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The public image of the far right in social media: a qualitative analysis of the portrayal of a Bolsonarist parliamentarian on Instagram

A imagem pública da extrema direita nas mídias sociais: uma análise qualitativa da representação de um parlamentar bolsonarista no Instagram

La imagen pública de la extrema derecha en las redes sociales: un análisis cualitativo de la representación de un parlamentario bolsonarista en Instagram

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ABSTRACT | This text examines the representation of Brazilian parliamentarian Abílio Brunini in his communication on Instagram by identifying the attributes he mobilized during the 2022 electoral campaign. Brunini, one of the main supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro, elected by the state of Mato Grosso, is one of the most controversial figures of the Brazilian far-right. We conducted a qualitative study of the posts with the highest engagement on the candidate's Instagram profile over 11 weeks of the campaign. The theoretical discussion connects the concept of representation with the notion of public image from political communication studies. It also addresses the characteristics of right-wing populist communication and its relationship with digital platforms. The analysis shows that Brunini used the network to project attributes that reinforce three dimensions of bolsonarism: anti-politics, attacks on the left, and Christian conservatism. The methodological proposal has important implications for studies on the representation of the public image of political figures.

KEYWORDS: attributes; public image; populist communication; far-right; Brazil.

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RESUMO | *Neste texto, investigamos a representação do parlamentar brasileiro Abilio Brunini na sua comunicação no Instagram por meio da identificação dos atributos mobilizados por ele durante a campanha eleitoral de 2022. Um dos principais partidários do ex-presidente Jair Bolsonaro, eleito pelo estado de Mato Grosso, Brunini é uma das figuras mais polêmicas da extrema direita. Conduzimos um estudo qualitativo das postagens com maior engajamento no perfil do candidato ao longo de 11 semanas de campanha. A discussão teórica aproxima o conceito de representação com a noção de imagem pública dos estudos de comunicação política. Além disso, discutem-se as características da comunicação populista da direita e a sua relação com as plataformas digitais. A análise mostra que Brunini utilizou a rede para projetar atributos que reforçam três dimensões do bolsonarismo: antipolítica, ataque às esquerdas e conservadorismo cristão. A proposta metodológica tem implicações importantes para estudos sobre a representação da imagem pública de figuras políticas.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *atributos; imagem pública; comunicação populista; extrema direita; Brasil.*

RESUMEN | Este texto analiza la representación del parlamentario brasileño Abilio Brunini en su comunicación en Instagram mediante la identificación de los atributos movilizados por él durante la campaña electoral de 2022. Brunini, uno de los principales seguidores del expresidente Jair Bolsonaro, elegido por el estado de Mato Grosso, es una de las figuras más polémicas de la extrema derecha brasileña. Realizamos un estudio cualitativo de las publicaciones con mayor participación en su perfil de Instagram durante 11 semanas de campaña. La discusión teórica vincula el concepto de representación con la noción de imagen pública en los estudios de comunicación política. Asimismo, se discuten las características de la comunicación populista de la derecha y su relación con las plataformas digitales. El análisis muestra que Brunini utilizó la red para proyectar atributos que refuerzan tres dimensiones del bolsonarismo: antipolítica, ataque a las izquierdas y conservadurismo cristiano. La propuesta metodológica tiene importantes implicancias para estudios sobre la representación de la imagen pública de figuras políticas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: atributos; imagen pública; comunicación populista; extrema derecha; Brasil.

INTRODUCTION

Populist discourse is closely linked to the affordances of social media platforms (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2017; De Vreese et al., 2018). Far-right populist communication uses moral frames to address cultural issues such as customs and other topics that the public is dissatisfied with by exploiting collective fears and radical binarisms that label others as dangerous enemies (Hameleers, 2024).

The literature shows that social media has a direct influence on current political processes. However, in contrast to their emancipatory aspect, history has shown that they play a key role in the de-democratization of several countries, including Brazil. The rise of the far right in many parts of the world and its normalization in political systems (Mudde, 2019) is partly due to the ease with which extremist messages circulate online, contributing to further radicalization in elections and even in public health crises, as we have recently seen with the COVID-19 pandemic. Far-right extremism is not only a localized phenomenon, but it has gained momentum in several democracies at the beginning of this century by using digital platforms to spread its messages (Forti, 2023).

