clothing item, together with its positioning at the centre of the framed space and right next to the coffee cup, brings the viewer to put these elements in relation with one another. The second is that this image shows on one hand the power of visual statements, and on the other how often these references tend to be purely cosmetic and of little relevance for the political debate. Resultingly, this image ends up being more a statement of Salvini's adherence to everyday Italian customs.



Image 2 (Source, Instagram: @matteosalviniofficial)

Image 2 in an example of how Salvini exploits Italian local gastronomic products to fuel his political agenda. In the picture, the leader holds a panettone, a traditional Italian cake generally consumed during Christmas (the post was published on Christmas eve). He figuratively offers the panettone to his viewers, as he looks towards the camera. Salvini's smile and the bright, warm light present in the photograph stress the goodwill of his symbolic offering. In the background, there are two references to Salvini's socio-political values and to the conservative agenda of his party. In this case, the stance is substantiated by a crucifix, a Catholic holy card, and a photo of Salvini with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Looking at the caption, we can see that the symbolic offering is connected to a real one. First, Salvini opens his caption with an informal greeting to his followers. The senator calls them friends, wishing them a merry Christmas. Then, Salvini explains that the cake was a gift from an Italian pastry chef, specifying his native region. Subsequently, Salvini frames the explanation within his political narrative, explaining that he will donate this panettone to agents of the Penitentiary Police.

This gesture, if analysed out-of-context may seem more a message of institutional solidarity than one with an underlying right-wing agenda. However, this post was published by Salvini on Christmas of 2020, as the Penitentiary Police was under public scrutiny due to

past events (Zamperini *et al.*, 2017) and rumours of more recent mistreatments of inmates during the Covid-19 pandemic³. This is in conformity with the defence of traditional values and patriotism that is proper of Salvini's agenda. Most importantly, this post is an example of Salvini's attempts to mix his self-presentation as an ordinary Italian citizen, who values local gastronomies, with the extraordinary elements of his life related to his high-visibility as a national party leader.

5.2 Giorgia Meloni: establishing a nationalised gastronomic place-brand



Image 3 (Source, Instagram: @giorgiameloni)

Image 3 shows how much the border between gastro-populism and gastronomic place branding can blur. In this image, Meloni shows a local product: the red kiwi from Agro Pontino, a valley to the south of Rome. In the portrait, the fruit is the main represented object, as it occupies the centre of the framed space and is held by the leader in her hands. In the background we can observe an Italian national flag, strengthening the connection between the national dimension of Meloni's political role and the local gastronomic product she is showing. A key role in this case is played by the caption which frames the visuals in a precise narrative. After an introduction on the origin of the product and its importance in the Italian economy, Meloni made a plea to the government to support the red kiwi producers due to their importance for the local and national economy and identity. Hence, in this post Meloni advocates for the protection of a local Italian product, stressing its importance for Italy as she defines its production as part of an "Italian excellence". The leader frames this Italian fruit as a resource

³ For further information see: La Rivolta Delle Carceri a Marzo, Chi c'era Dietro i Disordini. Ansa.It, May 8, 2020. www.ansa.it/canale_legalita_scuola/notizie/2020/05/08/la-rivolta-delle-carceri-a-marzo-chi-cera-dietro-i-disordini_9b-c30fe7-c189-4e82-b567-ad422a00719d.html; Giuffrida, A. (2021, July 1). Italian prisons under fire as video footage shows guards beating inmates. The Guardian. July 7, 2021. www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/01/italian-prisons-under-fire-as-video-footage-shows-guards-beating-inmates.

that is under threat, which the public should prioritise. This is part of a populist trope that is more explicitly expressed in Image 4. Still, Image 3 is an example of Meloni's exploitation of the strong ties between local cuisines and identity in Italy, giving substance to her ethnically defined People.



Image 4 (Source, Instagram: @giorgiameloni)

Image 4 depicts Giorgia Meloni as she shows to the camera a bunch of grapes. Similarly to the other examples, in this picture the leader is making a metaphorical offering of fresh fruit to her followers. Moreover, Meloni's smile and the light colours in the image strengthen the positive feeling connected to this symbolic offering. The caption adds a reference to the territorial origin of the grapes, as Meloni writes that it comes from a city in Sicily. Then, Meloni closes the caption with an appeal to her followers to buy "Made in Italy", specifying that she means local and Italian products.

