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#iononmiingnocchio: Sports Politicisation in the Italian Twitter Space. Text Data Analysis of the Italian Public Opinion

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Andrea Marchesi, Aidar Zinnatullin and Riccardo Nanni

#iononmiinginocchio: Sports politicisation in the Italian Twitter space

Text data analysis of the Italian public opinion

ABSTRACT

Owing to their popularity, sports often turn into arenas for political contestation. The practice of taking the knee as a symbolic stance against racism was started in 2016 and is entrenched with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. This practice generated discussions in the Italian public opinion during Euro 2020, where the ambiguous stance of the Italian soccer team contributed to the debate. This article addresses this particular case as an example of more widespread practices of antiracist contestation (and public opinion reactions thereto) in sports, approaching Italian public opinion studies from the underexplored angle of computational social science. We collected tweets featuring the hashtag #iononmiinginocchio (and its variations) throughout the duration of Euro 2020. The language used was analysed through network analysis and toxicity analysis to observe the characteristics of the debate and the rhetoric employed. This research finds that, despite politicians' media visibility throughout the debate, the Twitter discussion was mainly driven by common citizens. In this context, a toxic language encompassing white supremacist, homophobic, and sexist remarks was often employed with a silencing effect on a wide share of the Twitter usership.

Keywords: Racism, Black Lives Matter, Sports Politicisation, Athlete Activism, Social Media.

1. Introduction

Owing to their popularity, sports often turn into arenas for political contestation, right as in those events in which athletes take the knee before the game starts. Such practice started in 2016 as a symbolic stance against racism and is entrenched the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Boykoff and Carrington, 2020; Kim *et al.*, 2020). During Euro 2020, UEFA authorised the 36 national soccer teams to decide independently whether or not to take the knee. While several teams agreed upon a common behaviour, the ambiguous stance of the Italian soccer team generated a debate in the Italian public opinion. After a series of contradictory statements from the team's captain and PRs, the team took the common line of kneeling only when the opponent would, in solidarity with them. Such choice did not help quiet the debate, as it resonated as a non-choice with a sector of the public, thus leading to a polarisation that lasted throughout the competition (Corriere della Sera, 2021).

How has the Italian public perceived the Italian national soccer team's stance vis-à-vis this practice? This article addresses this research question, focusing on such a particular case as an example of practices of antiracist contestation (and public opinion reactions thereto) in sports, approaching Italian public opinion studies from the underexplored angle of computational social science. We used the software R to collect social media data, more specifically tweets featuring the hashtag #iononmiinginocchio ("I don't take the knee") and its variations throughout the duration of Euro 2020. The language used was analysed through word network analysis and toxicity analysis to gauge the political drivers of the various stances in the debate and the characteristics of the rhetoric employed.

Through these means, this article sheds new light on Italian public opinion studies within the specific realm of sports politicisation. We conceive sports as a contested site where the conflicts and individual roles permeating all the other social spheres are displayed (Hylton, 2021). Since literature

found a growing association between sports and the term “racial justice”¹ in 2020 (Chen, 2021), this paper focuses on dimensions of sport politicisation pertaining to the social structure of “race” and anti-racist practices.

This article develops as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of sports politicisation while section 3 discusses the role of social media in shaping and displaying public opinions. Section 4 illustrates the data and methods employed in this research. Section 5 discusses the empirical findings and section 6 draws conclusions.

2. Sports politicisation, taking the knee, and public perceptions

In August 2016 the San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick politicised the American anthem by performing a silent protest against the racist events which were occurring in the United States². Such a practice, backed by the BLM protest movement, quickly spread in the National Football League (NFL) and other sports, gaining both support and resentment from both athletes and the public (Kim *et al.*, 2020).

“The discussion around celebrity activism and particularly the ways in which black athletes, such as a Kaepernick, have engaged the sports-media complex in recent years, needs to be situated in the context of the Black Lives Matter social movement which itself should be understood as part of a broader, global contestation of and resistance to colonial regimes of domination that are underpinned by forms of white racial governance.” (Boykoff and Carrington, 2020: 831)

Such a politicisation of the mass media space offered by football games, together with the following engagement of sports corporates, «raised several questions about social justice, freedom of speech, and the role companies do and/or should take in engaging in political issues» (Kim *et al.*, 2020: 1). In this, the BLM movement increased its prominence, and the aforementioned practice spread all over the sports, especially after the murder of George Floyd by a Minnesota policeman in May 2020, symptomatic of deeper inequalities - such as in access to healthcare, as highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Evans *et al.*, 2020; Chen, 2021). Besides the complex intertwining of historical and ongoing processes pertaining to the fight for Black people’s and ethnic minorities’ rights in Western democracies (not only in the United States), the paper centres on its expression in the sports arena. Indeed, sports events have become a place where athletes and supporters can deliver political messages. This is particularly true for the main global manifestations, such as national teams’ soccer competitions (Tomlinson and Young, 2006). This resulted in a contested practice: not all players and supporters approve of it³, and previous research found prominent associations between approval/disapproval and individual socio-demographic characteristics and social positions (see Intravia *et al.*, 2019). The sports arena has already become a symbolic space (Carrington, 2010; Intravia *et al.*, 2019), where Black athletes in the United States employed «their celebrity status as a mechanism to engage broader publics around questions of racial justice» (Boykoff and Carrington, 2020: 831). This social activism is then made visible to the wider public through mass media.

