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*Unveiling the Myth: Berlusconi's Legacy in Italian Media*

**Charisma, Populism, &  
the Erosion of Political Trust**

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## **Abstract**

At the beginning of the summer of 2023, a staple figure of Italian culture and politics passed away after living in the public eye for three decades. Everybody in Italy had an opinion on Silvio Berlusconi, a man whose face was easily seen at least once a day on televisions, newspapers and gossip columns. News of his death circulated quickly, and journalists rushed to comment on his political career, his personality, his sex scandals and on his legacy. Who would take the sceptre of power? Would anyone be able to replace him on the cultural and political pedestal of the Bel Pease?

This thesis dives into the complex public persona of Silvio Berlusconi, unravelling the layers of charisma that marked his political career in order to understand his influence on Italian society.

Charisma, though often overlooked in contemporary political discourse, emerges as a central force shaping the rise and tenure of populist leaders. Berlusconi's ascent to power, much like figures such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, was facilitated by his charismatic persona, "miracle making" promises, and strategic positioning within Italy's socio-political landscape. The study also points to the representational power wielded by charismatic politicians, whose wealth and success become a symbol of societal aspirations. Despite personal scandals and a noticeable divisive rhetoric, charismatic leaders like Berlusconi and Trump continue gathering support by embodying aspirational qualities that resonate with part of the population, transcending traditional political considerations.

Crucial to perpetuating charismatic populism is the role of the media, which serves as a tool to craft these types of leaders. In an era marked by media ubiquity, political leaders easily manipulate the narrative to cultivate an aura of charisma, effectively blurring the lines between rational and legitimate governance and performative spectacle. This mediated construction of charisma not only sustains populist leaders but also perpetuates a cult of personality that undermines traditional democratic norms.

The study places itself within the discourse of populist studies, drawing from Weber's concept of charismatic authority to identify and understand figures like Berlusconi. By highlighting the dynamics of populist leadership, the research underscores the erosion of trust

in democratic institutions, as charismatic leaders wield a dangerous influence that goes beyond conventional checks and balances.

Ultimately, charisma emerges as a pivotal lens through which to examine the connection between media, populism, and democratic trust. By unravelling the complexities of Berlusconi's persona and leadership, the thesis provides insights into the implications of charismatic populism on democratic governance and societal cohesion. As politics continue to evolve within the landscape of mediated spectacle, understanding the allure and impact of charismatic leadership is essential for safeguarding democratic principles and institutions.

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*Proved me right when you proved them wrong  
And in this perfect weather, it's like we don't remember  
The rain we thought would last forever and ever*

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## 1. Introduction

On June 12, 2023, Italians saw an era come to an end. The passing of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi sparked a widespread reflection on the effects of his long, but controversial career. Berlusconi had become a prominent figure both within the country and on the international stage, and he inevitably left behind a lasting legacy that continues to provoke discussions on his successes and failures he left on the political landscape of the “Bel Paese”.

Berlusconi’s rise and establishment to political power was sustained by his public portrayal as a self-made man of middle-class family, having obtained success through persistence and hard work as an entrepreneur. This narrative appealed and resonated with a number of Italians, who began looking up to him as an aspiration, given his wealth, influence and power. Nevertheless, political commentators immediately raised questions about the intersection of business and governance, as his entrance into politics challenged traditional notions of political leadership. His years in power have been examined by many scholars as examples of populism, and of the populist leaders’ political personalities. As the owner of the media conglomerate Mediaset, Berlusconi wielded considerable influence over Italian media, prompting concerns about the objectivity of coverage related to him and his policies.

This influence brought to the forefront critical questions about media ownership and its implications for democratic discourse. The intertwining of political power and media ownership underscored the challenges of achieving unbiased reporting on Berlusconi's political endeavours. This case study wants to shed light on the ever growing ubiquity of populist leaders and their growing support, it is not merely a depiction of Berlusconi’s life, but rather a commentary on our current socio-political situation and the consequences of these influences on society.

All of these contradictions and complexities will be examined in this thesis by way of charisma, centering this quality as a guiding light through the tapestry of Berlusconi’s life and career as a populist leader.

## **Why this matters**

Until his passing in the summer of 2023, Berlusconi remained a fixed personality on both Italian television screens and politics.

It is exactly because of his permanence in the lives of Italians, despite his political, legal and social missteps, that I found it valuable to have such a case study, where I can investigate the charismatic persona that he publicly built with the help of the mass media.

The media coverage following Berlusconi's passing provides the opportunity to look at the ascent of such a populist figure through the lens of charisma, a quality that has been disregarded lately by researchers of the populist field. Nevertheless, presenting and breaking down the artificial character of Berlusconi allows for an investigation into the connection between media, its ownership and the portrayal of charismatic leaders. While charisma can be used as a tool to understand these leadership personalities, it is crucial to look at the role that media plays in enhancing - if not creating - certain qualities and disregarding others.

Considering Berlusconi's ownership of the majority of Italy's media channels, as well as referring to Trump's influence on Fox News, or Bolsonaro's on O Globo in Brazil, it is impossible not to draw a direct link between the rise of populist leaders and their exploitation of the media.

While there has been an abundance of literature on Berlusconi and others, this has mainly focused on one specific aspect of their personality in order to formulate hypotheses on their ascent to success, or to study their various scandals and mishaps. Unfortunately charisma has not been utilised as much in recent populist studies, which I believe should provide useful in portraying a more holistic image of these leaders, as well as providing practical and generalisable examples of populism as an ideology grounded in media and charismatic authority.

## **Research Aims and Questions**

This research is placed at the intersection of media and populism, and it aims to illuminate the role that mass media plays in sustaining charisma as an intrinsic and necessary quality for populist leaders to succeed in establishing and legitimising their influence.



Mass media is used as a site to cultivate narcissistic and charismatic personalities while maintaining control over the public's perception, thus creating and curating an image and a narrative that fits whatever ideology is being spread.

The research sees charisma as a ground for building populist leadership in this mediatised world. The concept of charisma is updated to fit a more modern context, where the success of a leader is no longer in the hands of the followers who attribute supernatural qualities to them - as Weber believed- but it shifts in the hands of the leaders themselves, who yield wealth and media to give themselves these supernatural qualities. Adapting charisma to fit a more mediatised context is also one of the aims of this project.

My research questions are as follow:

1. What did Berlusconi's charismatic persona mean for his ability to shape public opinion and perceptions of his legacy in the Italian press after his death?
2. What did Berlusconi's wealth and media empire mean for the portrayal of his life in the Italian press, and how did these factors contribute to the narratives surrounding his death?
3. How can we understand Berlusconi's impact on Italian democratic culture?

### **Outline of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into five parts that will guide the reader first through a theoretical approach to the research, to then discuss and present my findings in a more concrete and practical section. The first chapter is the Literature Review, where existing research regarding Berlusconi's different personality aspects are broken down and theorised in the Italian context. The Theoretical Framework that follows proposes the theories that will guide the analysis of the empirical material, while the Methodology & Methods chapter deals with the type of analysis I will carry out the research. Then, the chapter that bears the thesis eponymous title discusses the themes identified throughout the selected articles. Finally, the Conclusion summarises the research findings and presents my own reflection on the field of studies where this case is situated.

## 2. Literature Review

In this thesis I argue that the political type that Berlusconi represented is becoming more prevalent in our society, and its influential powers are more noticeable and possibly more dangerous. To understand how these figures are built and the ways they appeal to voting citizens, I will be looking at different aspects of Berlusconi's persona.

Berlusconi is oftentimes grouped with other national and international leaders that possess charismatic qualities and take advantage of them to further their political careers. It is not just a matter of rhetoric, or appearance, but something deeper than both. Former US President Donald Trump is seen as another, if not more emblematic case of a charismatic leader who managed to win over millions of Americans without any political authority.

Much of Trump's media coverage cited his "legendary charisma" ( Berger 2017; Guilford 2016; Khazan 2016; Minton 2016; Sullivan, 2017) as one of the reasons for his popularity, and contrasted it with Hillary Clinton's lack of it instead. Ghazal Aswad (2019) cites Clinton's own admittal on a radio show, referring to former Presidents Obama and Clinton: "They are so natural ... they can just go into a room and really capture it –They've got charisma. It was a lot harder for me" (Earle and Chambers, 2016). Nevertheless, it may appear bizarre and perhaps dystopic that charisma should trump capability and trustworthiness in politics.

However, the dangers and powers of being charismatic have been noticed and documented from the mid 1900s, both in the political (Davies, 1954; Friedrich 1961; Berenson, 2010; Horváth, 2022) and in the religious sphere (Barnes, 1978; Corcoran & Wellman Jr., 2016).

Berlusconi's persona, like Trump's, struck a "responsive chord" (Schwartz, 1973) through Italy combining many factors that ended up creating a seemingly magical mixture that appealed to an incredible amount of people. Poli (1998) recognises Berlusconi's image as self-made entrepreneur as one of the inviting qualities that people were drawn to, Ricatti (2010) highlights Berlusconi's sexuality and masculinity as another, Biagioli (2011) connects the self-proclaimed "man of faith" to the influence of the Catholic Church in Italian politics, and all of these present the overarching theme of the enormous wealth Berlusconi accumulated throughout his years as entrepreneur, media magnate and politician.

All of these qualities are clearly worthy of investigation, and researchers have naturally jumped at the chance, but there has been a decline of interest in the all-encompassing gift of charisma and its impact on Berlusconi's popularity. I aim to contextualise his charismatic presence in today's media and political context.

In the next sections, I will examine specific aspects that made Berlusconi's persona what it was, linking it to international studies conducted on similar personalities as well. This will allow me to paint a broader picture of who Silvio Berlusconi was.

### **The entrepreneur**

Even before entering politics, Silvio Berlusconi was a successful, career-oriented man. He had numerous highly profitable businesses, so lucrative that his strategies were then replicated on the political stage.

As mentioned before, Berlusconi had acquired the football team Milan in 1986, and spent years carefully planning the team's ascent into the world ranks of football. Poli (1998) recalled the effort he and his management put into making it more public, creating paraphernalia for football-goers, focusing on the value of the press office, and trying to understand who the real target audience was. Succinctly, he treated this endeavour just like a business, and it flourished. This incredibly public win - since the team quickly established itself as a national and international force - put Berlusconi on the pedestal of the winning man, who will rescue and salvage even the most unsalvageable business with his acumen and his innovative spirit and mind. In a country such as Italy, where football reigns over all other sports, and where industrial dynasties used to rule the public life, Berlusconi emerged as a popular and avant-garde figure.

Berlusconi's style of leadership, and the way he built his public persona is not much different from other entrepreneurs. He was a risk taker, someone who had come from humble origins, and had then accumulated a great deal of wealth simply by working hard. He was a great communicator and had cultivated a sophisticated, self-confident public image as a businessman that he then translated into his political persona. Having seen all of his achievements, the Italian public was seduced by this man who was promising them a 'new economic' miracle.

His charismatic nature positioned him as one of the most well-recognised Italian figures both nationally and abroad, not to mention setting him apart from other entrepreneurs.

However, a focus should be drawn to the widespread myth of the entrepreneur, which appealed to voting citizens, and could arguably be a link to his rise to success. In Italy, entrepreneurs enjoy a degree of fascination from the general public: creativity, bravery and tenacity are some of the qualities entrepreneurs must possess in order to be successful and generate more and more wealth.

Aggestam (2008) reflected on the mythological characteristics that entrepreneurship seems to have taken on. She pointed out that these myths “reflect the mindsets and goals of contemporary society” (2008, pp.14), and that we are presented with a newfound conception of entrepreneurship as based on social interactions, driven then by personal charisma and a precise mindset. Berlusconi is the perfect case study that showcases how personal characteristics drive a thriving business forward, if not being directly at the bases of such success. Aggestam (2006) noted that the recognition given to entrepreneurs is rooted in the business society that ‘constitute our socio-economic-existence’ (2008, pp.16). Berlusconi constructed a persona that fitted the business oriented society Italy craved, and his mass media empire amplified it tenfold.

By forefronting his individual, lived-in experiences, Berlusconi contributed to the myth of the entrepreneur as the modern economic hero of our times (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005), a figure that finds his relevance in the needs of people to be financially successful in business. The figure of the hero possesses extraordinary qualities that put them above the rest of individuals, who can only hope to understand their journey and have a modicum of their success. People are fascinated by the extraordinary, and these successful individuals also exude a degree of personal charisma that enhances the perceived heroism of entrepreneurs. Other examples of these business-oriented mythic-like figures are Bill Gates (Microsoft) and Steve Jobs (Apple).

Nicholson and Anderson (2005) listed numerous characteristics of the entrepreneurial myth that prompted a deeper societal reflection. They included:

Depictions such as evil wolfish individuals, super-natural angel-like gurus, successful skyrocketers and community corrupters. Additionally, they illustrated the entrepreneur as creator, seducer, aggressor, charmer, saviour or intense pursuer of opportunities. Indeed, myth-making surrounding the entrepreneur does include a great variety of descriptors such as explorer, warrior, superman, mother, marathon runner, lion, whirlwind, magnate, captain, game player, even god, that create the living myth of the entrepreneur (Nicholson & Anderson, 2005, pp.2).

Incredibly fitting for businessmen such as Berlusconi, Trump and even Elon Musk, it cannot go unnoticed how masculine-oriented these are. Berlusconi's been referred to as a superman (Pisa, 2012; Pizzoccolo, 2012), a captain (Cattaneo, 2023), a seducer (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2023; Peduzzi, 2023; Waddick, 2001). It is clear that his public persona and his career benefited from his traditionally masculine behaviours and attitudes, and made him a role model for many youngsters wanting to be successful in the business field.

In fact, studies show that operating from a gendered perspective, aligning one's behaviours with traditional gender roles and characteristics heightens an entrepreneur's legitimacy (Smith, 2013; Radu-Lefebvre et al, 2021). Consequently, opposing these behaviours not only hinders an entrepreneur in the business sphere, but in their private one as well.

In this section, academic studies were presented in order to showcase one part of Berlusconi's persona. His success and popularity should be looked at like a puzzle, where every single piece of his personality contributed to the larger-than-life figure he has become for the Italian public. Continuing with another piece of this puzzle, the next section will further examine Berlusconi's masculinity and the reasons why it added to his charismatic personality.

