

Picture That: Canada's 2015 Federal Campaign Through Instagram Images

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Social media is changing the landscape of elections. It opens a new sphere for politicians and political parties to connect with citizens. Now more than ever before we are seeing our political leaders turning to social networking sites in order to campaign and disseminate information, and the Canadian 2015 federal election was a prime example of this. All three major party leaders took to social media as a campaign tactic, but how these leaders make use of social media images has gone relatively unexamined. In this research study I ask what are the common theme(s) evident in all three major party leaders' Instagram feeds during the 2015 election campaign? And a sub-question derived from this asks: what sorts of latent campaign tactics are suggested by these themes? In order to answer these questions I use a mixed-method approach, both a visual content analysis and discourse analysis are employed using a small sample extrapolated from Instagram. In summation, two major themes are apparent in all three leaders' Instagram pages: The Crowd Pleaser and The Family Man, both of which have underlining political agendas.

Introduction

Social media transcends all spheres of society: it is public, political, and personal. With its increasing popularity, there is no end in sight as to how ubiquitous and pervasive this medium of communication will become. Instead of consuming current events through evening broadcasts and morning newspaper deliveries, civil society is shifting to Internet news sources, including Twitter and Facebook trends. It is no surprise, then, that political campaigns have taken to social media more than ever before to raise support. This recent phenomenon has changed how we consume current political information and as a repercussion it has morphed the way politicians campaign. This shift towards social media campaigning has become quite apparent in the 2015 Canadian federal election, with all three of the main party leaders taking to Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter on a daily basis.

In particular, politicians are using more social media images to campaign than was the case previous elections. Perhaps due to how easily viewers absorb and interpret images, this trend is on the rise. Now that all the party leaders are on Instagram and Twitter, what themes are being conveyed in the images they express on social media outlets? Are these similar themes? And finally do these images reveal any underlining tactics? My official research question asks: what are the common theme(s) evident in all three

major party leaders' Instagram feeds during the 2015 election campaign? And a sub-question derived from this asks: what sorts of latent campaign tactics are suggested by these themes? In order to answer this question I will first review the relevant literature, followed by a description of my methodology, and subsequently report my results from my research.

Literature Review

There has been a growing body of literature on politicians social media use during and between elections, yet there remains a gap in the scholarship on how the strategic use of social media images frames and brands politicians. In general, the literature on political parties/officials social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) use has remained separate from the literature addressing strategic dissemination of visuals by political officials, (Marland, 2012: 217). Instagram is a new and rapid growing social networking service that allows users to share images and short videos, (Lee et al., 2015: 552). Launched in 2012, Instagram is still in its infancy (even with over 200 million users) and therefore has gone relatively unexamined; indeed, it is not formally recognized as a social media site in most of my literature. However, I am operationalizing Instagram as a social media site, as it was adopted by all three major leaders in the 2015 election and updated daily during the campaign. In this literature review I aim to achieve three outcomes: first, examine the importance of images in campaigns and how they are used to frame leaders; followed by a discussion of how politicians use social media, and finally I will operationalize the three major party leaders.

Images

Why are images important for campaigns? It is a simplistic question, in a sense, because we all have an understanding of the power and persuasion of images. Nevertheless, images appear to have a much stronger pull on voters than that of traditional candidate posters or radio ads— as one Tory noted, “visuals trump words,” (Marland, 2012: 222). When examining campaign images of party leaders it is important to understand the power that these images have, how they resonate with viewers, and how this impacts votes. There perhaps is no better Canadian example demonstrating the power of images in a campaign than that of Robert Stanfield attempting to catch a football. In 1974 while on the federal campaign trail Stanfield partook in an unprompted game of catch, and he was photographed letting the ball awkwardly slip through his hands while knock-kneed and grimacing (Cheadle, 2008). Multiple national newspapers published the photo on their front cover with the large headline “Political Fumble?” and unfortunately for Stanfield this would become an iconic photo and the defining image of his political career (Cheadle, 2008). He lost the election to incumbent Pierre Trudeau, the young and “vital” Prime Minister who was already changing the image game through the use of televised commercials, (Flanagan, 2014: 102). Images have an incredible currency with the public and have the ability to make, or, in Stanfield’s case, break a campaign.