Studies that discuss the relationship between platforms and violent and extremist discourses focus on the social, political, and cultural factors that influence this type of relationship and how the logic of platforms makes these types of discourses more visible (Gerbaudo, 2018; Recuero, 2024). Other studies analyze the strategies used by radical actors to address specific issues and mobilize followers in digital spaces (De Vreese et al., 2018), or address analyzes of the appropriation of extremist messages in online groups (Schulze et al., 2022; Piaia & Alves, 2020). However, attempts to understand how and in what ways the discourse of these far-right actors in social media shapes the public image of this segment among voters are still tentative.

Thus, this study explores how the public image of far-right politicians is built by identifying some of the key attributes they use to portray themselves on digital platforms. We conducted an empirical study on digital communication, more specifically on the Instagram account of one of the main supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro, federal deputy Abílio Brunini of the Liberal Party (PL). Brunini was elected in 2022 from the state of Mato Grosso in the Midwest of Brazil, where support for Bolsonaro was very high. He was elected to one of the state's eight seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Seven of the candidates elected in the state of Mato Grosso associated their image with that of the former president, while five others, including Brunini, ran campaigns strongly aligned with Bolsonaro's agenda (Araújo et al., 2024).

Brunini gained notoriety in the political scene in Mato Grosso when he was elected as a councilor. His mandate was revoked for a breach of order, but the process was reversed by the court on formal grounds ("Justiça determina...", 2020). He was involved in several controversies in the National Congress that attracted media attention and were deliberately edited for social media.

Our qualitative empirical analysis focuses on the 33 posts with the highest engagement on Brunini's Instagram profile (@abiliobrunini, 286 thousand followers) during the 2022 election campaign. Our research questions are:

1. What attributes did Abílio Brunini use in his electoral communication on Instagram during his 2022 campaign for the Chamber of Deputies?
2. What types of Brazilian far-right discourse (Bolsonarism) did Brunini use in his digital communication?

The answers to these questions help us to understand the way Brunini presented himself during his successful electoral campaign. In addition to the introduction, this article is divided into four sections. We will discuss Goffman's concept of representation and relate it to the notion of public image. We will then look at the characteristics of populist communication and their relationship to digital platforms, before presenting the method and analysis and discussing the data. Finally, we will present the concluding reflections that systematize our research findings.

Representation, attributes, and construction of the public image

To understand the construction of attributes associated with the public image of political actors, we take our cue from Goffman (2013), for whom representation is "uma espécie de imagem, geralmente digna de crédito, que o indivíduo em palco e como personagem efetivamente tenta induzir os outros a terem a seu respeito" (p. 271). Although it seems that Goffman views each stage as nothing more than a personal strategy, he does not lose sight of the relational nature of this process. He believes in the existence of an operative consensus between the actors and the audience so that the staged show is not affected by possible disbelief. When the individual plays a role, he or she asks his interlocutors to "acreditarem que o personagem que veem no momento possui os atributos que aparenta possuir" (Goffman, 2013, p. 25). In this sense, actors and audiences work together on a collective construction with demands and concessions.

In this paper, we consider attributes in political communication as mechanisms to reinforce themes and views of far-right Bolsonaro supporters. However, it is important to point out, following Goffman (2013), that this process of constructing representation — in which attributes converge — is a complex negotiation game with potential voters who may or may not accept the proposed image as valid.

It is important to note that representation consists of several elements, primarily physical representation and discourse, both of which are interwoven through interactions with other intermediaries. Thus, the actions and discourse that politicians use to build their image are also based on the discourse on certain topics in other areas of society, such as the traditional media, religion, political parties or opinion makers. Together, these areas form a discursive network from which the attributes emerge and to which they return in a constant symbolic co-construction between actor and audience. In this regard, the extreme right takes up issues such as corruption, security and order, which follow the discursive formations of media agendas. Guazina and colleagues (2023), e.g., argue that the media played an important role in the construction of anti-Worker's Party rhetoric and the discursive forms of Bolsonarism.