### **The Italian Man**

Briefly reconnecting the aspect of entrepreneurship with masculinity, many scholars have pointed out the overarching and dominant discourse of entrepreneurship as a form of masculinity. This is caused by a body of research drawing from male viewpoints as a neutral, starting point, which does not aid in the exclusive association of entrepreneurship and masculinity (Hamilton, 2013).

Berlusconi's performance of masculinity and hypermasculinity have been an object of several researches. After all, Italian masculinity is located in a cultural context that, to this day, struggles to detach from a patriarchal, religious focus (Di Battista, 2022; Roberts, 2023; Sagers, 2023; Scalise & Provost, 2023).

The history of Italy contextualises the type of masculinity that Berlusconi embodied all his life and that by many, it is still considered the correct way of being a man. The ideal prototype of the Italian man stems from before Italy was even united in 1861, but we can still identify some characteristics that persist to this day.

Firstly, the patriot: during the 19th century, the patriot was seen as someone who took pride in defending their territory from 'the outsider', while possessing "a mixture of noble qualities, sacrifice, moral strength, but also the capability of fighting for common ideals and for a common future of all Italian people" (Pozzo, 2013, pp. 588). Already with this first characteristic, one can draw comparisons with Berlusconi and his choices of policies. Berlusconi founded a centre-right political party that promised to put Italian citizens first, against more inclusive immigration policies (Longhi 2009a; 2009b; Nadotti 2009) - the outsiders of our new society - and that called citizens to action in the name of a national, patriotic identity (Forza Italia, n.d.). In a famous speech broadcast to television channels, Berlusconi painted himself as the saviour who sacrificed his serenity, his privacy and peace of mind in order to serve the public (Forza Italia, n.d.); someone who, in spite of the attacks on his persona, possessed the strength to dust himself off and still work tirelessly for the Bel Paese.

Then, Pozzo (2013) points out another aspect of traditional masculinity: the patriarch in the family sphere. Historically speaking, the man was the master of the Italian house, enjoyed limitless powers on his family in the eyes of the law as well. The role of the *pater familias* took on a legal role in the institution of the *patria potestas*, which guaranteed men the power over his wife and children, their legal ownership.

Silvio Berlusconi played his role as a father on a public stage as well: his wife and children are all well-known to Italians, and so were his mistresses and affairs. However, the parallel with the traditional *pater familias* figure is twofold: firstly, Berlusconi took the mantle of the father of the country, even going so far as declaring it in one of his speeches (Genovesi, 2014). Arguably, this ensured that his voting base saw him as a paternal, authoritarian figure

in which their trust could be stored. Secondly, Berlusconi was seen as a *pater familias* to the female politicians in his political party. After associating with him, many of the female representatives closest to him would then be referred to as the 'women of Berlusconi' in the media sphere. Their every move would be tied to him, as if they had suddenly become his property (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2013), his influence was cast long and wide.

Berlusconi embodied a Mussolini-like idea of virility as well, where the beauty of the masculine body was heightened (Pozzo, 2013). The former premier was always very attentive to his appearance, and later in life, underwent surgical operations to appear younger. His sartorial preferences spoke of a polished and poised style, of a man who dressed for the public role he had.

This concept of virility is particularly valuable when discussing Berlusconi and his widespread influence. From 2009, he was periodically involved in sex related scandals that cemented his image in the public eye. His wife divorced him and accused him of 'consorting with minors' (Messia, 2011), shortly after, in 2011, he faced prostitution and corruption charges.

On this occasion, Berlusconi said "It's better to be fond of beautiful girls than to be gay." (Messia, 2011). While denying the accusations, Berlusconi chose to highlight his heterosexuality and his virility by commenting that being sexually active, no matter with what woman, was better than being gay, being outside of the norm. Berlusconi reinforced the normality of men's sexual impulses by rooting it into patriarchal rules, and it has been noted how Berlusconi enlisted support by misbehaving and acting both like a naughty boy, and like a powerful man who could not be stopped:

His affairs, cheating and mistresses are played out under the media spotlight like the actions of an alpha male. Money, sex and power are an explosive erotic game show in Italian mediatized politics (Azzarello, 2010, pp.84)

His heterosexuality and manhood are reinforced by the heterosexual lens through which each scandal is portrayed, so much that the Italian public grew accustomed to his sexual misbehaviours and even justified them (Fazzino, 2011).

Ricatti (2011) deftly wrote about Berlusconi's hypertrophic masculinity by examining it from a queer theory perspective. He focused on Berlusconi's seductive power and its sexual nature, and highlighted his ambiguous sex appeal and narcissism. Berlusconi's masculinity can be examined by looking at his body as an object of consumption and narcissism. Boni (2008) affirmed that since his image was so mediatised, his body became a vessel for people's identification.

Therein lies part of Berlusconi's popularity: in media theory, one can observe a phenomenon referred to as cinematic identification, in which the audience find pieces of the screen character in themselves, in a narcissistic identification that involves "power, omnipotence, mastery and control" (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey (1975) further argues that this identification is highly gendered, which sees a male audience identifying with the male body represented on screen, who controls the events as he pleases. Berlusconi, with his constant media presence on Italian television screens, was the male body that the audience identified themselves in.

### **The Media Magnate and the Populist**

The role of the media in building and magnifying Berlusconi's presence and relevance on the Italian political stage cannot and must not be underestimated. This section will first look at Berlusconi's portrayal in the media, drawing onto the archetypes theories that have been established. Following, studies linking Berlusconi's media coverage to his own ownership of media production will be examined.

Klapp (1962), in writing about the archetypes that American media had established, highlighted the value of social typing and considered how as members of society "we do not have [...] freedom *from* typing, but a *choice* of type" (1962, pp.2). Social typing is a way of defining roles and selves within a community, and for this reason, they are a crucial link between a person and the system they live in (Klapp, 1958). Everyone must assume a role in society, a role that has precise characteristics and boundaries. This helps placing individuals in the social system and under certain aspects, predict their behaviours. Berlusconi's role as an entrepreneur could already be its own social type, especially after having looked at the deferential treatment reserved for this class of people.



While the concept of social typing was defined decades ago, and it is not without its discriminating implications, one must reckon with its tangible connection with media and political personalities of today's society. The PR teams and the media contribute to the type-casting process that clearly communicates to the audience the type of person they are looking up to, or even electing as a public representative. Clearly, one must acknowledge that what is made public by these personalities does not always represent their true nature. Klapp (1962) wrote that, in the past, political typecasting was left to chance, whereas now, politicians have teams whose aim is to define the precise role that will further their political career. The political field is now seen as a stage, where one's role must be played to the best of their abilities and can even be coached to improvement. The process is then a type of identity-making one, whether that is done individually or with the help of the others.

In Berlusconi's case, literature is split in regards to his role on the national and international stage. This may happen for multiple reasons: firstly, the presentation and construction of the public self of an individual gets misunderstood or tarnished by external factors or individuals; secondly, cultural context may affect the perception of one's self and of one's role on the public stage.

Berlusconi and his team worked tirelessly to typecast him as the hero, which worked to a degree as thousands mourned the death of "a great man" last year, while remembering the successes and triumphs of his personal and professional life (Ansa, 2023a; Ansa, 2023b; Galici, 2023). According to Klapp's (1962) archetypes, the heroes can fit into different categories: winners, splendid performers, heroes of social acceptability, independent spirits and group servants. Out of these, Berlusconi's persona was created in at least four categories. He was a winner, a hound-dog in the business world, capable of winning deals before others even knew about them. When his football team started winning match after match, championship after championship, it was him that was looked at as the saviour. He was also a great communicator and performer on the commercial and political stages (Mazzoleni, 2011), when the favours or attention of Italians waned or faltered, he started

Engaging his personal charisma in the political struggle, canvassing the entire national territory, shaking hands and talking to thousands of voters, making controversial statements that monopolise the news agenda, circumnavigating Italy with a cruise ship accompanied by his garrulous old mother (Mazzoleni, 2011, pp.4).

His acceptance in the political field was due to his constructed relatability and how he appeared as a man of the people, utilising simple language and showcasing that he, too, was like his voters. To be like him was possible through hard and honest work. As mentioned before, part of his charm and popularity was exactly the way everyone could “recognise something of themselves in him, can identify themselves and that which they would want to be” (Meluzzi in Boni, 2008, pp. 112). According to Klapp’s (1962) analysis, Berlusconi falls under the categories of independent spirit as well: they stand alone, they are themselves in the face of a system that would like them to be different. Arguably, Berlusconi’s antagonism for the traditional, corrupted political class launched his political career and placed him as an outsider.

However, as anticipated at the beginning of this section, the formation of one’s identity and own typecasting are not always perceived as one would like them to. As an example, one can see that Berlusconi’s *hero* typecast did not successfully translate on an international stage. Ginsborg (2005) affirms that “in the European public sphere he remains the archetypical Italian — friendly and generous, lightweight and untrustworthy” (2005, pp. 102). Berlusconi’s role then arguably shifts to the *fool*, and to Klepp’s analysis, he would fall under the category of the *pompous fool*, who “have the fault of pride. They make an unsound, grandiose claim which is ‘shown up’ by a squelch or hard fall” (1962, pp.76). The former Italian Prime Minister admitted his desire of making Italians laugh, and this resulted in clamorous inappropriate faux pas on the international stage and several politicians calling him a clown (AFP, dpa & Reuters, 2013).

Mazzini (2013) also refers to Berlusconi more as a jester or as a fool, rather than a clown. A artificial-artistical fool, she says, is one who uses his charisma and language skills to manipulate the reality around them. Everyone becomes the butt of their jokes, with no discrimination based on race, gender or class.

Nevertheless, while this may have worked in his favour in Italy, this behaviour denied him any chances of being seen as the *hero* type on an international level.

This section focusing on Berlusconi's relation to mass media could not be complete without an examination of his media empire, which many argue was part of his popularity and a reason his influence was so far reaching (Boni, 2008; Mazzoleni, 2004; Waddick, 2001).

The preceding arguments, which delve into Berlusconi's mythical entrepreneurial persona, his masculinity, and the public role he crafted and embraced, gain further resonance when the central point becomes his control over a substantial portion of Italy's media industry.

Ginsborg (2005) looked at how the majority of commercial television in the country was founded, programmed and shaped by Berlusconi. The former Prime Minister turned towards the United States to learn their commercial programming, which resulted in the acquisition of soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, of game shows and talk shows where scantily clad women presented awards and raised the viewership. Under Berlusconi's supervision, Italians's average daily viewing time achieved a stunning three hours and fifty minutes, and Italians became the Western population that watched more television - excluding the United States.

Berlusconi saw the money-making opportunity of advertising on television as well, and made that a cornerstone of his channels. Ginsborg (2005) highlights how ads were shown at fifteen-minute intervals, thus allowing advertisers to not only showcase their products in between his shows, but to control the environments in which they were placed, resulting in raising sales.

His channels broadcast news as well, and so it appeared that all political and cultural choices ended up being dictated by one single man, which then went on to become an influential political figure. Mike Bongiorno, a veteran presenter of quiz shows, went on to say that: "we live for television, we take our arguments from it" (Ginsborg, 2005, pp.160).

It is now starting to become clearer how Berlusconi ascended to the political stage already powerful enough to turn the tide to his favour, if he wished so.

The conflict of interest once he was elected was a topic of numerous discussions, but Berlusconi never yielded the media power he had acquired. Instead, he publicly claimed that his news outlet never outright favoured him, going so far as to mock him and his policies, his scandals and his life. He was appalled at the comparison with more authoritarian politicians,

as he so clearly allowed pluralism in his media. Even though this is partially true, Ginsborg (2005) saw how pluralism seemed to fade as the television audiences were at stake, then Berlusconi showed up and reminded the public of his control.

While his victory cannot be looked at as only being a byproduct of his mass media empire, his insider knowledge of the working of news segments, talk shows appearances, opinion pieces and so on allowed him to develop strategic and effective communication (Ginsborg, 2005). Much research (Mazzoleni, 1995; Mazzoleni, 2004; Mazzoleni, 2011; D'Arma, 2015) has been carried out on Berlusconi's political communication, developed through a personalisation that went on to characterise his public appearances. He directly addressed the Italian public on camera, he spoke to them as close friends, thus reconnecting the concept of cinematic identification presented in the previous section.

His personal charisma, constructed as it may appear (Boni, 2008; Ginsborg, 2005; Gundle, 1998), and his media knowledge make his appearances on the screens of millions of Italians authentic:

Most people know that if the richest man in Italy wants to govern the country, it is not because he wants to get wealthier, but because he wants the complete confidence, the affection, the love and respect of the people (Mazzoleni, 2004, pp. 272).

Another point that has been examined is that of Berlusconi's populist persona, and how his ubiquitous presence in mass media outlets served his political career. Populism breeds very charismatic leaders who are able to talk to the general public by discarding the elitist and complex ways of the usual political class, and they usually rise to power in times of confusion (Willner, 1984). That certainly fits the socio-historical context in which Berlusconi rose in popularity.

Typical of Berlusconi's political communication was the personalisation of politics, which goes hand in hand with a populist leadership that aims to represent the will of the people without actually giving a voice to said people (Azzarello, 2011; Meny and Surel, 2000).

Berlusconi tapped into the fear, distrust and disillusionment of those Italians left disappointed and bereft at the failures of the previous government, immediately fostering a sense of conflict between the collective identity of "we," representing all virtuous Italians characterised by success, hard work, and commitment to national values. His entrepreneurial

image, by then known to the public thanks to his successes on the football team, and on television, warranted the trust of a public that hoped for upward mobility and wealth.

He portrays Italy's political freedom as being endangered by the opposing force of "they," which includes traditional communist and socialist parties, trade unions, bureaucrats, immigrants, and left-wing intellectuals. These groups have been portrayed as the primary culprits responsible for Italy's political and economic challenges (Azzarello, 2011).

Mass media has been made into an advantage for populists around the world, repeating and creating narratives that target their audience, fueling polarisation and the creation of new scapegoats and enemies, as well as engaging supporters with direct channels (Manucci, 2017; Schmidt, 2020).

However, unprecedented in the history of media and populism, only Berlusconi had ownership of this industry on his own political turf. His words were spread loud and wide by his own channels, as Mazzoleni observed for his 2001's campaign (2004) where the premier cleverly allowed his adversaries to take centre stage as well as entrusting his own devoted journalists to cover his moves. In this way, a balance and fairness in reportage was allegedly established. A historical journalistic figure in Italian media, Maurizio Costanzo, when commenting on whether Berlusconi cared and encouraged a just approach to the news broadcast, said: "Power does not belong to those who talk on television. It belongs to those who permit you to talk on television" (Ginsborg, 2005, pp. 114).