This is an example of how the localisation of gastronomy and the national dimension connected to the broader category of "Made in Italy" food, including both local, unique products and nationally produced, globally exported products, are mixed by both Meloni and Salvini to fuel the nationalist element of their agenda. These are posts advocating for a peculiar *glocal* identity already pushed by Salvini in local elections (Mazzoni *et al.*, 2020). Here, the locality of food is used to strengthen the nationalistic claim, bringing forward the idea of a national identity as composed by a variety of local communities. In other words, both local and national gastronomy are used by Meloni as a tool to strengthen her definition of the Italian People and to mark her belonging to this group. This mechanism is reinforced by the depiction of Made in Italy as something that is under threat and needs to be defended from an unidentified enemy in the caption. This abstract oppositional element and Meloni's appeal to defend Made in Italy further foster the idea of gastronomic products as strictly connected to her ethnic definition of national identity.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the analysis above, I argue that Meloni's and Salvini's consistent usage of gastro-nomic products to fuel their populist narratives inherently politicises food as an identarian element connected to the traditional values typical of populist, right-wing parties. Moreover, it is important to stress that the two leaders compose their gastropopulist pictures differently.

Looking at Salvini, his connection with local gastronomies tends to be rather loose, rooted in some key elements that underpin the politician's public persona. The leader uses food more as a tool to appear relatable in front of his constituency, stressing his belonging to the People by showing that he consumes the same Italian products that most Italians consume. This ordinari-ness has already been observed by other scholars to be a key characteristic of Salvini's public persona (Mazzoni, Mincigrucci, 2021; Terracciano, 2019). These elements are part of an *aesthetic of ordinari-ness*: a visual narrative where the represented subjects other than the high-visibility character mainly contribute to fuel a narrative centred around their seemingly ordinary life. In Salvini's case, this aesthetic is composed by images of ordinary and iconic Italian foods. Their consumption and the social rituals connected to them contribute to associate this idea of ordinari-ness, that many Italians can relate with, with his conceptualisation of what "true" Italians look like.

This *aesthetic of ordinari-ness* may not influence the ties between iconic products like coffee or Panettone and the Italian national identity. Nonetheless, place branding actors may have to confront themselves with Salvini's aesthetics given the strong ties of some gastronomic products with local and national identities in Italy. Moreover, Salvini's gastro-populism fuels his self-pre-sentation as one of the People. Place branding actors mimicking such a personal narrative, may be incorrectly reconnected by viewers to that ethnically-defined community, alienating those not adhering to the conservative values attributed to these concepts. Thus, place branding actors seeking to distance themselves from a politicised narrative of gastronomy should tell stories that defy the rules of this *aesthetic of ordinari-ness*, or exploit them to provide a substantially dif-ferent narrative. For example, if place branding actors seek to tell the personal history of a food producer, they should frame it as the narrative of a professional in the sector, ensuring that the personalization does not build the apparent intimacy of Salvini's posts. Focusing on the aesthetic element, place branding actors should make an active effort to systematise the production of visuals connected to gastronomies. For example, they could alternate shows of ordinari-ness with the depiction of the extraordinary, coordinated efforts required for many food productions, in terms of labour and resources. Another element of extraordinari-ness could be channelled depicting big public events connected to the economics of gastronomies and to their consumption (e.g. fairs, international expositions, community gatherings). Moreover, with a high standard in terms of visual production, place branding actors can distance themselves from the amateurism and apparent spontaneity proper of the analysed gastropopulist pictures.

Differently, Meloni's gastro-populism is more often connected to political messages. More pre-cisely, the leader uses gastronomy to substantiate her representation of the producers and con-sumers of these products as part of a monolithic, ethnically defined national community. Al-most half of Meloni's gastropopulist pictures stress her definition of the People. Meloni's mix of gastropopulist pictures with calls to the People to defend their gastronomy substantiate in the captions. In the text, the leader mentions the geographical origin of these foods, followed by a connection to her nationalist stances or agenda. In other words, Meloni fuels her definition of the People exploiting the identarian elements of these foods. The consistent presence of these key elements shows how Meloni builds narratives that are localised, and framed within the rhet-oric of a monolithic national community that these local identities are inherently part of.