In line with Rennó (2022), we understand Bolsonarism as a heterogeneous and complex right-wing orientation that unites different segments of the right and the extreme right. Led by Jair Bolsonaro, this movement is composed of neoliberals, military police, armamentists, supporters of Operation Car Wash who want to criminalize politics, and religious fundamentalists who seek to impose their moral beliefs on public policy. These groups promote a radical discourse against the PT and the left, while at the same time fueling anti-PT sentiment.

Referring to Goffman's (2013) theatrical metaphor about everyday interactions, he assumes the existence of tacit agreements between participants that are collectively activated and constructed in the course of interaction. In other words, acting means mobilizing attributes that are conducive to the interests of the actors and, in particular, to what they consider to be the interests of the public. The characteristics displayed by a social actor are therefore neither purely intentional nor occasional, but the result of what these actors believe in order to build a public image and fulfill the expectations of those with whom they interact.

In an election campaign, politicians try to anticipate the public's expectations and then play a role based on those expectations. This requires skill to make certain attributes visible while others remain hidden. The Goffmanian approach pays attention to the promissory property of communication processes, i.e., what is expected of the interlocutors in their symbolic exchange, without there being any guarantee of its realization.

In this sense, we understand that the attributes in Brunini's contributions are intentionally used to satisfy voters who mobilize for far-right agendas in a particular electoral context.

The relational perspective that runs through Goffman's (2013) thinking is also present in the concept of public image proposed by Gomes (2004). For Gomes, the public image is the result of information, ideas, and concepts shared by a community that are constantly being restructured. It is therefore not a fixed entity, but a changing one,subject to an ongoing game of control and enforcement. In the course of this negotiation, preferences are formed and the credibility of the actor is gained or lost. For this reason, visibility in the media plays an essential role in the formation of the image.

Weber (2004) goes in the same direction and emphasizes that public image is not one-dimensional, but rather an interactive phenomenon that emerges in a scenario of symbolic exchange. She argues that the media play a central role as protagonists and mediators in the dispute over meanings, acting as a filter that organizes, reinforces or reduces the visibility of political actors. Weber emphasizes that this is a performative construction, i.e., it depends on the ability of politicians to act strategically in the public sphere by using narratives, gestures and symbols to gain legitimacy and recognition. The public image is thus a negotiating space in which interests and meanings are articulated and contested between politicians, other entities, and the public.

Indeed, political figures build their public image and identify with voters in a symbolic game that takes place in a hybrid media system where traditional and digital logics intermingle (Chadwick, 2017). It is therefore important to discuss the relationship between the populist communication used by the far right to build their representation and digital platforms.

Populist communication and digital platforms

Politicians create self-identification attributes to build their public image and use populist communication strategies to disseminate them. In this context, Vreese and colleagues (2018) strongly emphasize that "the means of communication used to spread populist ideas are as central as the populist ideas themselves" (p. 3).

In this sense, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) highlight three characteristics of populist rhetoric: [i] the people as a sovereign power, [ii] the attack on elites (political, scientific, cultural or media), and [iii] the exclusion of others. Engesser and colleagues (2016) add that "populist communication manifests itself through the emphasis on the sovereignty of the people, the monopoly of their defense, the attack on elites, the exclusion of others, and the idea of an imagined homeland" (p. 1111). Populist communication is based on the classic opposition of us versus them and tends to manifest itself through emotional and sensationalist messages that exploit collective outrage or resort to mockery and comedy as a strategy to ridicule the opponent and emphasize the ethical and moral superiority of us. The

two sides — us and the others — are like homogeneous groups using politics as a battleground. Consequently, the populist discourse presents the leader as the only legitimate political representation — the one who fights on behalf of the people against a corrupt system. This system consists of traitors to the people, including not only individuals but also the institutions themselves.

Populist binarism tends to separate the people from the elites. In contemporary populist communication, however, this duality is expressed in a different way, by naming and establishing an irreconcilable opposition between the two groups. In this case, the people are referred to by the populists as good citizens, patriots or, to put it nativistically, real Brazilians. What is remarkable here is that the term us has a unifying and divisive function; it unites people in the same group, the supposedly good, pure people who defend the country. In Bolsonarism, being Christian is a particular characteristic of us, it is the good people as opposed to those who represent harmful ideologies. It is therefore not uncommon for Bolsonaro supporters to say that being Christian is incompatible with the left.