Berlusconi owned and yielded the power he had when he felt threatened, thus rendering this "permission" to speak dangerous for journalistic and democratic integrity.

### **The Wealthy Dream**

One of Berlusconi's most well-known biographies is cleverly titled *Il Venditore*, the Salesman. Its author highlighted Berlusconi's talents in strategically marketing his personality as well as his projects in real estate, politics and the media. Ginsborg (2005) does not only see Berlusconi as a skilled salesman, but above all, he sees the former premier as a buyer of luxuries and commodities, of anything that he sees and enjoys. He notes the apparent need for Berlusconi to have his name and face be ubiquitous, and compares him to

Donald Trump when he talked about having New York's best view from his own living room (Hurt III in Ginsborg, 2005). The latter's comment came well before his time as President of the United States, and just goes to showcase how Berlusconi could have inspired Trump's newfound political trajectory.

Despite his enormous wealth, and being the richest man in Italy (Poli, 1998), Berlusconi's public approach was always to remind his audience that he grew up in a regular working class family like the majority of Italians, and that he achieved success through honest work. Poli (1998) writes that he "transformed his own successes into a philosophy of life based on the virtue of hard work, optimism, self confidence, efficiency, and fitness" (pp. 271). His lucrative businesses and resulting wealth proved to Italians that his recipe was the correct one, that they, too, could reach the same goals and never worry about their new paycheck anymore.

In a country where the economy had stagnated, Berlusconi represented the figure that everyone wanted to be. In the early 2000s, when interviewed, some young people affirmed that they would vote for Berlusconi because his television programmes were full of beautiful and young men and women, because his political party was new and dissimilar from the old ones, and that he made them dream of a successful and rich future (Boni, 2008). His wealth didn't create a significant distance between him and his followers; instead, it transformed into a characteristic and a desired achievement that his supporters aimed to attain as well. Ginsbourg (2005) stated that "perhaps the essence of his charisma lies in its mirroring qualities. Many Italians look at themselves in the mirror — a national pastime — and imagine an opulent and powerful self reflected back to them." (pp.112).

## **Conclusion**

This review of existing literature aimed at providing an overarching picture of who Berlusconi was, or rather, who he constructed his public persona to be. I mentioned that his person was a puzzle, a kaleidoscope of facets that were carefully constructed to appeal to as many Italians as possible and make him a legendary figure to look up to. A research gap can then be identified: in narrowing my focus on the charismatic nature of his authority, my thesis is situated within the realm of charismatic leadership and the cult of charisma, exploring its implications on the Italian democratic landscape, particularly with regard to authority and

legitimacy. The next chapter will provide a theoretically grounded framework that will focus on the concepts of charisma, charismatic authority and legitimacy in the political and social sphere, as well as presenting the discourse theories I will use to interpret my findings.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

#### **Contextualising Weber's Concept of Charisma in Contemporary Society**

The German sociologist Max Weber wrote extensively about charisma as part of his broader sociological theories. Weber (1968) formulated a framework in which charisma appears to be one of the three types of authorities: traditional authority, legal-rational authority and then charisma. While the first two are the types of authorities that we are used to seeing in modern societies, charismatic authority is usually a transitional stage, and Weber (1968) explains the reasons why this is the case.

Starting with the terminology, it is valuable to note how Weber (1968) took the term 'charismatic authority' from the theological language, and in this context, charisma referred to qualities and skills that appeared to be superhuman, god-like, and it was reserved for extraordinary individuals who were deemed to have a personal and exclusive relationship to God. These individuals were then considered charismatic leaders, and in the most classical fashion, one can account for the founders of the main religions as being charismatic leaders. However Weber (1968) builds on this theological definition and contextualises the emergence of charismatic leaders in (his) contemporary society. He believed that charismatic authority flourished when charismatic leaders take the political or social stage in times of great societal need, when the people are desperate for change - any change.

And so the leader is making their way through elections, or making their name known on media platforms, putting their ideas in the hands of their audience. Weber (1968) reflected on this connection, on the role of the follower in this relationship that can sometimes become para-social. He wrote that the followers are just as important to the leader as the leader is for the followers, because charisma must be recognised by an external party that is not the charismatic person themselves. The power relation that gets built lies in the interpersonal links between the followers subjected to authority and whoever is deemed to be a charismatic leader. This connection creates excitement, creates commitment to the leader, in a way that forms a community of disciples.



Looking at Weber's own words on the concept of charisma:

[ The term charisma ] will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional power or qualities. These...are not accessible to the ordinary person, but regarded as of divine origin or exemplary (Weber, 1968, p. 241)

It is possible to notice how Weber (1968) does not believe that the charismatic person is actually extraordinary, but rather that they are treated as such. They are elevated to a pedestal and endowed with extraordinary powers far from the reach of an ordinary person. It is then that one can understand the power of the followers' recognition.

However, he also pointed out how fragile the power of a charismatic leader is. Firstly, their power is dependent on their actions. Their followers expect miracles in order for their authority to be recognised, if they do not deliver, followers may put their trust in the next charismatic person that comes along. Secondly, charismatic authority cannot be transferred in case of death or loss of political status. This means that intrinsically, the charismatic leader will either comply with their initial proposals or will be cast out. In the former case, charisma is then routinized either by having charisma being bound by customs, rules and regulations that uphold society, or by having charisma legalised, which is done by establishing legal structures around the leader's behaviour and actions. It then develops into a new system of laws that transform the charismatic authority, so extraordinary as it is, into the legal-rational type. This is an especially important element of Weber's (1968) theory that I will be utilising in my analysis, as the matter of Berlusconi's legacy is a crucial one. I aim to look into whether his charismatic authority and legitimacy have been passed onto another politician, or whether it disintegrated.

Despite being a foundational work in his field, Weber's (1968) concept did not go un criticised. A few of the biggest questions that he could never answer related to what socio-historical conditions needed to arise in order for a charismatic leader to emerge, why people with these qualities would jump at the political opportunity suddenly, what the true nature of charisma is and what happens when this power is given to unworthy people (Horvath, 2020).

However, out of these questions and confusion, a few concepts were introduced in the field of political anthropology that could provide some answers and further situate charismatic figures in today's political environment and frame Berlusconi's ascend. One of these concepts is that of liminality (Van Gennep in Horvath, 2020), which is out of the ordinary and unclear situations where charismatic leaders are supposed to emerge. In its definition, a liminal space is a limbo, a moment or state of transition between states of stability. It is then a point in time where anything can happen, and when it does: "the anxiety generated is much greater, emotions can escalate, the behaviour of people might become unexpected" (Horvath, 2020, pp.4). Berlusconi emerged on the political field in a liminal moment, that much is indisputable.

It is in these liminal spaces that the second concept, or figure comes in: that of a trickster (Radin, 1987). This person is an outsider, someone who does not belong to any stable community, and whose behaviour is erratic and refuses to commit to the rules of decency that society has put in place. A trickster will always present themselves as harmless, as charismatic, but given the chance, they will create chaos and division. Horvath (2020) writes that while under ordinary conditions recognising these figures is easy, when we face a liminal political space, confusion ensues. Mannheim (1956) too saw that populist and authoritative leaders take power amidst confusing and chaotic times where a lack of sense of security is perceived by the people. The impossibility of relying on one easily and broadly understood sense of knowledge, of what is real and dependable, makes it possible for these type of leaders to establish their influence. Mannheim (1956) described this in the 1930s, and in today's mediatised and manipulated age, it is even more relevant.

I believe these two concepts can aid in deepening the understanding of Berlusconi's nature, and where the charismatic behaviour ended to perhaps leave the trickster to emerge. According to Marangudakis (2020) tricksters are the "mirror image of political charisma" (pp.126): they are not charismatic politicians out of balance, but rather a hollow person with no will except to rule. They are not guided by specific principles or morals, but more importantly, they lack individuality and they are a "reflector of collective representations and visions of others" where "authenticity though is not original nor personal, but collective: it is the reflection of the thoughts and emotive state of his audience and according to it" (Marangudakis, 2020, pp.126). These characteristics closely resemble both Weber's

descriptions of charismatic figures, but also of populist leaders and their tendency to change the policies and talking points to mirror the country's current sentiments.

To conclude this first section, we have then seen that our theoretical framework does not only pose the question of what charisma is and how it is established, but what can charisma turn into if left unleashed and in the power of individuals who lacks responsibility, who possess a great deal of vanity and whose power is self-intoxicating. The analysis will aid in understanding if this was the case in Berlusconi's career.

In Weber's (1946) words, this initial framework wonders "what kind of a man must one be if he is to be allowed to put his hand on the wheel of history"? (Weber, 1946, pp.36)

### **Authority and legitimacy**

Another concept worth exploring is that of authority, the way it gets legitimised in society, and its relation to charisma. A scholar on authority and legitimacy is certainly Habermas (1962), who, building on Weber's (1968) work, argued that a legitimate form of authority is one that is established through communicative processes and discourse. According to him, authority is not a system imposed from above, but it is rather the preferred outcome of rational discussion and deliberation amongst citizens who participate in the government-making process. His proposed democracy sees a society where individuals collectively engage in rational and inclusive discourse to legitimise societal norms and rules. It is only in this way that the deliberative process is truly legitimate, as there is not one individual who superimposes their own idea.

Glassman (1975) defined legitimacy as the consent to being led, and he noted how this consent is tied to our own human skill of rational thought and consciousness. Weber (1968) pointed it out as well, the way humans utilise these skills to approach social life. Then, this is how rationality leads to the main components of legitimacy.

However, Glassman (1975) also wrote about the irrational components of legitimacy. These irrational components often live together with their rational counterparts, and they are still a legitimate way of obtaining consent. Irrational acts are a consequence of our heightened

consciousness, and it results in inner conflict:

Because of the rational component of consciousness, human individuals have the ability to be the least dominated and freest of all animals with group structures, but yet, because of the irrational components of consciousness, humans can also be subjugated more slavishly than all other animals (Glassman, 1975, pp.621)

This framework that showcases the irrational aspects of legitimate authority includes - if not centres - charisma. The relationship between a charismatic leader and a follower is a consensual one, where the followers have not only accepted the power of their leader, and with it, all the wealth and privilege they will assume, but they approve of it (Glassman, 1975). It is the opposite of what Habermas (1962) defined as a rational, legitimate authority based on an equal exchange of ideas, but it cannot be called un-legitimate under any definitions, since consent is obtained and given freely. Charismatic qualities can then potentially represent an irrational, but legitimate way of obtaining power, such as in Berlusconi's particular case.

One can argue that while the consensual relationship between leader and follower is still irrational (thus agreeing with Glassman's theory), while acknowledging Weber's (1968) idea that charismatic qualities cannot be left unmediated and unchecked. He sees the issue of charismatic leaders as an ethical one, where charisma cannot be the only quality a person must possess in order to be a legitimate figure of authority: they should have true faith in the people and in their capabilities, a passion for leading others, and a feeling of responsibility.

### **Foucault: Power & Knowledge**

Foucault (1972)'s framework explores the ways in which power is exercised through language, knowledge, and social practices within specific contexts.

Foucault (1972) narrows down on the value of power, and how it is not only repressive, but also productive. He led theorists away from the idea that power can only be used as a coercive instrument, and posited that 'power is everywhere', especially embodied in discourse and knowledge. "Power is diffused rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed [...] and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them" (Gaventa, 2003:1).

Thus, power and knowledge are intertwined, and they construct each other. The production of knowledge is not neutral, but it is shaped by power relations. This relates to Flybjerg's (2001) phronetic theory as well, which sees power relations being intrinsic to the production of research. Those who have the authority to define what knowledge is and what counts as such wield a significant power in society. While Foucault (1973) did not live in our current society, with the type of media that pervades it, we can translate this power-knowledge nexus to Berlusconi very well. He, as a media magnate, exercised a notable amount of power on the dissemination and production of knowledge in Italy, thus establishing his influence on the social and political sphere. I aim to look at how power structures and the production of knowledge were in the hands of Berlusconi.

Foucault (1972) also analyses how power operates through discourses, and looks at how dominant discourses - referring to prevailing systems of language, knowledge and powers that shape society - establish norms and bounds through which individuals perceive and understand our world. Controlling and regulating discourses is in itself a power move, which reinforces existing social hierarchies and does not allow alternative perspectives to thrive. Again, the analysis will look at the tie between Berlusconi's media ownership and the (re)creation of dominant discourses.

One last piece of Foucault's (1972) analysis focuses on the potential for resistance and subversion through discourse and knowledge. Individuals and groups can and should challenge dominant discourses and dominant powers, and produce themselves new forms of knowledge that aim to disrupt existing and oppressive power structures and reveal possibilities for change.

### **Barthes' Mythologies**

As it is discussed, in order to make sense of the world, its concepts and the objects that inhabit it, people need to rely on a shared system of symbols that are then connected through language. Without a shared language that expresses and develops these symbols, it is impossible to be understood by others. While a linguist like Saussure (1916) presented these connections as arbitrary, Barthes (1957) believed because of their collective structure, they

evolve into being naturalised. In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes focuses on the way we use myths as types of speech devoid of literal sense, defining them by intention instead: “the function of myth is ‘to empty reality’, to establish a world ‘without depth’ and to naturalise history” (Mambrol, 2016). Denotations, which are the meanings we attribute to images and symbols, thus become servant to an ideology, naturalising, legitimising and pinning hegemonic ideas into society’s values, passing them as common, historical and/or natural.

This thesis wants to discuss the way charismatic power is legitimised in modern society, especially as Berlusconi’s entrepreneurial and charismatic persona can be identified as a myth in itself, and Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957) provides a tool to understand the workings of language, image and signs that provide authority and legitimation to such leaders.

### **Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory**

These two scholars have approached discourse theory by combining the theoretical traditions of Marxism and structuralism, thus focusing on both the social aspect of discourse and a theory of meaning (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002). Building on Saussure’s (1916) and Barthes’ (1964) work on signs, they propose that social and political identities are constructed through a discursive process of articulation, where the formation of a “signifying chain” is established. In this process, elements such as interests, identities and demands are connected and given meaning in relation to one another. Discourse is created by “the partial fixation of meaning around certain nodal points” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 11), which are special signs around which other signs are ordered, and these are only given meaning from their relationship to the nodal point. Much like their predecessors, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) believe that meanings and signifiers exist in a constantly interconnected network, where people’s beliefs and behaviours are not fixed but contingent upon the discursive articulation of different elements.