Through the use of visuals, politicians tend to generate personality traits such as being relatable, intelligent, reliable, trustworthy, and competent— all qualities that voters consider important in leaders, (Hoegg, Joandrea, and Lewis, 2011: 896). Studies have shown that attractiveness and perceived competence (inferred through the visual) will have an effect on candidates’ success at the polls, (Praino et al., 2014; Antonakis and Dalgas, 2009). These studies reinforce the notion that “image matters” during a

campaign; therefore, a logical conclusion is that voters do not vote for a candidate based solely on pragmatism. This helps solidified the concept that appearance, and hence photos of politicians, matter greatly in elections because they have a subtle influence on voters conceptions of competence and leadership.

It should be noted that the concept of appearance equating to competence (furthermore leadership) disproportionately affects certain bodies more than others. Gender, sexuality, and race have substantial power in constructing political authority. A Caucasian, male, heterosexual body is “the prototypical body of the political leader,” (Trimble et al., 2015: 324). This has implications for my research, as all three party leaders in my study are the “prototypical body” of political authority, it could be expected that each candidate might reinforce this hegemonic narrative through the use of their visuals. Masculinity plays an important role in images, it has the ability to persuade voters of competence (Praino et al., 2014: 1100) and this is a tactic that citizens see repeatedly through images of politicians engaging in sports, labour (such as construction and handy-man work), and also ‘paternal’ photos help to reinforce this hegemonic masculine narrative of leadership.

Social Media

Social media allows for politicians to negotiate an identity that may differ, or even counter, what mainstream media and journalists have created. This provides an arena of agency for political figures to create their own image— unmediated, (Svensson, 2012:183). Svensson (2012) observes through his research that social media use during campaigns is less about engaging with citizens and more about “image-management,” (186). In particular, Svensson found that social media was used strategically to create an image of both “competent politician and person,” (189). Social media opens the door for the personalization of political figures, a peek into the private sphere that can be used to counter mainstream media narratives, (Carlson, Djupsund and Strandberg, 2013: 22). Constructing this “personal touch” for party leaders is not a new campaign tactic; previously television ads were used in Canada to “rub the sharp edges off [Harper’s] personality” and create a softer, safer, and perhaps more of a paternal image of him, (Flanagan, 2014: 133). But with modern election campaigns incorporating social media this personalization can come “from the leader” rather than a political ad— helping to dismantle the barrier of ‘politician’ and ‘citizen,’ (Coleman and Moss, 2008). In addition to breaking this barrier, social media allows governments to reach large and diverse civil populations much quicker and even in real time, (Kavanaugh, 2012: 484). Taken together, these scholarly works help to outline *why* politicians are incorporating social media into their campaign tactics; however, it still highly contested whether or not social media is an effective campaign tactic or rather just a means of showing that politicians are “up-to-date,” (Ross, 2015).

When discussing the effectiveness of social media campaigning, Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign is the magnum opus. Obama’s campaign was the first of its kind to mobilize popular social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube) in order to spread his political platform in combination with citizen engagement (Hanson et al., 2010: 585). As Hanson et al. (2010) outlines, Obama used these forms of social media to “provide a new form of mediated communication that [gave] the audience access to on-demand content and the ability to share and discuss it with others,” (585). These are some of the key components to social media campaigning: the ability to produce content faster, direct communication to

citizens' computers and phones, and finally it allows citizens to spread and converse on the content. Obama's campaign changed the way that politicians use social media, what was once a supplementary medium of communication has now become an obligatory campaign tool, (Flanagan, 2014: 133). This literature helps support the rationale behind why leaders are using more social media than ever before, and even helps shed light on some of the ways in which it is used to frame or construct an image of a politician.

Party Leaders

For this project I have narrowed my research to Canada's three main party leaders: Justin Trudeau of the Liberal Party, Thomas Mulcair of the New Democratic Party (NDP), and Stephen Harper of the Conservative Party. Each party leader had an active presence on social media during the 2015 election campaign, a trend that spoke to the modern ubiquity of social media in politics. While this study is based on the three main party leaders, I am not giving any attention to their personality, platform, or political ideology in this literature review because I am primarily concerned with imagery themes and meaning of such in campaigns, not political standings.