In contrast, the term them is used in populist discourse to identify the targets of resentment of the first group. These include the elites — the corrupt establishment — and a number of other groups that they categorize as dangerous. These groups are labeled as a threat to the development of the nation and the values of good citizens (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). It is also assumed that they are protected by the elites and collaborate with them to threaten the integrity of us.

Disinformation is another part of populist communication strategies. Both have strong discursive connections; they use an antagonistic logic that places the pure people in opposition to corrupt elites and employ strategies to produce negative, confrontational and disrespectful content (Hameleers, 2024). Humor and mockery are also used as discursive strategies to attack and disqualify the opposition, often using formats inherent to digital communication, such as memes (Albuquerque & Quinan, 2021).

These populist communication strategies can prove effective in a wide variety of domains, including traditional media, where this discourse also takes place. However, it is the social media platforms that have the greatest affinity for this type of communication. Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) argue that social media radicalize populist communication "because they are platforms that lend themselves to the production of emotional, controversial and even violent content typical of populist activism" (p. 3). Populist discourse thus not only responds to the grammar of networks, but also collaborates with the economic infrastructure of these spaces, using a rhetoric of urgency, a constant denunciation of corruption, a decline in values and a general crisis that affects all areas of life.

In the next section, we will describe the methodological choices that guide our empirical analysis.

METHOD

This study examines the construction of the public image of actors of the extreme right-wing Bolsonaro movement and is based on a specific case: the online communication of the former deputy federal candidate, Abílio Brunini, in the 2022 elections. To this end, we analyzed the candidate's Instagram profile throughout his electoral campaign between August 15 and October 30, 2022. Although the parliamentary elections took place in early October, we collected posts up to the second round due to Brunini's involvement in Bolsonaro's re-election attempt.

We chose the social network platform Instagram for this study because it is heavily used by politicians (Author, 2024). It is also one of the most used social networks in Brazil. Launched in 2010, it is a photo and video portal with a total of 134.6 million active users in 2024 (Kemp, 2024). Given its popularity, especially among young people, political actors often use it to build their public image and appeal to voters.

The research was developed around a corpus of the three most engaged publications from Brunini's Instagram profile during the 11 weeks of the electoral process. We believe that these publications, which show the greatest public mobilization on Brunini's profile, are best suited to our goal of understanding how he built his public image during the election. Our collection was conducted automatically using the program Fanpage Karma and generated a set of 33 posts.

To better understand the material, we used Bauer's (2022) content analysis technique. We collected texts and images (including captions), as these are important elements for building meaning on a platform like Instagram. First, we examined the material to identify the attributes used in Brunini's online communication. The attributes were assigned on the basis of a systematic reading, the aim of which was to answer the following question: What kind of identity is the subject trying to promote here? The criterion we chose was that the answer to this question must be given in the form of a name (noun or adjective).

The nominal expression we use to describe active and systematic reading is identification attribute or simply attribute, which can also be understood as an identity feature. The process of capturing the attribute is called identity nominalization. The use of nominalization to describe attributes (e.g., courageous, loyal, irreverent...) gives more emphasis to the identity traits that the political actor represents, as it gives the impression that he possesses these traits, thus

giving them greater social value and recognition. Nominalization thus becomes a way of highlighting certain characteristics in a more direct way, which facilitates the analysis and categorization of the characteristics used. In this way, we can outline the specific practices and ideologies and then categorize and identify the communication trends.

Goffman (2013) states that "actors tend to give the impression, or not to contradict the impression, that the role they are currently playing is their most important role, and that the qualities they claim or ascribe to them are their most essential and characteristic attributes" (p. 127). Goffman's ideas illustrate a clear distinction between attributes (the focus of this methodology), traits and social roles. Attributes are identity characteristics that we try to prove we possess, which is why we group them together nominally (the brave, the strong...). Characteristics are the elements that confirm the identity traits, e.g., certain actions or behaviors (this person speaks this way, this person acts this way...). The role, in turn, is a social position that a person occupies (e.g., a politician, a father or a teacher), and each has its own social expectations of conventional attributes and characteristics. Therefore, while courageous represents an attribute, a politician, father or teacher are different social roles that a person can play. This is an important distinction to bear in mind to understand the focus of our analysis.