Useful to the case study, this discursive theory also connects to Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) theory of hegemony. They present that hegemonic practices involve the articulation of certain elements within the signifying chain as dominant, so that society sees them as common sense or normal. They reproduce dominant ideas until the alternative is nonexistent. It is clear that this shapes power relations within society by excluding alternative meanings.

Lastly, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) also build on the concept of “empty signifiers”, which have become a fixed notion in the realm of populist theories. Empty signifiers serve to explain how hegemonic articulations take place within a political discourse. They are symbols and terms that can be filled with different meanings depending on the context, and it is precisely because of their flexibility that political figures use them to signify a vast array of things, to fit specific political agendas. This relation to populist figures is nothing new, and some scholars have already written about Berlusconi’s specific usage of empty signifiers to rally support to his causes throughout the years (Bull, 2016; Luisetti, 2011).

## 4. Methodology and Methods

The investigation of this case study wants to follow Flyvbjerg (2001) recommendation of a phronetic research, which aims to have a practical impact and be a relevant form of qualitative research in the desired field. Flyvbjerg referred to the Greek word phronesis, an intellectual virtue that “concerns values and goes beyond analytical, scientific knowledge (episteme) and technical knowledge or know how (techne) and it involves what Vickers (1995) calls “the art of judgement” (Vickers in Flyvbjerg, 2004).

It is important that this type of research emphasises and addresses matters of power relations and ethical considerations, since individuals and patterns of behaviour do not happen in a cultural and social vacuum. The scholar must then uncover power dynamics, to highlight the systems of oppression and question assumptions that might come from their own personal bias.

One of the reasons for utilising this approach in the context of my thesis - as a baseline - is to be reminded that Berlusconi’s ascent to power, and grasp on it, as well as his influence on Italian media and Italians reflects the power relations and priorities of the country. It sheds a light on the ability that figures like Berlusconi have to consensually usurp an extraordinary amount of power, and are able to sit on it in the virtue of being a carefully constructed charismatic leader. This knowledge should be socially relevant and raises ethical issues within Italian democracy and media.

This case study also aims to highlight the populist characteristics inherent in Berlusconi's persona and political strategies. It prompts a broader inquiry into the impact and implications of the ascendance of such figures on the democratic process and the very foundations of democracy.

Another reason, connected to the previously mentioned one, is the value that Flyvbjerg (2001) places on thick descriptions. Since it was noted that no social and cultural event happens without the systems put in place around it, it is of utmost value that researchers provide contextually embedded accounts of social phenomena. This allows us to capture the true complexities and nuances of real-world situations. In the case of this study, the existence of



nuances is extremely relevant, as the empirical analysis will focus on the complexity of Berlusconi's persona, drawing from journalistic accounts of his death. As his legacy, and his lived experiences marked an entire society for many decades, it can be said that his public persona was a very nuanced one and it is this reflection on the media that will be examined later on.

A baseline theory to build on in this case study is that of social constructivism. This approach that I will be using further builds on Flyvbjerg's (2001) focus on nuances and complexities of social life and situations.

As a theoretical perspective, social constructivism affirms that reality and the knowledge that we derive from it are constructed socially and defined, shaped by human interactions. These, in turn, are acquired through language and shared meanings. Social constructivism is now the base for the majority of social sciences research.

It is valuable to start from this perspective when, in the literature review, numerous subjective processes were presented relating to Berlusconi's persona. For example, Berlusconi's charisma was repeatedly mentioned by multiple scholars, but if we keep in mind both phronetic and social constructivist theories, we can investigate how he managed to develop, curate and maintain his own proper concept of charisma.

Charisma in itself already is a socially constructed quality that society - and the media - attribute to people who fit a specific identity profile. In summary, the analysis of Berlusconi's press coverage in the wake of his death can be examined utilising these perspectives, which ensure that we position this case study in a wider field of societal relevance, as well as having us understand how individuals and societies negotiate realities and construct public identities within the specific cultural and historical context of Italy.

### **Content Analysis**

To analyse my empirical material I will carry out a content analysis. This type of analysis allows the researcher to investigate the presence or the lack of certain themes, words, or concepts within the data selected. It is used in particular to evaluate language within text to search for bias, or uncover underlying political and power relations to determine a specific

message. Holsti (1968) defines content analysis as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages.” (pp.601.)

The type of content analysis I will be conducting is called ‘relational analysis’. This investigation will explore the relations between different theoretical concepts such as charisma, wealth, gender, etc.

“Individual concepts are viewed as having no inherent meaning and rather the meaning is a product of the relationships among concepts” (Columbia, n.d.). This implies that concepts such as charisma, authority, gender, wealth, etc. will be looked at and investigated based on their relation to each other.

Relational analysis does not focus or narrows down on one concept or one specific theme, but rather aims to connect concepts together in order to create a holistic and situated view of the phenomenon.

With this type of analysis, I will identify explicit terms in the empirical material and determine the relationships between these terms and concepts to develop a clearer understanding of Berlusconi’s phenomenon.

In proceeding with my research, I will utilise the concepts and discourse theories I presented above to identify and relate concepts to established literature as well. I will interpret the findings within the framework of the presented theories and concepts, which will allow me to pinpoint discourses that reflect power relations, knowledge production, and social practices in the given context.

## **Sampling**

Selecting a sample for content analysis entails careful consideration, as the sample size must both be accurate enough to represent the discursive phenomena under study, and it needs to be rich enough to demonstrate and showcase such phenomenon (Aydın-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2019; Wood & Kroger, 2000).

In most qualitative studies - and this proves to be no different - sampling is done in a purposeful manner. Scholars advocate for this way of sampling where researchers choose samples based on their research aims and questions, as well as based on the selected

theoretical framework that will lead their data analysis. Rosenthal and Rosnow (1991, p. 205) affirmed that: “the lack of random sampling in most experiments is not an issue, because in contrast to surveys, experiments are not intended to provide estimates of population value”. The issue brought forward in these cases is that of reliability and validity, especially as the selection of samples may be chosen personally and privately, thus with a possible lack of transparency. This would put in question the credibility of the researcher, and their own positionality in regards to the study. Reflexivity is not merely a ‘bias check’ to tick off during analysis, but it is a process that must encompass the entire research activity, in order to ensure the utmost transparency (Wood & Kroger, 2000). As the author, and as an Italian, I have to pay attention to report the data and the attitudes I encounter in the most unbiased way, despite having lived in the country when Berlusconi was still alive.

For my own samples, I have selected some keywords that would aid in answering the research questions. As the focus of the study is on the Italian press, the keywords were in Italian and as follows: Berlusconi e l’eredità’ culturale (Berlusconi and cultural legacy), Berlusconi e l’eredità’ politica (Berlusconi and political legacy). The reason why I had to specify the cultural and political legacy is that in Italian, the word for legacy is the same as the word for (monetary) inheritance. As Berlusconi’s inheritance was a public matter, I did not want articles regarding this topic to come up in my research, as I deemed them irrelevant. As the empirical material had to be rich in text, I selected articles that were two or more pages, and compiled a list of 32 articles from different newspapers.

The selection of newspapers was completely random, as I am not looking for a specific partisan view on Berlusconi’s legacy and public portrayal. So the list includes some right-wing opinion pieces, some more centrist view points and some left-wing writers.

Selecting Berlusconi as a case study is especially emblematic and useful, as he presents an extreme - but not uncommon - example of a legitimately elected leader who was attributed charismatic and almost godly qualities, which helped him further enchant the people he planned to represent.

## **5. Unveiling the Myth: Berlusconi's Legacy in Italian Media**

In order to discuss and present the findings of the conducted analysis, I broke the texts down into categories of coding that would summarise the data and allow me to answer the pre-stated research questions.

The following analysis then unifies the theoretical framework and literature with the data I collected.

### **Building a charismatic leader: entrepreneurship, gendered charisma and sexism**

As introduced in the literature above, Berlusconi had a huge impact on Italy all throughout his public life, which lasted three decades. Understanding how his charismatic persona contributed to shaping public opinion, and with that, his legacy, was not an easy fit. The data analysed highlighted concepts that work closely together to arrange a complex tapestry that will answer this question.

Even before I begin to explore the concept of Berlusconi's charisma and charismatic authority, I will present what I chronologically believe aided his ascent to power.

Before Berlusconi as a "Cavaliere", "Presidente" and international politician, Berlusconi was a self-made entrepreneur.

The term is mentioned more than thirty-five times in the span of fifteen articles, almost half of my sample. Berlusconi was firstly admired by the general public because of his business acumen, which had earned him incredible profits for all Italy to see. His risk-taking attitude, his entrepreneurial success are a feat that not even the staunchest of his opponents dared to rage against. In the first stepping stone of explaining the rich tapestry of Berlusconi's success, it is his social identity as a business owner and founder.

The "myth of the entrepreneur" refers to the idealised and often glamorised image of entrepreneurship prevalent in society, especially Italian society. This myth portrays entrepreneurs as visionary, risk-taking individuals who single-handedly create successful

businesses through sheer determination and innovation. Poli (1998) wrote that “ Within the two organisations he founded, Fininvest and Forza Italia, he is worshipped as a visionary and driving leader. Within Fininvest, in particular, he built a quasi-personality cult of the heroic corporate founder” (pp.277). This hero social type is clearly visible in the selected texts, despite some of them assuming a more mocking tone. One of the articles defined him “the king of all enchantments”, someone who believed he was “the Lord's anointed” and who resided in his own reign, in the “Arcore palace” (Corrias, 2023). In other articles, Italy becomes Berlusconi's, as if it were another investment opportunity he seized (Castellani, 2023). This specific relation is what Berlusconi's public persona was built on in the first place: his treatment of the political stage, of his role as a public servant, as a business that he could not give up the control of.

The myth of the entrepreneur worked in favour of Berlusconi, and still does from beyond the grave, as people look up to his successful entrepreneurial journey and feel a kinship to him. They feel understood, even the poorest (Armino, 2023; Felice, 2023), and Berlusconi exploited this myth all throughout his career. The need for people to see themselves represented in the myth of the entrepreneur stems from the psychological and sociological importance of social identity. As a social category, the entrepreneur becomes a reachable goal for individuals, who start their journey into self-identifying with this social category.

However, before highlighting the relation between the concepts of myth/entrepreneurship and representation, I want to point out more elements that contributed to the shaping of Berlusconi's public persona, and shed more light on how he influenced the country's perception of him.

In the literature, I presented the correlation between the entrepreneur as a social type and how it is constructed around gender. This is another relation that emerged during my analysis as well, the way Berlusconi performed his masculinity in a way that was appealing to his electorate, and the way the Italian press articulated his successes in aggressively masculine terms, to enhance this side of him.

In one article, Berlusconi is said to “have guessed that that illiberal system was made of clay, and he attacked it with his entrepreneurial activities” (referring to the Tangentopoli political scandal), and then he “attacked the tv monopoly”, and again he “won the battle for the

television antenna and then built the private television empire” (Soave, 2023). One of the terms Nicholson and Anderson saw as perpetuating the myth of the entrepreneur was a game player, and game changer: in Labate (2023), we see exactly this picture being painted of Berlusconi. He writes: “ But his strength did not simply lie in winning by the rules, but to get on the field to flip these rules upside down. He did not just want to win, he wanted to change the rules of the game. And he did.”

Looking at the relation between charisma and masculinity, or charisma through the eyes of hegemonic masculinity, we can understand Berlusconi’s performance as a process geared towards “an aggressive form of masculinity linked to neoliberal ideals of manhood and manliness” (Bielo, 2014; Johnson, 2010). Interestingly, Bielo (2014) sees that charismatic masculinities are always in a dialogue with the constructed social identities around them and “their performance dependant on both real and imagined narratives of gender and gender relations” (Bielo in Wignall, 2016). Charisma is then seen as a social construct in itself, a construct that can be shaped and manipulated through the years and through diverse lenses. Joosse (2014) sees this in the “constructivist view of leadership that places the onus of authority firmly in the hands of the followers” (pp.272). In Berlusconi’s world, his charismatic masculinity was fabricated within the socially constructed and traditional gender relations. This allowed him to create a whole narrative that placed his personality, with his charismatic masculinity at its centre, that built on these antiquated but still present gender relations.

Building upon Berlusconi’s relations with women, we can observe that from the outbreak of his sex scandals in 2011, Berlusconi’s endeavours were frequently analysed from a feminist perspective that aimed to unveil the patriarchal gender relations that still permeate Italian society and politics.

Berlusconi’s behaviours on the international political stage often consisted of insensitive, inopportune remarks that were meant to showcase and establish his dominance over the female gender. Angela Merkel was publicly called “ unfuckable big-ass”, and he promised his own football team that if they won, he would provide for them “a bus full of whores” (Lanfranco, 2023). It is improbable that misogynistic comments such as these would have allowed him to pursue a political career if he had not been an established presence in the lives of Italians, and the way he developed his image rendered him untouchable in the eyes of his

followers, who then would excuse such remarks. The specificity of the Italian context thus plays a fundamental role in explaining why and how he was able to thread the waters of the political stage without being torn apart.

His traditionally masculine behaviour was clearly juxtaposed to his treatment of the feminine, which is incredibly visible in his own media channels.

The data speaks for itself:

On the one hand, the female universe in Berlusconi's life was represented by women who remained one step behind the man. They were women who served the traditional family, always present to support the man, but who were never placed on the same level.[...]

On the other hand, however, the female figures that were aired on Berlusconi's television networks represented the exact opposite. In fact, the ideal of woman promoted through the media means of the founder of Forza Italia was that of a continuously sexualized woman. [...]

Young, pretty, anything but demure, provocative, artificially embellished, very often half-naked and above all mute. By taking away any right of opinion from the woman and relegating her to a condition of an "object" put on display for the public, Berlusconi succeeded in imposing this aesthetic canon nationwide: from television spaces to government palaces, and even affecting the individual realities of citizens. (Montini, 2023).