Crucially, the captions of Images 3 and 4 present a narrative focused on two local Italian prod-ucts. In these images, the politician associates the made in Italy brand with a public concern for the economic situation of the country. In other words, Meloni reframes made in Italy and local

gastronomies within what Moffitt (2016) defined as the performance of a crisis, that populist leaders undertake to strengthen their positioning as true defenders of the People. Arguably, Meloni's performance of crisis cannot be ignored by actors aiming to exploit the identarian element tied to local gastronomies. Specifically, it puts all actors involved in gastronomic place branding processes in front of a potential public perception of their communities as in a general state of emergency. Moreover, Meloni's gastropopulism may influence the public perception of food as a "community builder" symbol in ways that are tied to its potential use as tool for place branding policies. The framing of Made in Italy as something that needs to be actively defended by the People as performed by Meloni is another key element. For example, place branding actors that want to project a different image of their Made in Italy product will need to stress the consolidated role of their product on the market. Another example is the possibility of providing data on the importance of a determined gastronomic product for the local economy. In a nutshell, place branding actors can focus on constructing and fostering narratives that focus on the positive impact of food related practices on local and national economics. This strategy should not be hard to implement, given the centrality of the agricultural industry in the Italian economy (Farinella and Moiso, 2021)

In conclusion, this article provides indicators that the political phenomenon of gastropopulism has much to say about gastronomic place branding. Most importantly, high-visibility characters in general can play an influential role in shaping the public perception of local (and national) identity and of the symbols attributed to elements that can also play a key role in the establishment of place-brands. The methodology and case-study provided want to build bridges between two apparently disconnected disciplines, that share a need to disentangle the relation between food and identity. Nonetheless, there are inherent limits to the approach of this article to the covered topic. First of all, the study of only two right-wing, populist politicians does not provide insights on the relation between populism as a broader phenomenon and gastronomy. Moreover, the focus on Italian gastropopulism does not allow broader theoretical reflections on the origins of the phenomenon, and how it may impact place branding actors in other countries. Hence, I invite future researchers tackling topics tangent to that of this article to engage with the provided framework, and to build upon it by addressing these limitations.

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Appendix

Category	Definitions			
<i>Food type</i>	<p>Fresh Products I identified as fresh products the following foods, unless there was a clear reference to their frozenness: vegetables, meat, fish, milk, milk-derived products, fresh pasta, pizza</p>	<p>Beverages Any type of drink</p>	<p>Desserts Any type of sweet, solid food</p>	<p>Other All foods not included in the previous categories</p>
<i>Geographical reference of the product</i>	<p>National A reference to the Italian origin of the product</p>	<p>Local A reference to the specific region, city, or geographical area of the product</p>		<p>Local & National Applied when both categories are relevant for one picture</p>
<i>Method of reference</i>	<p>Textual Used when the geographical reference was present only in text form, even if the text is part of the image</p>	<p>Visual Used when the geographic reference was codified in the visuals of the image, without textual references</p>		<p>Textual & Visual Used when both previous categories applied</p>
<i>Narrative</i>	<p>Personal The picture and attached textual messages tell a story focused on the politician's ordinary life or to their private sphere</p>		<p>Politicised The narrative constructed in the image is strictly connected to the politician's profession, to their political stances or to their party's agenda</p>	
<i>Right-wing component</i>	<p>Defining Us Any reference to the constituents the leader appeals to; any reference to their definition of the People; any appeals to their followers/constituents</p>		<p>Opposing Them Any reference to the opposition of the leader to a certain category, political class or social group</p>	<p>Absent No reference to populist or nationalist stances or policies</p>
<i>Role of food in the picture</i>	<p>Central The gastronomic product is central in the image produced and/or in the text attached. Without the food the photo would have a significantly different meaning or would be deprived of its significance</p>		<p>Cosmetic The presence of the food in the photo is only accessory, and when participates to the visually codified messages, it does not so in a crucial way</p>	

Appendix 1 – Codebook guidelines