Overall, the identification attributes represent the actor or the public image that the actor conveys to the public. The process described above allowed us to answer the first question: [i] What attributes did Abílio Brunini use in his electoral communication on Instagram during his 2022 campaign for the Chamber of Deputies? After identifying the predominant attributes, we matched the identity features with the far-right values and the forms of populist rhetoric to answer the second question: [ii] What types of Brazilian far-right discourse (Bolsonarism) did Brunini use in his digital communication? In the next section, we will present and discuss the analysis data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: REPRESENTATION OF THE IMAGE OF A BOLSONARIST PARLIAMENTARIAN

Based on this methodology, we have identified the predominant attributes in Abílio Brunini's Instagram communication and categorized them into three ideological categories: [1] Anti-politics, [2] Anti-left, and [3] Conservative Christian.

These three categories were based on the frequency and repetition of the identified attributes, as well as their thematic correspondence with key aspects of Bolsonarism and far-right populist communication as studied in the literature. We will now discuss each category in order of prevalence in the posts we analyzed.

Category 1. Anti-politics: the overseer and the incorruptible

This first category comprises two main attributes. In the posts we have analyzed, Brunini presents himself as an overseer and an incorruptible. Overseer is the most recurring attribute in his Instagram posts and is linked to anti-political and anti-establishment sentiments typical of Bolsonarist populist communication. This attribute of the overwatcher is a type of self-representation that is relevant to Brunini's actions, as it describes him as someone who constantly monitors the political class to which he himself belongs. However, he wants to appear as someone who does not belong to the system, which is noticeable both in his rhetoric and in the image he paints of himself, e.g., wearing informal clothes (image 1).

This attribute is reinforced by the outrage and indignation contained in his posting, which make up the characteristics of his portrayal (Goffman, 2013). Political activity is also understood as a struggle against a dishonest and privileged class. This strategy refers to what is referred to in the literature as crisis rhetoric, where the populist actor (negatively) reports on a state of permanent and widespread collapse (Engesser et al., 2016). An example of this is one of his video posts from August 17, 2022, whose caption reads: "Ready to fight. We have come to monitor those who steal money from health, education and public works [...] We will not rest" (Brunini, 2022a).

Image 1. Instagram frame from deputy Abilio Brunini

Source: Brunini (2022a).

In addition to calling out the political class, a clear division is made with the concept of us versus them, a hallmark of populist binary language that puts the good and honest against the corrupt. This division is expressed through the discursive opposition between Brunini, the overseer, and the others (those who steal). This shows how identity attributes create a distinction between the individuals who make up the social fabric. Brunini's opposition takes on a dramatic tone as he shows a hint of indignation and repeats the word overseer more than once.

The emphasis he places on the act of surveillance — even without making specific suggestions — reflects his attempt to paint the picture of an outsider monitoring crimes against the system, watching for any deviation and ready to hold those responsible to account. Posts that use this attribute convey a rhetoric of surveillance and accountability. It should also be noted that the image he is trying to build is not just that of a passive critic of the system. He conveys the idea that he is fighting for transparency and trying to eliminate those who take advantage of the public.

The video of Brunini (from the same August 14 post) shows him as an indignant yet confident candidate; he looks directly at the screen and speaks confidently as he talks about the fight that must be waged. He is emotional in this post and in most of his other posts that contain the overseer attribute. The use of textual and visual elements (including sound) creates a dramatization that has the potential to be captivating given his emotional display of outrage at the system.

With these forms of representation and enunciation, Brunini hopes to arouse the same feelings of outrage and passion in his interlocutors that he propagates. The posts we analyzed were mainly about the surveillance of health and education. In his post from September 16, 2022 on the topic of health, he describes himself as someone who tries to make cases of corruption public (Brunini, 2022g). His video post on education shows him near a school where he accuses teachers of political activism (Brunini, 2022e).