Berlusconi's "state-sanctioned sexism" (Montini, 2023) was pervasive, and arguably, it became legitimised by the unwillingness of both the people and institutions to take measures against it. The epoch of Berlusconi is then characterised by a legitimised system that sees gender relations being regressed into the pre-feminist era: "The paradigm of the commercial TV of boobs and asses, of veline and velone, of programs like *Uomini e Donne* and *Big Brother*: the impudence, vulgarity, ethics and aesthetics of selling out made into a system and value" (Montini, 2023). It is with this quote that I can highlight the representational aspect that made Berlusconi as popular as he was. I argue that being a successful entrepreneur was far from being the only aspect of his personality that made Berlusconi a star to look up to.

His treatment and portrayal of women, widely publicised in a country where patriarchal gender norms persist, attracted an electorate nostalgic for unaccountable, sexist behaviour. Berlusconi's avoidance of consequences for such actions only bolstered his image among

those who long for a time when men could act without repercussions in this manner. Two journalists deftly articulated this point:

Berlusconi's ostentatious freedom, characterised by pure machismo and extreme sexism, was elevated to a model of a collective revolution that was nothing but an individualist aspiration for a society that saw in such a cultural paradigm the possibility of succeeding." (Montini, 2023).

Years in which Silvio Berlusconi changed Italy and Italians, politics and culture, customs and language, individual and collective imagination. All by transforming - with the voluntary and involuntary complicity of (almost) all of us - into a titanic sentimental diseducation, which has entered by right and backwards into the autobiography of the nation: berlusconism.

Which is the supreme form of the vices, virtues, aspirations, obsessions, of the average Italian male, the arch-Italian, intolerant of rules and elites, creative in work, overbearing in business, possessive in affections, melodramatic in betrayals, always willing to sin and equally willing to its absolution. (Corrias, 2023).

Berlusconi becomes a vessel for the electorate who dreams of a different, wealthier and more powerful future. His charismatic and magnetic personality created an even bigger myth that would become a fixed part of Italy's history, and I want to quickly draw us back to Weber's (1968) concept of charismatic authority, to then contextualise Berlusconi's charisma in our modern, mediatised world.

Berlusconi's behaviours and attitudes do fit within the Weberian's theory that centres charisma: his radical promises that only he could save the Italian economy, his defiance for rules and conventional norms, his ability to "mirror" people's aspirations (Gisbourg, 2005) all trace back to Weber (1968).

Drawing on Barthes'(1957) as well, I already can identify Berlusconi as a sort of mythological figure on the Italian scene. Barthes (1957) presented how a myth conveys ideological messages through discursive practices that are embedded and naturalised in society, which Berlusconi took great care of establishing throughout his career. He turned every aspect of his being into a common practice, things that just happened and thus were accepted, disregarding the effects of his acts on the wider population. A mythological figure such as Berlusconi also operates as a form of social control by shaping people's perceptions and naturalising, if not manipulating, existing power relations.



Based on this data, an answer to one of the research questions may start to appear. Berlusconi's charismatic persona was partially built on the gendered, socially constructed social type of the entrepreneur, which appealed to an Italian society that craved wealth and upward mobility, and the media's perception of this specific facet of his personality - accomplished through gendered language - aided in shaping the legacy of Berlusconi in the public eye.

Berlusconi took a long, hard look at the cultural and economic state of the country, and decided he would embody the hero Italians needed, and so he built the character from scratch. Klapp (1962) stated that nobody is exempt from assuming a social type, however there is a choice to be made regarding what mantle you want to take on. Berlusconi became the hero, the king of enchantments (Corrias, 2023), the Lord's anointed (Corrias, 2023), the visionary (Coppari, 2023) and many other epithets. From one of these we can also draw a parallel between Weber's (1968) original conception of charismatic authority - focusing on the religious aspect of it- and Berlusconi's own comparisons to religious figures, using words such as "saviour" and as above, "Lord's anointed" to describe himself.

His personal magnetism and his ability to talk to people enhanced his chances at winning, his passion for football made him relatable to a country that breathes the sport, a sprinkle of religious fanaticism in a heavily Catholic environment appealed to more conservative voters, and his wealth and power made him an inspiration for those dreaming of upward mobility. Succinctly, any Italian could find a part of him that represented them.

### **Representation & Mediatisation**

What can we say about representation in politics that has not been said before, or above? From the data, I further state that Berlusconi's entire personality - from his sexism, to his personal wealth, to the power he yielded - represented the ideal Italian man for many. A return to the past, if you will. A cultural regression with a tinge of economic progression and less elitism, that is what Italians were promised.

However, Berlusconi's particular case highlights a specific kind of representation, one that poses significant challenges for the democratic process, for citizens' engagement, ethical

leadership and even the integrity of political institutions. That is narcissistic representation, and it occurs when elected officials centre their own personal interests, self-promotion and ego over the promises they made to their constituents.

The myriad of articles, posts, and talk-show episodes that were dedicated to Berlusconi's private life before and after his death testify to the centralisation of himself in his political career. He was the founder of the party, the leader, the saviour of all. He was also the felon, the narcissist, the man obsessed with death and legacy.

His politics were defined “the showbiz politics, a form of democracy degradation that has become the most popular way of doing politics” and his political party Forza Italia the “political sceptre of his financial empire and of which showbiz politics was the *modus operandi*.” (Napoleoni, 2023).

Many articles describe his brand of politics as *ad personam* (Napoleoni, 2023; Corrias, 2023, Montini, 2023), which I want to argue is one of the reasons why he became so popular. Again seen as an entrepreneur of sorts, as a businessman who could turn anything into a success, Berlusconi became the focal point of the political party. People followed him, and him only. Corrias (2023) calls Berlusconi's party “his own stage, his theatre”, a stage that came down only at his death, and maybe not even then. Italian political scientist Pasquino (Mitzman, 2012) noticed:

The Italian word is *vanitoso*. He's a vain man. He likes to be photographed, quoted and loved, as everybody knows. The President of the Republic is the father of the country and he wants to be that. It would also secure him a place in the history books. He wants to be remembered.

His own representation was nevertheless more complex, more multifaceted than simply installing himself on a victorious pedestal for thirty years. Berlusconi's narcissistic personality also saw the construction of a humbler side, sometimes the mantle of victim was donned for the occasion. In 2006, he said: “I am the Jesus Christ of politics. I am a patient victim, I put up with everyone, I sacrifice myself for everyone.” (BBC News). Corrias (2023) remembers his victimism: “Owning three television channels damaged me”, or yet again,

when he stated that he loved Italy so much that he just had to sacrifice himself, his time and serenity to lead it (Forza Italia, n.d.).

Narcissistic representation was not merely about portraying oneself in the best light, to further one's business and political interests. It became a tool for manipulation, it allowed the narcissist to use rhetoric to appeal to the electorate's emotions instead of having them focus on political failures. I advance that this side of him contributed, if not furthered, his relatability in the eyes of Italians. Nobody likes a sore winner, so he needs to be the loser sometimes.

From the findings presented so far, I have painted a picture on the way the Italian press portrayed Berlusconi's charisma through the lenses of entrepreneurship, of masculinity, and of gender. Charisma can thus be seen as a *fil rouge* that encompasses this complex portrayal, this rich tapestry I had begun to unravel with the existing literature. However, it is valuable to note that if we consider charisma a social construct, then we cannot refer to it as an intrinsic quality that people like Berlusconi possess, but rather a product of the society surrounding him. While I have no intention of discarding Weber's (1968) idea that charisma is made up of innate and ascribed qualities, I would like to use Berlusconi's case as an argument for unifying both ideas. Berlusconi's success then, and the construction of his personality are both a product of what society considers an icon, a charismatic authority, but also a leader whose magnetism fits into society's traditions.

Another reason why I subscribe to the idea that Berlusconi's charisma was not simply innate was the mediatisation of his charisma, of his persona. By the time he left his mandate as Prime Minister in 2011, Berlusconi owned 90% of Italy's media, thanks to his private holdings and the businesses he indirectly controlled (Pertsis & Post, 2014). Montini (2023) calls attention to the way he utilised the television channels he owned to mould a space for himself inside the homes of Italians at any hour of the day, and thus reiterating his ideology as well as making sure that his narcissistic need of being seen was met. Discussing his relation with the female gender, Montini (2023) and Lanfranco (2023) both refer to this complete ownership as having instigated and legitimised the regression of the female figure in the public sphere of Italy. Lanfranco (2023) focuses on Berlusconi's power as seen through the allowances, if not the pressures he applied on news reporters to perpetuate his role as Italy's most famous man, a father to the country. The power he was never afraid to wield

aided in the portrayal of his private affairs as much as in that of his political career. It is noticeable in the reportage covering his wife's request for divorce, where the newspapers and television channels he owned attacked - not even subtly - his now former wife, describing her as washed-out and even overweight (Lanfranco, 2013).

His power played out behind the scenes as he was an elected official, but he was seen to have "manipulated his image in the media by firing reporters, journalists, and television personalities who criticised him" (Pertsis & Post, 2014). Our data shows that journalists did not forget his attempts at quieting them down (Ruocco, 2023), and the way he monopolised so much of the broadcast media that the pluralism he preached died little by little (Ginsbourg, 2005).

Labate (2023) ties the mediatisation and showbiz politics of Berlusconi to his narcissistic need to create a government *ad personam*, while making his status of felon a state of victimhood:

The conflict of interest is no longer something to be hidden but rather proudly displayed as the only criterion to be used to select the ruling classes; the identification of institutions with a person is not a threat but a project of institutional reform; the tax evader has become a state prosecutor.

His presence in the media was crafted by a capable team that would not allow out-of-character and criticism to air, unless he needed to prove his own generosity in allowing these criticisms to reach the electorate. His phantom hand still played on after his death, where Italian journalists broadcasting from his channels released heartfelt statements celebrating his successes and refuting all criticism (Novella, 2023), whereas overseas, his death was seen as the death of a billionaire incapable of controlling himself (Corrias, 2023) in private or in his professional career. The stark difference between the foreign and the national reporting did not go unnoticed, and it was linked to the overwhelming power his family still holds over the media in Italy. After all, this heroic figure needed a worthy legacy, and his children are now running every part of the empire.

Additionally the data showed that news articles clearly highlighted Berlusconi's ownership of media outlets as a political move (Pertsis & Post, 2014) throughout the years, questioning the legitimacy and equality of democracy in a country that allows this behaviour as well as the

influence of money on politics as a whole. Berlusconi was not the first and certainly was not the last owner of media outlets that influence national politics, as Rupert Murdoch bought his first paper in 1973 and nowadays, we count many other ultrarich owners of media channels. A few examples are Blocher in Switzerland (Spirig, 2024), and tycoons that made purchases on behalf of the government such as in Turkey (Yagci & Oyvat, 2020) and Hungary (Szeidl & Szucs, 2021).

This relation between media ownership, politics, and the influence of this connection on the democratic process is a recurring - if not outrightly discussed - theme that the articles selected showcased. It will be presented and discussed shortly.

Berlusconi took advantage of every tool his money gave him access to, and purchasing media ultimately became a tool of control for him, a tool that would allow him to steer people's public opinion in his own preferred direction (Pertsis & Post, 2014), that would amplify his controversial personality by reproducing sexist and antiquated messages, and to further his own financial goals. While his charisma may not entirely be innate and natural, as Weber (1968) described it, I reason that modern charisma could not survive without a clever and strategic use of media.

Power over media allows for a legitimisation of charismatic qualities, as it corroborates the leader's narrative - as inauthentic and falsely constructed it may be - and it manages the audience perception of one's personality and career. According to Glassman (1975), legitimacy can sometimes be achieved through irrational acts of consent. If that is so, then arguably Berlusconi's control over the media portrayal of his persona could be considered one such irrational act, potentially stemming from his charismatic qualities.

### **Mediatization & Populism**

Examining charismatic authority within a modern world has forced me to look closely at the overall context in which this type of leadership develops, and thus I cannot avoid examining the political context exploited by Berlusconi.

As a reminder, the former Premier emerged on the political stage during turbulent times for Italian politics, as a nation-wide scandal involving hundreds of elected officials had recently been uncovered. The trust of the Italian electorate was moot, and people were tired of the elitist ruling class that had pocketed money that could have helped them instead.

Berlusconi emerged in this period of crisis and “nothing was ever the same”, remembered Coppari (2023).

The mediatisation of his persona was and still is the consequence, or result of a wider process of media infiltrating in “all spheres of of society, from the structure of the family, to the ageing process, from gender relationships to power, from the political apparatus to economic structures” (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 3052). This mediatised society can also produce and reproduce social and political dynamics that perpetuate unequal, harmful power relations. Politicians have thus learned how to exploit this continuous access to people’s homes, phones and lives in a way that furthers their agendas. Berlusconi’s political party and his own predilections highlighted him as one of the most well-known populist leaders of our time, and it is in this political environment that his own relation and exploitation of media comes into play.

The data presented above already shows how, through his ownership of a vast media empire, he was seen to control the flow of information in Italy, which allowed him to paint himself in a favourable light and promote his political agenda. However, many articles also touched on - more or less explicitly- the way his populist politics were significantly enhanced by the media, and consequently, by Berlusconi himself.

In a long article discussing the economic consequences of Berlusconi, Felice (2023) remarks on multiple aspects of the former Premier’s populist tactics, despite not always defining them as such. Firstly, the article opens with a quote of the man himself, promising the Italian people “a new Italian miracle” if they voted for him. While political scientists may find it hard to settle on a clear definition of populism (as it is constantly evolving), the usage of empty signifiers is a recurrent ploy of populist leaders. It refers to a symbolic concept or phrase that is deliberately vague, ambiguous, or emotionally charged, allowing it to resonate with a wide range of people while lacking specific meaning or content. Berlusconi’s “miracle” was exactly that, as his political ascent was guided by murky promises hardly ever fulfilled.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) articulate that empty signifiers such as “the people” - which are a nebulous, hardly defined group that Berlusconi aims to represent - is based on the populist attempt to order the social world in a single axis that sees “those who hold political, economic, social, or cultural power, [...] (Bourdieu calls this the dominant class) and the rest of society (the people) (Rosanvallon, 2021, pp.18).

Felice (2023) recalls that Berlusconi rarely walked his walk, as his presidencies were characterised by “a call for revolution” in theory, but by immobilism when it came to voting and addressing concerns. Another journalist wrote that Berlusconi started his political campaign by attempting to unify Italians against the threat of communists, a threat that only he ever perceived as real, but that he used to entice his electorate. The identification and unification against an alleged threat, thus perpetuating the “othering” of a segment of a population, is a tested-and-tried populist characteristic that Berlusconi, like Trump and Bolsonaro, employed effectively in their campaigns.