Hypothesis

Based on of the above scholarly literature I predict that the leaders' Instagram feeds during the elections will fall into certain thematic categories, predominately personalization and masculinity. Reflecting work that addresses social media use by politicians, I would expect to see all three using personalization through family images or photos that peek into the private sphere such as home shots or what they had for dinner. These are the types of photos that mainstream media do not have access to; therefore, social media provides an arena of agency for personal photos. Another theme that I anticipate is an undertone or blatant image of masculinity. All three leaders fit the archetypal body of a leader, so I would expect each one to use this narrative in reinforcing their competence through masculinity. Such photos may include sports, construction, and outdoor activities.

Methodology

My research question is exploratory and aims to discover certain trends; therefore, I have chosen a nonprobability sampling method because a) it allows me to code and analyze a manageable amount of images and b) my sample size is small to begin with. I have set qualifications for my data in order to ensure that my results are answering my research question(s). First, all my data was extrapolated from Instagram on October 11th, exactly eight days prior to the election, and I collected the 15 most recent images from each leader's account. I chose Instagram because it is an image-only social media site that has gone relatively unexamined; therefore there is a literature gap in analyzing how these social media photos are being used in campaigns. So close to the election, these particular photos are important because they are the images that each leader has strategically chosen to use as a tactic to help with their campaign. Another qualification I have added is that the image must either be a landscape shot or have a human in the frame; therefore, it cannot be a 'text picture,' because my research is primarily focused on images and not text.

I am using a mixed-method approach, a visual content analysis in order to answer my main research question research about manifest content and a discourse analysis to answer my subsequent question regarding latent content. Content is defined as “any message that can be communicated, including words, meaning, symbols, or themes,” and by applying a content analysis technique I will be able to better organize the images based on thematic content, (Archer & Berdahl, 2011: 371). My imagery /discourse analysis is guided by the methodology of Marcus Banks, who described researching visual images as moving beyond just the superficial level and examining more of the latent content of the image based off of cultural and historical context, (Banks, 2001: 15). I examined the ‘latent campaign tactics’ as defined by some of the major concepts that emerged from my literature review such as personalization and masculinity. Guided by Banks qualitative approach to visual analysis, once I had organized the images thematically I asked what narratives are being communicated through these pictures? What are some of the greater implications of these photos? This qualitative approach will allow me to best answer my second question.

Results

There were major motifs present throughout all three party leaders’ Instagram feeds that paralleled portions of my hypothesis. Within my sample, there were two evident thematic categories that transcend Harper, Mulcair, and Trudeau’s Instagram posts; I referred to them as the ‘Crowd Pleaser’ and ‘Family Man.’