The attribute of overseer also sometimes contributes to Brunini's antagonistic rhetoric, as he employs a pressure tactic often used in radical criticism of politics: an anti-corruption discourse centered on anti-political and anti-institutional sentiments. His messages do not talk about having to monitor himself; he claims that he is acting on behalf of the people against them (mayors or other political actors). He assumes that corruption is widespread and that the overseer (himself) can put a stop to it. This idea is conveyed in a number of sentences in the corpus, such as: "ready to fight", "we will not rest", "tell your mayor I'm coming". Brunini thus evokes the idea of a constant effort to fight against the corruption and

mismanagement that make life difficult for the citizens the candidate idealizes and claims to represent.

Finally, the attribute of the overseer is used in connection with a messianic image propagated by Abílio. In his post from August 29, he can be seen standing at the door of the city council of Lucas do Rio Verde, in the interior of MT, expressing his outrage at the fact that the city council was closed at 4 p.m. on a Monday (Brunini, 2022b). Aside from the anti-political and anti-establishment sentiment he displays in this post, he also claims to be a savior, someone who has come to rescue the public from oppression by a traditional, corrupt, and privileged political elite.

It is important to note that while Brunini claims to monitor, he does so without formal institutional means. While recording with a cell phone and showing the scene to the public, he says: "I am the one who exposes the irregularities" and avoids using the institutional means that exist for such a complaint. He does this for the social networks, with the aim of provoking outrage. Although he does not provide concrete evidence for his accusations (which is required at an institutional level), the direct and informal communication he conveys through social media is enough to give credibility to the images he shows.

Brunini has used the strategy of fighting the system several times in his digital communication, claiming that he will take action against the political establishment that has betrayed the public. By ensuring that corruption is eradicated while exuding a kind of unshakeable moral rectitude, he is trying to mobilize the second attribute of this category: incorruptible.

This identity attribute is such an important part of his communication that he even addresses corruption among voters (in his August 30 post), declaring, "I am not interested in corrupt voters"." To prove this, he released an audio recording of a person apparently asking for financial help in exchange for votes (Brunini, 2022c). On another occasion, he claimed that he was running his campaign "without stealing public money to fight corruption" (Brunini, 2022d).

Category 2. Anti-left: anti-left, anti-Workers' party, and Bolsonaro supporters

This category includes the anti-left aspect, which is an essential part of Bolsonaro's discourse and Brunini's messages. Here we have the attributes anti-left, anti-Workers' Party, and Bolsonaro supporters. While the first category was aimed more at politicians, this category is directed toward left-wing groups, particularly the Workers' Party. The anti-Workers' Party rhetoric is a core element of Brunini's communication, partly reinforced by the Brazilian press (Guazina et al., 2023), and different strategies are used to delegitimize this political party.

Image 2. Instagram frame from Deputy Abilio Brunini

Source: Brunini (2022f).

In this case, the tone of outrage and indignation turned to laughter and mockery in order to ridicule the Workers' Party and its supporters. An example of this is a video released in a post on September 15 featuring a Workers' Party supporter being interviewed by Brunini. The idea was to ask this supporter questions that Brunini knew he could not answer. Brunini deliberately provokes the person (image 2) in order to make fun of him afterwards, as can be seen from the caption and the laughing emojis in the comments.

The video shows clips of Workers' Party politicians being mocked by Brunini, while he adopts a sarcastic tone to show how much the party and its voters should be laughed at. The ridicule and irony are clear in the caption: "Why doesn't the Workers' Party like Abílio? Because he is for the people and against corruption". This caption is accompanied by a laughing emoji, the same one used in the comments. This is an example of how the representation between actor and audience is relational. Thus, mockery (characteristic) is used to create sentiment against the Workers' Party (identity attribute) while building the image of a politician (social role). These three elements are reinforced by the audience's reaction, as they approve of the success of the performance and also contribute to it.

Image 3. Instagram frame from Deputy Abilio Brunini

Source: Brunini (2022i).

The attack on the left and the Workers' Party, a typical strategy in Brunini's campaign and in Bolsonarism, underlines the anti-pluralist aspect that resonates in the discourse of the extreme right, but often goes unnoticed because it is hidden as tongue-in-cheek content that only serves for laughs. Laughter is used by the extreme right to ridicule the other and portray them as frauds (Da Empoli, 2019). The staging of an interview that does not aim to listen, but to ridicule, is not only a provocation, but a kind of performance that disregards the contradictory and delegitimizes the other as a participant in the political discussion.