If we employ Rosanvallon’s theory of populism (2021), we examine Berlusconi’s political practices as actions stemming from an ideology. While often associated with specific political movements or even leaders, Rosanvallon (2021) argues that populism should be treated as an ideology that encompasses a set of beliefs and principles that can be considered ideological in their very nature. Anti-establishment sentiments, the simplification of complex issues, authoritarian tendencies and more all form a coherent set of values that aim to underpin populist movements.

Relating to Berlusconi’s case, I draw on this theory of populism as an ideology by associating it with Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) hegemonic theory to attempt explaining the longevity of Berlusconi’s career. An ideology such as populism becomes hegemonic when it achieves widespread acceptance and dominance within a society, influencing not just political structures but shaping culture, language and values. This also follows Foucault’s (1972) connection between hegemonic power structures and the dissemination, if not the production, of knowledge.

Given Berlusconi’s mediatisation of his own figure and politics, paired with his ownership of media production sites, it can be argued that his cultural impact began dominating. His tenure

in the public eye was aptly defined as “berlusconism”, a term meant to recall cultural movements such as impressionism, futurism and the such. Through his mediatic influence, he disseminated his sexist ideas, he utilised populist discourse to create division and entice his electorate, thus shaping the Italian context and making them dominant ideas.. Montini (2023) points this out stating that “with Berlusconi’s victory in the ‘94 elections, a new season opens in which the image of ‘The Cavaliere’ properly becomes a cultural example that manages to mould public opinion according to his own beliefs, ad personam”.

There is then a connection that emerges within these news articles that ties Berlusconi’s populist ideas with the mediatisation of his own image and career, resulting in an uncontested hegemony that spanned three decades.

What can be understood from several of these articles, whether right wing or left wing, was that Berlusconi’s legacy is indisputable. However, the difference in the way this legacy is perceived is quite telling, as his supporters see any criticism as a proof of Berlusconi’s legitimacy and power, and a testament to his success and to the envy of his enemies. Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) also call attention to the antagonism innate to a hegemonic culture, which we can see here. They acknowledge that even within a solidified hegemonic society, antagonistic relations emerge as a result of the precarious balance in which hegemony is upheld. While a figure like Berlusconi managed to claw his way into Italian’s homes, it does not directly mean that there weren’t other social groups vying for power. However, Berlusconi’s media empire always kept the opposition at bay.

To elaborate, I will make use of a quote by Novella (2023):

As the images of the media event that will go down in the annals scroll by, among presidents, ministers, television faces and many ordinary people, a mumbling is heard in the background. That of a piece of the country that Berlusconi never understood. And it persists in not understanding him even in moments of collective gathering.

Novella (2023) voices those Italians who would not hear criticism of the great Berlusconi in the wake of his death, as he had been “so divisive, but loved by almost everyone” (Novella, 2023). This refusal to consider an official’s shortcomings is another characteristic of populist leaders and their followers. Populism often fosters a climate where followers are inclined to



relinquish their objective judgement in favour of blindly following a charismatic leader. This is also a result of the construction of cultural and political hegemony, where the discursive power of the leader is not questioned at all. The concept of hegemony thus deepens our understanding of how Berlusconi's political power was constructed, mediated and contested through discourse and media ownership.

This was what also Weber (1968) discussed in his theory, that the legitimation of a leader's followers grants them extraordinary status. However, what is compelling about Berlusconi's long lasting legacy is that, contrary to Weber's (1968) assumption that a leader's failure to fulfil promises would lead to his downfall, his popularity lives on.

It is then imperative to ask ourselves whether, in our modern world, charismatic authority is not solely built on the miracles that a leader can perform for his followers, but also on other contemporary and external factors such as the mediation of politics. The shift into a different context then, one that varies from Weber's (1968), may play a part into how long charismatic authority can actually reign.

### **Charismatic Authority and Legacy**

The matter of legacy is one that every leader must reckon with through their career, asking themselves what are the reasons that led them down this path and what type of person they want their country to remember them for. Berlusconi was no exception to this conundrum, as the theme of legacy was a recurring one throughout the selected articles, if not being the large focus of them.

In this section, I aim to discuss how Berlusconi's legacy ties into Weber's (1968) concept of charismatic authority, and then draw a connection between Berlusconi's legacy and the mediation of its death.

Since the articles selected were published shortly after the former Premier's death, it is obvious that their words explore Berlusconi's positive and negative legacy on the country, on its democratic institutions and on the people who looked up to him.

The way he was painted vastly varied from one article to the other, however it is possible to see a recurring pattern of recognition that portrays Berlusconi as a personality whose impact will live on, someone who has “left deep marks” (Felice, 2023) on Italy and Italians alike.

Corrias (2023), in discussing his legacy, states:

Years in which Silvio Berlusconi changed Italy and Italians, politics and culture, customs and language, individual and collective imagination. All by transforming - with the voluntary and involuntary complicity of (almost) all of us - into a titanic sentimental diseducation, which entered by right and backwards into the autobiography of the nation: berlusconism.

Berlusconi reigned over the Italian consciousness for over thirty years, his face was ubiquitous and so was his voice. No matter the political affiliation, journalists rightfully placed his persona at the forefront of the last forty years. Whether he accomplished the Italian miracle as he had set out to do or not, everyone in Italy recognises the power he’s held for three decades.

I argue that his own legacy was a matter that Berlusconi took into his hands from the very beginning of his political career by creating a political party ad personam. I presented his narcissistic tendencies in another section, and they certainly play into his party choice as well, but by making politics in his own image, Berlusconi guaranteed that nobody could take his place. And so it happened.

In the aftermath of his passing, journalists started wondering who would be the worthy successor of such a divisive, imposing and charismatic man, but they came up empty-handed. Florio (2023) begins his article by wondering what the future of Forza Italia could look like, as Berlusconi was

the founder, the financial backer, the national and international face, the personification of the ideological pillars on which the whole organisation has rested. A party that, at the first point of its unwritten manifesto, sees the worship of Berlusconi, the one from whom everything was born, and the idealisation of his personal history

Further proof is that while Berlusconi was still alive, the norm that required a new election for party president to happen every three years was never respected. His presence was larger than life, and nobody could ever contest it.

One could also argue that Berlusconi's alleged need to amass wealth and eccentric items was an attempt at immortalising his legacy once he left his reign. In his "palace at Arcore", Berlusconi had a granite mausoleum built for him. This extravagant and enormous construction, Corrias (2023) explains, was created to resemble the Egyptian pyramids and mythology, where the pharaoh - in this case, Berlusconi - and his family could reside in eternity in peace. Berlusconi clearly thought about his death, and the way it would be perceived by its audience, by its electorate: It [the mausoleum] will remain in time as the narcissistic apotheosis of a billionaire obsessed with loneliness and death (Corrias, 2023).

Berlusconi's legacy both follows and distances itself from Weber's (1968) view regarding the succession of a charismatic leader.

Weber (1968) admits the possibility of a charismatic leader not having a worthy succession. If the charisma is not routinized, and thus transferred into more stable forms of authority, it can decay and disintegrate. In these cases, the movement or organisation built by the charismatic leader may fragment, decline and eventually lose the faith of fervent followers that do not have a hero to look up to anymore. Berlusconi's political party partially declined after his passing, as we saw that many followers were interested in Berlusconi himself, rather than the generic proposals of his right-wing party.

So on one hand, Italy never found a successor as charismatic, as powerful, as inspiring as Berlusconi, just as Weber (1968) predicted.

However, Weber (1968) provides an alternative, which is the transfer of charisma. In this case, Berlusconi could have appointed a successor himself, carefully selecting someone who would embody similar characteristics as his own.

This did not happen, and here lies the difference from Weber's (1968) theories. What Weber may have not considered is that the charismatic leader's intrinsic narcissism might supersede any willingness to appoint a successor in order for their political message to continue on. Berlusconi, unarguably, did exactly this. He outrightly refused to nominate any member of

his political party as his designated successor, he “ate every possible heir” (Esposito, 2023), but he also publicly antagonised the only other right-wing leader that could have led Italy after him, Giorgia Meloni:

It was Meloni, ultimately, who was the real black beast for a man who never tolerated that anything but the flood could come after him. It is no coincidence that in the very last, when the leader of Fratelli d'Italia was on the threshold of government, Berlusconi went out of his way to show that she had to once again go through him before she could get to Palazzo Chigi (Turco, 2023).

Berlusconi's narcissism, I advance, led to the disintegration and disillusionment of Italians, who did not continue voting for Forza Italia after his passing. They still voted right wing, but not the party their idol, their leader had founded. Whether this was a conscious decision on the part of Berlusconi or not, his refusal to admit that someone could succeed him led to the decay of the party he had spent three decades building. What does that tell us? I argue that it is further proof that Berlusconi's political career was never about the people, but as a true populist and narcissistic leader, it was about himself and about his own interests. His own legacy.

A final element to consider regarding Berlusconi's legacy concerns its mediatisation. The data collected is obviously an example of how the Italian media threw themselves at the task of portraying Berlusconi's life and career in one way or another, but as a media magnate, his and his empire's role in the way he was portrayed is not irrelevant.

Firstly, it is opportune to highlight how Berlusconi was granted not only a State Funeral, but the day of his burial was also declared a national mourning. It is the first time this proclamation happened for someone who was not a President of the Republic, a higher charge than Prime Minister.

His burial was broadcast on all of Berlusconi's television channels, and was watched by 6.6 million Italians (Sorrisi & Canzoni, 2023). Novella (2023) wrote that:

In front of that coffin, Milan stops, with all of Italy. The greeting of the institutions, in the basilica, and of the thousands of citizens in Piazza Duomo, and the millions

connected by TV, is the last tribute to the most popular Italian character in the world in the last thirty years. While scrolling through the images of the media event that will remain in the annals, among presidents, ministers, TV faces and many ordinary people, chattering is heard in the background.

Berlusconi's death then is as mediatised as his life. It's as televised as yet another event that is going to cement Silvio Berlusconi in the memory of all Italians, whether they liked him or not. Whether they like it or not. It is an "intangible [mausoleum], made up of tears, regrets, bows, love and endless ghosts, which from national mourning onward, will raise its followers" (Corrias, 2023).

### **Legitimacy, Authority & Charisma**

Weber (1968) discussed how possessing charismatic qualities was not enough to legitimise a leader's authority. Charismatic authority becomes legitimate when followers accept and embrace the persona and the messages they propagate, thus attributing an almost divine significance to them. It is this belief in the leader's qualities that provides the basis for the legitimisation of their authority and contributes to making them seem untouchable and above any repercussions.

Following Weber's (1968) logic, Berlusconi's legitimisation came from his electorate, from the people that believed in his charismatic qualities and his promises. This also reflects Habermas' (1962) argument that sees legitimate authority being built through deliberation among people, not as a top-down approach that imposes a system from a higher ruling class. Based on the data discovered, and the reflections it prompted, it is clear that Berlusconi's success was not imposed by previous elite governments or politicians. Especially his early success can be attributed to his status as an outsider, as a regular Italian citizen who sacrificed his private life in order to save the country.

Assuming that Berlusconi's authority was legitimised, as he was indeed elected by the people, and appealed to them, I examine the way he leveraged this legitimisation to further his personal interests.

Various articles cite the current government's decision of granting Berlusconi state funerals as a further example of his persona and his defiant acts against the institutions as "state legitimisation" (Felice, 2023; Cozzi, 2023).

Throughout his political career, Berlusconi attempted to bend the Italian political institution to his own favour, not his party's, his own. Felice (2023) discusses Berlusconi's economic consequences in his article:

Reducing the penalty for false accounting (passed in 2002) and shortening the statute of limitations in criminal trials (enacted in 2005) are textbook cases of *ad personam* laws, i.e., in its interest and protection from ongoing trials (moreover, the latter was also effective).

He then proceeds to highlight how Berlusconi ended up taking advantage of his legitimate - in his most direct sense, as he was rightfully elected - power to ridicule Italy's image in the eyes of the world, and he accomplished that during a particularly sensitive financial and political time. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that his eulogies were only positive on Italian territory, while abroad, they painted a less than stellar picture of him (Giuffrida & Tondo, 2023; D'Emilio & Barry, 2023; Horowitz & Donadio, 2023).

The legitimisation of his power might explain why his supporters vehemently oppose hearing any criticism directed at Berlusconi. Suggesting that he exploited his power unfairly and attempted to manipulate the very political establishments safeguarding the Italian constitution forces one to acknowledge the vulnerability of such institutions. If they can be compromised, one must grapple with the unsettling prospect of whether Italy could face risks more significant than Berlusconi in the future. Arguably, these concerns are not particularly appealing to his electorate, who prefer focusing on the critics of Berlusconi's influence:

They are all recalcitrant little splinters in a sea of affection for the father, the entrepreneur, the president, the business leader, the friend. Splinters still unable to read reality, to tune in to Italians, to process those images coming from the cathedral, the large crowd moved and stricken, for a disappearing national landmark (Novella, 2023).

Another aspect regarding the legitimisation of Berlusconi's charismatic persona is his media ownership. His control of media channels effectively aided his image and allowed him to maintain his level of popularity, which clearly shaped the public perception of his political endeavours. His media empire gave him a significant advantage in controlling the narrative surrounding his actions and politics, thus utilising discursive practices for his own interests. All of this indirectly contributed to the legitimisation of his figure in the eyes of both the state and the people.

Berlusconi's control over the media also created a loop where their mediated persona reinforces their state legitimisation, and vice versa. Berlusconi manipulated the media into an almost constant positive coverage that would enhance his public perception and political standing, thus making it easier for him to maintain his power and extend his influence. In turn, state legitimisation provided him with the authoritative ground and the resource he needed to further shape his public image.

It is debatable whether it is prudent for institutions to legitimise authority on the basis of charismatic qualities, and what the consequences of granting power to such individuals may bring..

### **Charismatic Authority and the Democratic Process**

This analysis conducted and presented thus far has wanted to depict the intricacies of Berlusconi's personality in order to make a case for a generalisation of such social types, which are becoming more prominent on political landscapes.