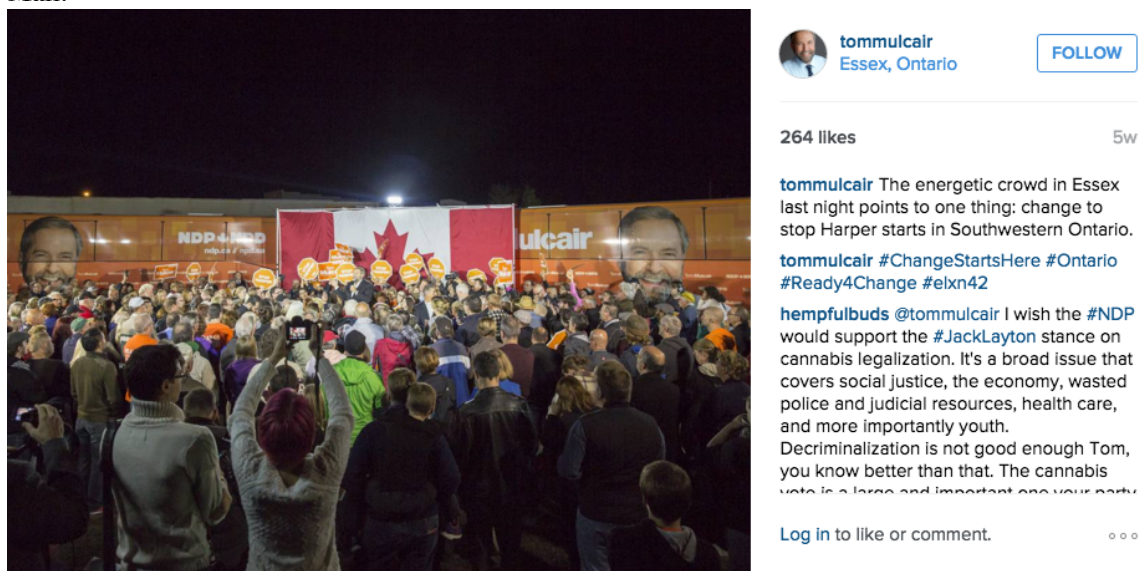


Image 1.a: Crowd Pleaser: Mulcair

The Crowd Pleaser was a very common image within my sample, accounting for roughly 20% of each leaders’ Instagram feed. The Crowd Pleaser image is characterized by the party leader standing amidst a crowd of enthusiastic supporters, usually the leader is depicting speaking passionately or just smiling, surrounded by a sea of party colors.

I use image 1.a as an example of Mulcair as The Crowd Pleaser, encircled by supporter and orange, the official NDP color. The crowd is never stagnant in these shots, they are always riled up and galvanized while watching the leader, and I would argue that these images are a latent tactic used to instill

a sense of trust, credibility, and authority in the leader. Though it should be noted that not all Crowd Pleaser shots clearly depict the leader, as seen in image 1.b below; however, it is implied that Trudeau is there in the distance, lost in sea of supporters.

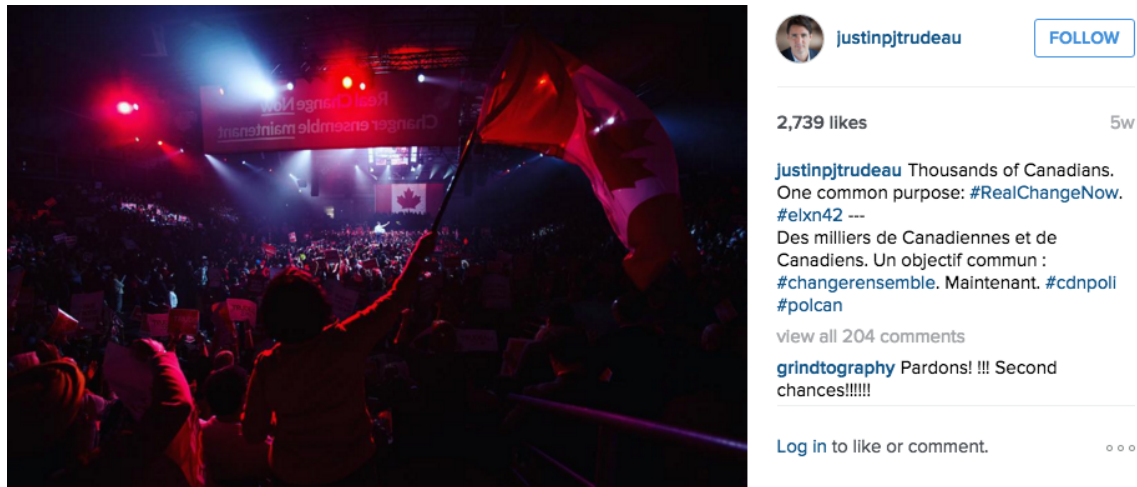


Image 1.b Crowd Pleaser: Trudeau

This theme initially contradicted my hypothesis that the leaders would use social media to break the barrier between politician and citizen, creating a sense of personalization seen in the Family Man motif. However, the Crowd Pleaser is akin to the literature on how appearance is used to convey competence (Praino et al., 2014). This becomes an alarming trend of images due to recent articles documenting the pervasiveness of “crowd-renting,” (Schneider, 2015). Recently *The Atlantic* did an article on how politicians are using companies like Rent-A-Crowd to pad their rallies with bodies, creating the perception of a large group of supporters, (Schneider, 2015). The act of renting supporters or even staging a group of people to cheer for a photo has an undertone of propaganda to it, and at the least should raise questions about the ethics of these synthetic photo ops and media releases. Marland (2012) expands upon crowd manipulation for the use of a visual and posits that they are “so devoid of any substance that their newsworthiness is open to interpretation,” (215). The carefully orchestrated Crowd Pleaser photos of Harper, Mulcair, and Trudeau are used to create a sense of legitimacy for each leader through visual solidarity (Mayo, 1978). But given the manipulation of these images it raised questions in my own research about the ethical nature of the Crowd Pleaser. What does this type of image mean for the democratic principle of popular sovereignty? Are these photos ethical? Does the virtue of the photo change because a partisan group disseminates it? And how, as citizens, can we begin to develop a critical vocabulary for assessing these staged social media images?