On the other hand, in the posts we have analyzed for this category, the left is presented as a homogeneous bloc (supporters of the Workers' Party) associated with corruption, disorder and a bad example. This is evident in an October 19 post in which Brunini provokes students participating in a public demonstration. Image 3 shows an attempt to mock and ridicule the students, who are referred to as " the left".

The caption reads: "the leftists were demonstrating, blocking the street for no reason, and we took the opportunity to distribute Bolsonaro stickers. Thanks to the members of the Workers' Party who set a bad example [...]. Let's save Brazil

??????" (Brunini, 2022i). The provocative tone is also expressed in other posts, such as one from October 16 with the following caption: "They made me an 'L' sign. I reacted to it and they went crazy". In the video, Brunini characterizes the girl who made the sign as a "strange girl, a student at UFMT" (Brunini, 2022h). His reaction to the student's gesture in the video is explained by the fact that he states that, in his opinion, the L sign is the sign of a thief and not that of Lula. The delegitimization strategy is carried out by reinforcing the word 'foreign' and by emphasizing the fact that she was a student at the Federal University.

Category 3. Conservative Christian: the Christian, the family man, the conservative

The last discursive category expresses attributes that contribute to building the image Brunini promoted during his campaign: the Christian, the family man and the conservative. These three attributes form the Christian-conservative category, which is paramount to the communication of Bolsonarism. It is based on a traditional view of the family and a relationship to faith that identifies the 'other' as a deviant being and a threat to the values of faith. It is interesting to note that the Christian attribute is part of the same strategy to delegitimize the left that was observed in the previous category. This is done by propagating the idea that being a leftist is incompatible with the Christian faith and that this is a threat to the truth of Scripture.

This idea is evident in the video published by Brunini on September 4, in which he has a conversation with a student in the city of Barra do Garças. This student claims that she was a leftist until, as the caption says, she "accepted Jesus". Image 4 shows Brunini talking about the young woman's story, saying that: "It is possible to convert someone who was a leftist. It's true, folks, this is a real testimony" (Brunini, 2022d).

The use of the verb convert blurs the boundaries between political action in the public sphere and religious practice, which should be exercised in private. However, the effort to unite politics and religion and to bring religious discourse and dogma into the public sphere is not just a strategy, but a project within Bolsonarism. In the video, the young woman claims that she used to participate in feminist movements, that she voted for the PT in 2018, and that she only realized that the left "distorts the truth" when she "got to know Jesus".

Brunini believes "that it is not possible to be a Christian and be on the left" and was thrilled when the young woman described her experience, saying that as a Christian she no longer "fits in with the left". "How can I call myself a Christian if I am in line with ideologies that contradict the Bible? That doesn't make any sense." She states:

Image 4. Instagram frame from Deputy Abilio Brunini

Source: Brunini (2022d).

"Once you have found Jesus, you do not advocate principles that endorse the destruction of the family and preach the killing of babies in the womb. God is all about the family" (Brunini, 2022d).

This story shared by Brunini also triggered another anti-left discourse that emerged in the second category: the misleading information that federal institutions are ideologically dominated by the left. The following excerpt from Brunini's interaction with the young woman illustrates the relationship between education, the left, and Christianity.

> — [...] Your first contact with leftists was in college, right? At school? What school did you study at? Technical school, IFMT?
>
> — That's right. At school, with students, left-wing movements. [...] In fact, they are as Antonio Gramsci says. The theory of cultural hegemony. [...] Then they start dominating their friends, dominating the people around them, thinking that leftist behavior in school is cool. And they start preaching hate speech against the right [...] and Christian values [...]. (Brunini, 2022d).

The Christian attribute stigmatizes leftist discourse, which is seen as contradictory to the principles of Christianity. This reference to God appears in other posts, further emphasizing this aspect. On August 16, Brunini asked his audience to pray for Lula to lose the election: "Keep praying, the Lord God changes what was foreseeable and can do what was impossible" (Brunini, 2022j).