Initially, it concentrated on specific facets, gradually expanding to incorporate a broader socio-political framework within Italy. The aim was to contextualise Berlusconi's case within broader themes such as the complexities of media ownership and political involvement, alongside the emergence of populist figures legitimised by charismatic authority.

To conclude this analysis, I will endeavour to understand the effect of Berlusconi's practices on the Italian democratic process and institutions. It will allow me to situate this case study within democracy and populist studies, which aim to highlight emerging political types and what they might mean for the wellbeing of democracy.

Firstly, I want to look at the detrimental aspects of Berlusconi's sexism on the trust of Italians in the political process. In the era where the #metoo movement happened globally, Berlusconi's frequently reported acts and words of misogynistic harassment went unchecked by the very institutions that should, arguably, not tolerate them. Berlusconi's "naughty act" was swept under the rug by simply attributing it to his playful and misunderstood personality.

However, both Lanfranco (2023) and Montini (2023) wonder how his persona could have been allowed to carry on with his behaviours, totally unchecked:

The point is not Silvio Berlusconi's relationship with women: the point is how it was possible that, with the exception of a few rare cases of opposition and alarm, a European country in the industrialised West expressed such unchallenged consent to the subculture conveyed by the most popular household appliance in Italian homes (Lanfranco, 2023).

While our focus lies within Italy, it is easy to find that Berlusconi's sexist remarks and behaviours did not go unnoticed or un criticised by the international press. It is enough to pair the keywords Berlusconi and sexism (in English) and one is faced with hundreds of articles that range from wondering how Italy could have repeatedly elected such a person, to entire lists detailing his history of inappropriate behaviour with women (John, 2018; Reuters, 2016; Williams, 2018; Kington, 2009; Merelli, 2016; Giordano, 2022).

Berlusconi, like other populist figures like Trump, have a history of talking about women - often powerful women - in a diminishing and belittling way. This perhaps is done to appeal to a more conservative - and arguably sexist- electorate or it is truly the way they think and believe women to be.

No matter the cause, Berlusconi's sexism may have eroded many Italians' trust in democratic institutions. I argue that it may have led to disillusionment among marginalised groups, particularly women, who may feel that their voices are not valued or represented in the political process. Another reason that Berlusconi, or Trump's remarks may impact women's lives is the normalisation of sexism. Montini (2023) wrote that Berlusconi's sexism was "state sanctioned", when the word 'sanctioned' is literally defined as 'to give official permission or approval for (an action)' (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).



The continuous reelection of a sexist candidate can normalise sexist attitudes and behaviours within society. It sends a message that such attitudes are acceptable or even desirable, undermining efforts to promote gender equality. Unfortunately the exact statistical data on Italian women's voting habits when Berlusconi was nominated is not found online, so the above considerations come from the data collected through articles.

As for Berlusconi's policies and official acts as Prime Minister, they too may have contributed to an erosion of trust in the government. Felice (2023) aptly discussed the many ways in which his self-serving attitudes further demonstrated the fragility of the government's processes. He describes how in 162 years of history (since the unification of Italy in 1868), he is the only former Prime Minister who was granted state funerals. According to him and others (Casadio, 2023; Corrias, 2023; Serra, 2023;) this concession solidified the humiliation and the contempt of the Italian institutions.

The last aspect is, probably, the best known. The discredit thrown on the institutions and the country's reputation, first by his conflict of interests and the shadows on his career as an entrepreneur, then also by his international acquaintances (his ostentatious friendship with Putin even after his speech at the Munich conference that, in February 2007, inaugurated the phase of Russia's open challenge to the West); finally by his private behaviours. Especially for the latter, and especially during his fourth government (2008-2011), Berlusconi ended up ridiculing Italy's image in the eyes of the world, and he did so, moreover, in an extremely delicate economic and financial conjuncture - the 2008 crisis and then the ensuing internal European sovereign debt crisis of 2010-2011 (Felice, 2023).

Despite these public acts of defiance against the very government and the very people he had sworn to serve, Berlusconi's power and presence on the political stage was always legitimised and allowed by those same institutions. When it comes to breaking and bending laws, these types of leaders are almost expected to dismiss them, as it is this very act that makes them different from the rule-abiding elitist class that their audience dislikes. However tough they might try to crack down on crime, they do not see themselves as criminals who should be held at the same standard as everyone else. Trump and Berlusconi both had numerous encounters with the law, but never did they mention being felons as part of their image. That word, that concept is reserved for people 'beneath' them.

Berlusconi's charismatic qualities were hardly the only reason he was allowed to carry on undisturbed all these years, but I maintain that it is partially due to those charismatic qualities that he crafted a character so powerful that he could not be touched or dethroned.

This circle of legitimation thus creates another loop for which a leader gets rightfully elected on the basis of charismatic authority and populist ideas, and this provides state legitimacy. On the other hand, state legitimacy enhances the leader's authority and his ideological influence. The consequences of such a loop, such legitimacy, are potentially dangerous for our democracy.

These consequences were highlighted by political theorist Jason Brennan (2016) a few years ago, who released controversial book titled "Against Democracy", in which he detailed the ways democracy as it is portrayed and carried out now is too reliant on the votes of 'ignorant, irrational, misinformed nationalists', people who would vote against their own best interest if they're pushed by the right leader and rhetoric. He recommends a form of governance called 'epistocracy', based on how knowledgeable citizens are, but even then would pose some issues. Foucault (1972) had already discussed the tie between knowledge and power, and how the former is shaped by the latter. Berlusconi presented a fascinating case that related to both knowledge and power, as his media empire effectively controlled how much fact-based and unbiased knowledge would pass onto citizens. His power was legitimate, this much was established, but the argument of these times is whether uninformed, manipulated but legitimate consent can be in any way beneficial to one's country.

Drawing back to the irrational parts of legitimacy, and the way charisma can be considered an irrational way of obtaining legitimate consent, we must then evaluate the impact that such leaders can bring upon the citizens they represent. Berlusconi's case is just one example of many political leaders around the world who have exploited their media influence, their wealth and their charisma to further their own economic gains and to the detriment of the people.

The question then turns to whether political institutions will hold against more powerful, more charismatic future leaders, ones whose usage of media, populist rhetoric and wealth may go even further to manipulate public opinion.



## 6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to deconstruct the public persona that Silvio Berlusconi crafted over three decades in order to understand the ways his charismatic abilities propelled his career forward, as well as providing a case study of a hugely influential man who shaped a nation's culture and politics even after his passing. Additionally, it aimed to explore the repercussions such leaders might have on a country's trust in democratic culture and institutions.

I investigated these matters by looking at articles written by Italian journalists in the aftermath of Silvio Berlusconi's death, when the discussions around his life and his career were fresh in the minds of both the Italian citizens and journalists. By examining the very words, expressions and concepts that I found in these texts, I was able to identify overarching themes and patterns that can be utilised to study other similar leaders, the way they craft their public persona, and the way they exert charismatic influence over their followers.

While the concept of charisma is elusive, and less considered in more recent studies regarding populist leaders, this research is proof that its influence underscores a leader's every move and every aspect of their personality that the public is faced with. Charisma can be used as a guiding tool to explore the construction of populist leaders in today's mediatised world. By looking at the very specific case of Berlusconi, I provide an understanding of how charisma has become - and possibly always was - a prerequisite for populist leaders to establish their power in society. This research was led by this red thread that proved enlightening in its approach to populism as an ideology.

One of the key findings was found within the very contextualisation of Berlusconi in the Italian landscape. Much like leaders like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Slovenia's Janez Janša, their power and their personalities are rooted in their own nation's traditions, both cultural and political.

Berlusconi's ascent to power was clearly aided by his charismatic attitudes, by the promises he made and the successes he showed off, but through this research I have found that without a very specific socio-cultural and political context, he would have had a harder initiation to the world of politics. He entered the political stage in a liminal space where the Italian public

did not trust the established politicians who had allowed for widespread corruption to take place. The exploitation of this liminal space and anti-establishment trends has been commonplace for many political leaders of populist tendencies. Bolsonaro positioned himself as an outsider candidate who promised to disrupt the establishment, tackle corruption and strengthen the economy. This is similar to Donald Trump's political campaign, who leveraged his past as a successful businessman - an outsider to the elite - to rally more people behind him, and relied on the disillusionment with traditional politicians and their ways of ruling a country.

These candidates looked at the political fragmentation to stand out as alternatives to the status quo, making them insightful cases to analyse in order to understand modern political practices and why particular figures become so popular. Looking at a country's specific socio-political context may aid in identifying the probability of these candidates not only to run for office, but also to actually win and be legitimised.

Another key finding that was unveiled was the representational power of such charismatic politicians. From the articles examined, whether right wing or left wing, it was clear that a wealthy man such as Berlusconi is encouraged to be regarded as an inspiration because of his financial and business accomplishments. A consequence of late-stage capitalism is that people's focus is drawn to wealthy individuals, as they are the heroes of our business society. Writer Johan Norberg (2007) encapsulates our society's idolatry of entrepreneurs and capitalists:

I think that we, the society, should be grateful to the entrepreneur and to the businessman for what they do. Entrepreneurs are the heroes of our world—that despite the risks, the hard work, the hostility from society, the envy from neighbours, and state regulations, they keep on creating, they keep on producing and trading. Without them, nothing would be there.

Leaders like Berlusconi have their influence legitimised not simply by the state once they are elected, but even before that, when society at large places them on metaphorical pedestals as role models for future generations. As a consequence, their personal flaws might get overlooked, and so do their attitudes towards specific groups of people, in virtue of the immense creativity and talent they are gifting to the world.

Take Donald Trump as an example of this: he was caught repeating and standing behind incredibly misogynistic and racist statements, but thousands of women and even minorities voted for him (Jaffe, 2017; Schwaradon, 2020, Statista, 2020). His charisma may be one of the many answers why his power was legitimised, but we cannot ignore that these voters' justification was that they cared more about his economic successes than about his attitudes towards them specifically (Goyette, O'Malley & Puglise, 2016; Setzler & Yanus, 2018). Charisma becomes a tool to be used strategically as a weapon: one draws the crowd in by appealing to everyone's dreams of being wealthier, better looking etc., and once they are hooked on the pipe dreams, they will likely dismiss the way they are treated directly, the way they are spoken about.

This representational power is nothing if it were not for the tool that allows leaders to reach their audience: media. Analysing the articles selected showed the role media played and still plays in upholding charisma as a necessary quality for leaders to guide a nation, a people. Politicians must "be photogenic, have a likeable personality" (Whimster, 2012), their appearances, their lives need to be manipulated to be perceived in a certain way, and this is done through the usage of media. Weber's (1968) concept of charisma placed it as a quality belonging to less rational societies, pre-modern. While it might still be irrational to forefront charisma as much when picking who to represent a nation, it is undoubtedly happening in front of our eyes, with the media as a site for cultivating these personalities. Media has even transformed the Weberian almost supernatural connection between the leader and the follower, it is only the artificially curated and mediatised charisma that survives, there is "no longer any profound psychic depth that binds charismatic leader and following together" (Whimster, 2012).

Today's political world is rightfully more inclined to discuss representation in the context of underrepresentation and marginalisation, attempting to draw a more diverse audience into the political stage and in the voting booths. However, it is possible to highlight a pattern of charismatic populist leaders who aim to represent the old guard, the people that "identity politics" has forgotten.

Berlusconi's sexism, his 'othering' of minorities -ranging from LGBTQ+ individuals, to women and immigrants- was an intrinsic part of his political campaigning. Young and old

men overlooked his 'naughty act' and cultural regression as they either saw their present selves in him, or they aspired to one day be rid of the consequences of these 'naughty acts'.

Here lies one of the core ideas of this thesis research: the charismatic leaders of our modern, business-oriented society are attributed aspirational qualities that inevitably draw those who dream of upward mobility. It is the dream they represent that entices the crowd. It is not merely their empty words, their wealth, their charismatic attitude or their relationship with women, but rather an irresistible mix that makes them the heroes of our times.

In a society that places values such as traditional masculinity, unrestrained power, and wealth over more ethical ones such as integrity, compassion, authenticity and the good of the collective, the election and legitimation of leaders that embody correlative values is normal. It is expected and accepted.

All of this is enhanced by the exploitation of mass media's pervasiveness in the modern world. I argue here that leaders have understood that channelling their charisma through television appearances, social media posts and videos would allow them to sow the seeds further than ever before. It is for this reason that charisma is such a necessary but underestimated tool to look at and utilise to understand this type of leader.

This thesis consequently situates itself within the context of populist studies, and draws from Weber's (1968) concept of charismatic authority to understand and identify these figures before their power gets legitimised by the highest forms of authority.

I have argued then that Berlusconi's case is just one of many that reinforces Rosanvallon's (2021) thesis that populism can be and should be - for all intents and purposes - be referred to as an ideology that is bound by specific and set beliefs and thus reflects certain personalities. Berlusconi is one case that highlights the potential dangers of charismatic modern leaders on a country's economy and its people's erosion of trust in the same institutions that should have their needs at their core.

However, the deconstruction of Berlusconi's personality and analysis of the complex tapestry he had built for the public also allow me to situate this thesis within the realm of leadership studies. It has allowed me to understand, break down and present some of the most distinctive

leadership styles of such leaders, and the understanding of these dynamics has shed a light on the broader implications of populist leadership and ideology on followers and non-followers.

Utilising charisma as a guiding light again, I have found a connection between the perceived intrinsic leadership qualities that a charismatic person is found to be possessing and a somewhat narcissistic personality who seeks outside validation. Charismatic individuals such as Trump, Berlusconi or even Elon Musk could have pursued various endeavours that would not have put them in leadership positions, but they saw the value and financial potential of being in those positions. Perhaps they saw the effect their charisma had on the people around them, and the way they would be drawn to them and regard them as superior, inspiring beings.

Charisma becomes an all-encompassing starting point to investigate the way modern day charisma is constructed and exploited by political leaders through media. It serves as a bridge between media and populism at their essence, as contemporary populism heavily relies on media platforms and artificial perceptions, while the success of politicians hinges on their charisma and appeal.