Image 1.c Crowd Pleaser Harper



Given my literature review, the Family Man was a predictable trope. This image occurred repeatedly in all three leaders' Instagram pages and illustrated both the concept of personalization and masculinity. I categorized this image as any photo where the party leader was seen with young kids, whether familial or not. These types of images also made up about 20% of my sample, most frequently occurring in Harper and Trudeau's feeds. When an image depicts the leader and their family, such as image 2.a of Trudeau, it reinforced the argument by Coleman and Moss (2008) who suggests social media is used to break the barrier between politician and citizen. Instagram allows the leaders to create this personalization through a mediated medium, exposing a private side to the public.



Image 2.a Family Man Trudeau



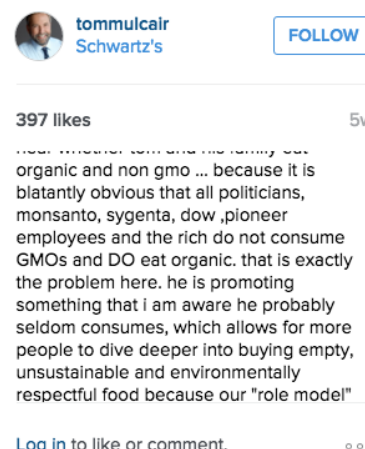
The Family Man theme also plays heavily into the concept of masculinity, and I would argue that it supports the work of Trimble et al. (2015) and the role of hetero-normative masculinity in campaigns. When the Family Man image occurs with a party leader and a child that is non-familial there is an undertone of paternalism. An example of this is image 2.b below, depicting Harper as the Family Man, and sitting down with a young girl while they both smile. Though there were no examples within my sample, the “kissing baby” photo is another common imagery theme during campaigns that ascribes to the paternalism of the Family Man. This form of masculinity is much more nuanced than the overt displays that I was expecting such as sports or handy-man photos, and instead is a sublet protectionist model of masculinity. Iris Young (2003) outlines the protectionist model of masculinity as one of virtue, chivalry, and fatherhood. By having this repetitive image of each leader with a baby, a toddler, and even pregnant women, I would argue that they are constructing the protectionist narrative that Young outlined, illustrating themselves as the indeed “father” of the nation. There is space for a much greater and in-depth analysis of gender and the Family Man theme during campaigns, one that is intersectional in scope and addresses the gendered implications of this imagery theme. Possible questions for further research should analyze how female politicians could cultivate this image, and if that is desirable? How are women portrayed, through visuals, as protectors of the nation? And finally, if these paternal photos are masculine, does that make them bad?



Image 2.b Family Man: Harper



Image 2.c Family Man: Mulcair



Even though these two themes flowed through all three leaders' feeds, each had motifs specific to their own Instagram. For example, Harper clearly had a 'Laureen' theme where his wife appeared in 40% of his sample photos. Mulcair had a distinct 'Youth' theme where images of youth in NDP clothing or bearing NDP signs were photographed on their own. And finally Trudeau, taking a page from his father's book had a clear motif of 'Nature' and the Canadian land, often appearing active in images, further highlighting his vitality. All three of these themes deserve a more critical analysis, employing the method that Banks (2001) described as taking both a cultural and historical lens to the photo.

Conclusion

This study has answered my research question, providing me with two evident themes that transcend all three leaders' social media images. Throughout this paper it has become apparent that social media is used by politicians to cultivate a disparate image. This mostly occurs through portraying a sense of competence and equally personalization. However, when all three leaders are portraying the same 'disparate' image, it conflates the originality and personalization of their Instagram pages. Masculinity and protectionist models also underpinned numerous images during campaigns, and this is a section of my results that requires greater gendered analysis in the future.

They saying goes 'an image is worth a thousand words,' but when it comes to staged images of politicians I think the saying should change to 'a thousand sources.' There is so much more that could be analyzed and discussed with each of the 45 images I mined. That said, I believe that having a larger n study would only add to the validity of these reoccurring themes I discovered. Social media image analysis is an under-researched field that requires more attention, especially given the potency and power of a single image. For now, we need to yield caution when consuming multiple images on a daily basis of our political elites and begin asking questions about authenticity, gender, and purpose.

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