The religious attribute, when associated with the other (the Bolsonaro supporter), has the effect of exploiting people's faith and strengthening ties with the extreme right and a politically very committed evangelical base. It is no coincidence that this attribute is usually accompanied by a call to prayer or to fight. This shows that the mission is not only political and moral, but also spiritual, because it is no longer a human project, but God's project.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this study, we sought to understand how the far right promotes its public image on social media by examining the self-presentation that a pro-Bolsonaro parliamentarian tries to build on Instagram during the 2022 election campaign. In dialog with Goffman's concept of representation (2013) and the notion of public image used in political communication studies, we proposed an analysis of the composition of the figure of political actors that can be extended and refined in new empirical research. Identifying the attributes that political actors propagate in their social networks — or in other spaces of political expression — helped us to understand the ways in which these agents present themselves to the public in specific contexts. In the qualitative content analysis, we applied a process of identity nominalization that captures the attributes presented and negotiated with interlocutors. We believe that the attributes are part of the performance, constitute the public image and, in the case of far-right politicians, are based on populist communication strategies that reinforce illiberal values.

In the case analyzed for this paper, the attributes were expressed through messages that employ populist communication strategies, such as the us versus them binary, in addition to the use of mockery when attempting to delegitimize the other. To answer the first research question— - what attributes did Abílio Brunini use in his electoral communication on Instagram — the data shows that he used the following attributes during the campaign: overseer, incorruptible, anti-left, anti-Workers' Party, Bolsonaro supporter, Christian, family man, and conservative. Brunini uses these attributes to promote his identity in the midst of a tense electoral environment.

We have grouped the attributes into three ideological categories that express aspects of Bolsonarism: anti-politics, anti-left, and conservative Christian. The most frequently used attribute in the first category, overseer, is particularly revealing. It positions Brunini as a kind of guardian of integrity, a figure who watches over the political class to which he belongs. This representation, reinforced by a sense of outrage, is used in conjunction with the populist rhetoric of "us, the good ones" versus "them, the corrupt ones". The anti-left and anti-Workers' Party attributes highlighted in the second category also focus on this divisive element. These are

not ideological positions, but brands that serve to build an image by attacking the Workers' Party and attempting to delegitimize it through ridicule. In this way, Brunini not only reaffirms his political position, but also tries to consolidate a base of support by rejecting the other.

In the third category, Brunini promotes himself as a Christian and a family man in order to establish a moral and identity connection with his voters, but he also doubles down on his opposition to the Labor Party by claiming that leftists and Christians are incompatible characteristics. The combination of politics and religion is a strategic tool in Bolsonarism's communication and has proven to be a powerful form of mobilization, especially in spaces with greater influence from neo-Pentecostal leaders.

The three categories and the attributes that compose them show how Abílio Brunini, throughout his Instagram communication, has sought to promote his image through an anti-left discourse. In this sense, the identified attributes (overseer, incorruptible, anti-Workers' Party and Christian) not only express direct relations with Bolsonarism, but also explicitly answer the second research question by highlighting key values of the Brazilian extreme right in the public scene: anti-politics, anti-establishment, anti-left and moral conservatism. These values are expressed in speeches that denounce allegedly corrupt and morally bankrupt politics and use crisis rhetoric to justify the need to radically fight the system and its opponents.

By appealing to anti-establishment, anti-politics, and anti-elite sentiment, Brunini not only positions himself as an outsider, but also capitalizes on the public's growing dissatisfaction with political institutions. By presenting himself as incorruptible and as an overseer, he creates a moral contrast to his political opponents. Radical opposition to the left simplifies political debate, reasserts stereotypes about certain groups, and encourages radicalization.

In short, our study of the attributes that make up Brunini's portrayal goes beyond his character and allows us to better understand the challenges facing democracy in the current dynamics of Brazilian politics. Similarly, the data helps to understand the mechanisms characterizing the far-right discourse more broadly. In future studies, we aim to extend our analysis to conduct comparative studies with other agents due to the increasing growth of the far-right and its effective diffusion on digital platforms. It is also important to examine how the public receives and uses these messages in order to investigate changes and reactions. In line with the contributions of Goffman (2013) and Gomes (2004), future studies can further emphasize the interactive nature of social representations and their role in legitimizing discourses. To this end, the analysis must take into account the temporal dynamics and constant restructuring of these representations.

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