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Berlusconi e le donne, un'eredità pesante	Monica Lanfranco	<a href="https://www.micromega.net/berlusconi-e-le-donne-unere">https://www.micromega.net/berlusconi-e-le-donne-unere</a>

		dita-pesante/
Silvio Berlusconi in bilico tra pin-up e macho: con la chirurgia estetica sdoganò la transessualità culturale	Marco Belpoliti	<a href="https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/06/13/news/silvio_berlusconi_chirurgia_estetica-404280845/">https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/06/13/news/silvio_berlusconi_chirurgia_estetica-404280845/</a>
Così Berlusconi passò da Dallas alla Casa delle Libertà: il nuovo potere annunciato in tv	Michele Serra	<a href="https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2023/06/12/news/canale_5_casa_delle_liberta_berlusconi-395088638/">https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2023/06/12/news/canale_5_casa_delle_liberta_berlusconi-395088638/</a>
L'imposizione del lutto	Sebastiano Messina	<a href="https://www.repubblica.it/commenti/2023/06/13/news/lutto_nazionale_berlusconi_governo_meloni-404345249/">https://www.repubblica.it/commenti/2023/06/13/news/lutto_nazionale_berlusconi_governo_meloni-404345249/</a>
Bindi: "Il lutto nazionale per Berlusconi? Inopportuno, ha segnato in negativo la storia d'Italia"	Giovanna Casadio	<a href="https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2023/06/13/news/rosi_bindi_morte_berlusconi_intervista-404325030/">https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2023/06/13/news/rosi_bindi_morte_berlusconi_intervista-404325030/</a>
L'eredità politica di Berlusconi e quel sogno mai tramontato di un "Gop" italiano	Villy de Luca	<a href="https://www.huffingtonpost.it/blog/2023/07/18/news/leredita_politica_di_berlusconi_e_quel_sogno_mai_tramontato_di_un_gop_italiano-12832470/?callback=in&amp;code=OTDIZGI2YJUTZMUZZI0ZNZRHLWI5YTITODU2NTE2ZGIZZDVM&amp;state=534760e5a9474976bf9957c52731f56c">https://www.huffingtonpost.it/blog/2023/07/18/news/leredita_politica_di_berlusconi_e_quel_sogno_mai_tramontato_di_un_gop_italiano-12832470/?callback=in&amp;code=OTDIZGI2YJUTZMUZZI0ZNZRHLWI5YTITODU2NTE2ZGIZZDVM&amp;state=534760e5a9474976bf9957c52731f56c</a>
Berlusconi, l'anno dell'addio. Quell'eredità politica con cui tutti devono fare i conti. Sia gli amici sia gli avversari	Antonella Coppari	<a href="https://www.quotidiano.net/politica/berlusconi-anno-addio-eredita-politica-ea7b32d5">https://www.quotidiano.net/politica/berlusconi-anno-addio-eredita-politica-ea7b32d5</a>
L'eredità di Berlusconi che affossa il Sud	Pino Ippolito Armino	<a href="https://left.it/2023/07/05/leredita-di-berlusconi-che-affossa-il-sud/">https://left.it/2023/07/05/leredita-di-berlusconi-che-affossa-il-sud/</a>
Silvio Berlusconi: un'eredità economica, mediatica e sportiva	Alessandro Ruocco	<a href="https://www.creditnews.it/berlusconi-eredita-economica-mediatica-sportiva/">https://www.creditnews.it/berlusconi-eredita-economica-mediatica-sportiva/</a>

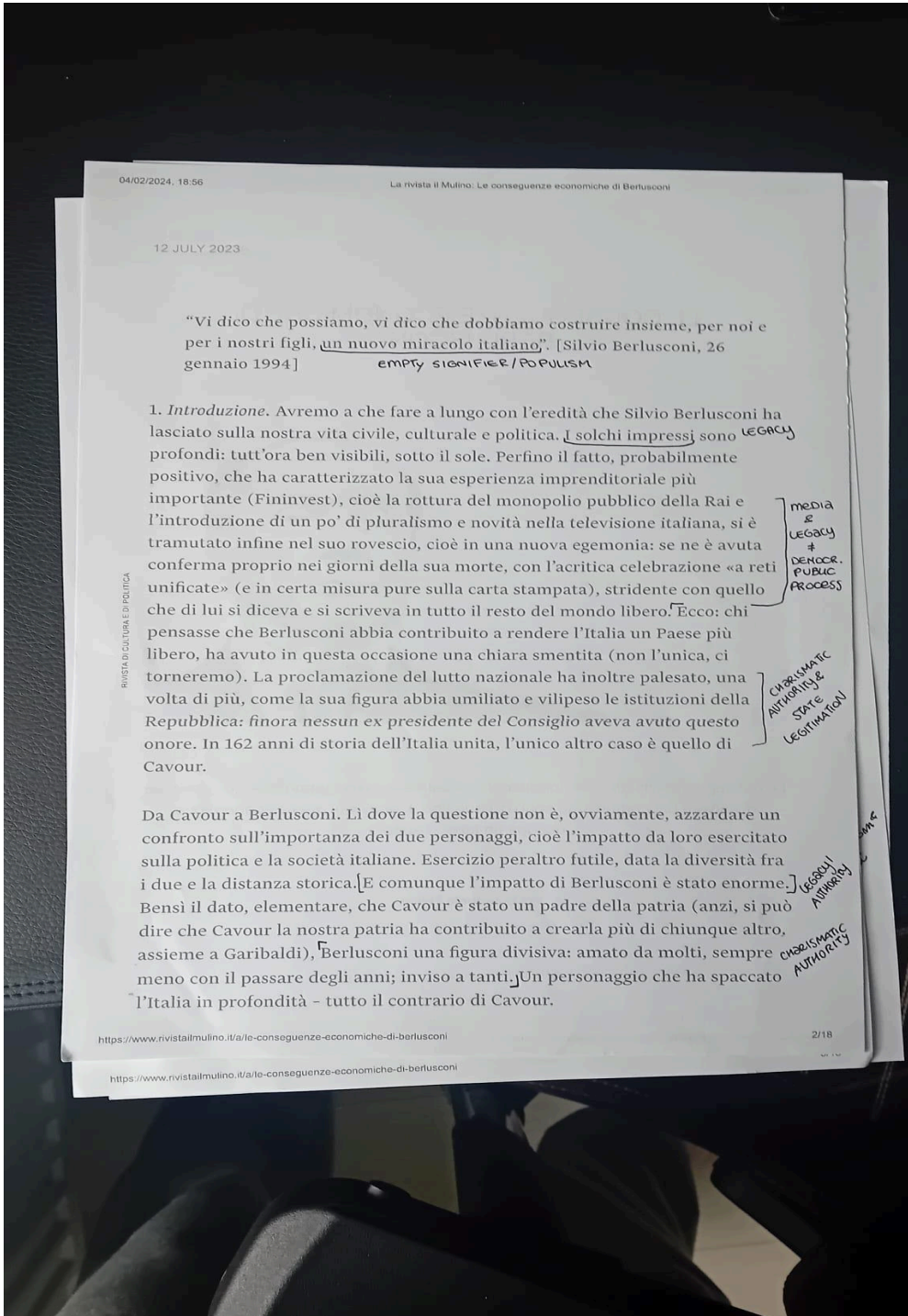
L'eredità politica di Berlusconi: quale sarà il futuro di Forza Italia?	Felice Florio	<a href="https://www.open.online/2023/06/12/silvio-berlusconi-futuro-forza-italia/">https://www.open.online/2023/06/12/silvio-berlusconi-futuro-forza-italia/</a>
Imprese e politica: Berlusconi e l'eredità difficile	Ernesto Galli della Loggia	<a href="https://www.corriere.it/opinioni/23_giugno_18/impres-politica-berlusconi-l-eredita-difficile-187849f4-0dfc-11ee-95d6-0f7a427f52d4.shtml">https://www.corriere.it/opinioni/23_giugno_18/impres-politica-berlusconi-l-eredita-difficile-187849f4-0dfc-11ee-95d6-0f7a427f52d4.shtml</a>
Berlusconi era unico e la sua eredità politica impossibile	Marco Esposito	<a href="https://www.today.it/opinion/morte-berlusconi-forza-italia-futuro.html">https://www.today.it/opinion/morte-berlusconi-forza-italia-futuro.html</a>
L'oscenità di Berlusconi è la sua vera eredità	Sergio Labate	<a href="https://www.editorialedomani.it/politica/italia/loscenita-di-berlusconi-e-la-sua-vera-eredita-gejf64c8">https://www.editorialedomani.it/politica/italia/loscenita-di-berlusconi-e-la-sua-vera-eredita-gejf64c8</a>
Silvio Berlusconi, comincia la saga per l'eredità politica: Meloni e Renzi in testa	Susanna Turco	<a href="https://lespresso.it/c/politica/2023/6/12/silvio-berlusconi-comincia-la-saga-per-leredita-politica-meloni-e-renzi-in-testa/4183">https://lespresso.it/c/politica/2023/6/12/silvio-berlusconi-comincia-la-saga-per-leredita-politica-meloni-e-renzi-in-testa/4183</a>
Silvio Berlusconi è morto, aveva 86 anni: il racconto di una vita fuori dall'ordinario	Antonio Polito	<a href="https://www.corriere.it/politica/23_giugno_12/silvio-berlusconi-morto-8ab875a6-08f8-11ee-9252-2eef801783fd.shtml">https://www.corriere.it/politica/23_giugno_12/silvio-berlusconi-morto-8ab875a6-08f8-11ee-9252-2eef801783fd.shtml</a>
Chi raccoglie l'eredità politica DI Silvio Berlusconi	Maurizio Belpietro	<a href="https://www.panorama.it/abbonati/politica/eredita-politica-silvio-berlusconi-marina">https://www.panorama.it/abbonati/politica/eredita-politica-silvio-berlusconi-marina</a>
La libertà è la grande eredità del berlusconismo	Sergio Soave	<a href="https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2023/06/13/news/la-liberta-e-la-grande-eredita-del-berlusconismo-5377968/">https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2023/06/13/news/la-liberta-e-la-grande-eredita-del-berlusconismo-5377968/</a>



# 9. Appendix

## Appendix 1

The two below images show the beginning of my coding, where I first identified broad categories within the texts. While originally done on paper, I quickly realised it would be better to move to a digital space and record quotes that could be useful.



04/02/2024, 18:49

Berlusconi, l'addio dell'Italia che ama - Panorama

POLITICA | 4 Giugno 2023

## Berlusconi, l'addio dell'Italia che ama

I funerali di Stato, il lutto nazionale e la grande partecipazione di popolo contro le polemiche e l'odio di chi non ha mai compreso fino in fondo la sua figura - COSA PREVEDE LA CERIMONIA DEL FUNERALE DI STATO

Federico Novella

0:00 / 0:01  
PUBBLICITÀ

Di fronte a quella bara, <sup>POWER, AUTHORITY</sup> Milano si ferma, con l'Italia tutta. Il saluto delle istituzioni, nella basilica, e delle migliaia di cittadini in piazza Duomo, e dei milioni collegati dalla tv, è l'ultimo tributo al <sup>LEGACY, C. AUTH.</sup> personaggio italiano più popolare nel mondo degli ultimi trent'anni. Mentre scorrono le immagini dell'evento mediatico che resterà negli annali, tra presidenti, ministri, volti televisivi e tanta gente comune, in sottofondo si ode un cicalaccio. Quello di un pezzo di Paese che Berlusconi non l'ha mai compreso. E si ostina a non capirlo anche nei momenti del raccoglimento collettivo.

Rosy Bindi che si scaglia contro il lutto nazionale dimentica che Berlusconi, prima che un politico, è stato uomo di popolo e di spettacolo. Diviso, nella sua figura di partito, ma amato da quasi tutti, sul piano umano. <sup>C. AUTHORITY</sup> Una figura di rilievo indiscutibile nella storia della Repubblica, se vogliamo anche <sup>REPRESENTATION</sup> un simbolo dell'italiano medio, con i suoi pregi e suoi difetti, come riconoscono in queste ore, forse un po' fuori tempo, anche alcuni tra i più accerrimi nemici, come Michele Santoro e Massimo D'Alema.

<https://www.panorama.it/news/politica/berlusconi-funerallutto-nazionale-polemiche>

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## Appendix 2

Appendix 2 shows the following step, when I started delineating the themes better and included quotes to help me once I started writing.

Article Title	Power	Media	Authority/Legitimacy	Sex Symbol/Gender relations	Masculinity	Democratic Process
Berlusconi e le donne, un'eredita pesante (Berlusconi and women: a loaded legacy)	1. The newspapers and tv channels owned by the famous husband attacked - not even subtly - Lario, describing her as aged and even overweight.	See: power	1. The former Minister was already infamous worldwide for having called a green party german politician a nazi, etc...	1. Chancellor Mereki was defined an "unfuckable big-ass" 2. He promised his football team that if they won, he'd gift them a bus full of whores.	1. Specific and traditional femininity to serve men, especially highlighted and present in tv. that's the women Berlusconi wanted to be around, that reinforced his masculinity.	1. How did a civilised western country expressed such an unwavering support -save for a few opponents - for such a person? 2.
il sessismo di Stato rappresenta l'eredita' culturale che Silvio Berlusconi lascia al nostro Paese ( State-sanctioned sexism represents the cultural legacy that S. Berlusconi leaves to our countr)		1. Key factor was use of media, where he utilised a communication channel that would allow him to enter the homes of italians at any hour of the day and state his ideology 2. his monopoly of media and public service made him the craftman of this regression/transformation of the female figure in the public sphere	1. state sanctioned sexism	1. Similar to masculinity: the women he surrounded himself with were either scantily clas and mute, or traditional women (still mute)	1. Like above, his machismo and extreme sexism were elevated to a collective revolution that was merely the representation of individual aspirations.	1. he is the craftsman of a cultural regression 2. his own individualism and unchecked sexism emboldened state sanctioned sexism
		1. his presence in the media did help breaking the previous monopoly of Rai on public broadcast, but it created a new hegemony, 2. His legacy/children still own it, which meant the Italian	1. state legitimation of his persona through state funerals, despite humiliating the intitutions and the country's reputation 2. his			same as authority: 1. state legitimation of his persona through state funerals, despite humiliating the intitutions and the country's reputation/ country still rewarded him after he trashed and disrespected the democratic process and institutions, and history. 2. he was diffident of rules and a state of rights (this should not give him

### Appendix 3

Appendix 3 shows my first attempt at drawing connections (all overlapping) between each concept I wanted to explore. At this stage, I was trying to streamline my thoughts in order to make the writing more cohesive and make sure the reader would not get lost in between concepts.