Among the thriving studies focused on how people respond to the politicisation of sports, little is known about the broader public, *i.e.*, followers and supporters (Intravia *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2020). After the George Floyd murder, 2020 sports events witnessed, for example, the strike of NBA players, the campaign “No Room for Racism” by the English Premier League, and the support to BLM protest by those athletes who took the knee before matches (see McClure and Halvorsen, 2021; Evans *et al.*, 2021). The protest continued in 2021 during both the Olympic Games and the European soccer championship in a context of fading institutional and public support (Evans *et al.*, 2021).

¹ This term has become common in talking about racial contestation in North America. However, there is no agreed-upon definition of what it entails. See Chen (2021) for a review and a mapping of the main uses of the term “racial justice”.

² The athlete sat down and then knelt during the American anthem to oppose racial oppression and police brutality against black people in the United States (Intravia *et al.*, 2019; Boykoff and Carrington, 2020).

³ Indeed, opponents claim that BLM protest “undermines the notion that other (White) lives also matter as if the two notions were somehow incompatible” (Evans *et al.*, 2020: 295).

“Although such events are grounded in a series of crises that stretch back decades, antiracist activism at present has gained a new intensity. This new intensity is evident in the world of sport not only because of individual athletes but inter/national governing organisations, clubs and teams, and grassroots activism. This includes the national football teams of several European countries, in which racialisation is seldom discussed, showing their support for the protests against racism.” (Evans *et al.*, 2020: 289)

In Italy, such a practice gained relevance during Euro 2020, which was won by its national team. The competition has been characterised by a lack of uniform behaviour from the Italian team’s part: “athlete protest against racial discrimination has been far from uniform, and those who protest have, at times, been criticised by those who do not” (*ibidem*, 188). While Italian players did not behave uniformly during the first matches, the whole team decided to take the knee only when the opponents also did. However, they ended the competition avoiding taking the knee at all. Their choices have been debated by Italian politicians and mass media, and the three choices have been strongly criticised by those who either did not or did support BLM protest. As UEFA authorised the 36 national teams to decide independently, several national teams unanimously decided whether to take the knee, but the Italian team did not find an “agreement”. Above all, it was after the third game of the group stage (Italy - Wales), which witnessed 6 on 11 Italian players taking the knee, that both mass and social media undertook what the press defined as “a trial” (La Stampa, 2021a; Corriere della Sera, 2021). Therefore, the entire team decided to not take the knee before the following match against Austria (round of 16). The common choice was to stand up, and the team declared anti-racist even without attending the practice (La Repubblica, 2021; La Gazzetta dello Sport, 2021) and to take the knee only when the opponent team asks for it. Accordingly, Italian players followed the Belgians in taking the knee before the quarter-final match (La Stampa, 2021b) and followed the decisions of the Spanish before the semi-final match and of the English in the final (il Giornale, 2021). However, after the quarter-final game, the interest in the practice by both mass and social media strongly decreased (see section 3). Such an ambiguous practice by the Italian national team can be interpreted by the public as a “tacit aversion to supporting anti-racism initiatives, dismantling racist practices and therefore weakening the potential for social change” (Hylton, 2021: 42).

Right after the very first opening match (Turkey - Italy), a specific hashtag among the others became viral among groups of Italian social media users, especially on Twitter: #iononminginocchio (“I do not take the knee”). Employing this hashtag, a section of the Italian public opposed the practice and shared its own opinion about it, whose growing relevance has been strongly tied to its performance during an international competition. The resulting debate in social media paired with the one in mass media, resulted in an interdependence of the two. While this hashtag became viral, its right opposite #iomininginocchio (“I take the knee”) did not. This aspect falls outside the scope of this article, although it hints at two relevant aspects: the politicisation and polarisation of social media use, and the effects of toxic social media debates illustrated in the empirical section.

Therefore, the paper focuses on such text data supplied by social media to analyse how the practice of taking the knee to support the BLM protest movement during Euro 2020 was addressed by the Italian social media users. In this section, we set up the ties between the politicisation of sports, the specific BLM protest, and the perception of the public. The next section delves into the use of social media to frame events occurring in the social world.

3. Social media: displaying and observing public opinion

Social media platforms enable users to make public their own viewpoint towards specific “objects” (*e.g.*, events, people, entities), as well as to show their agreement/disagreement with the viewpoint of other users. Since those who attend these networks can express their opinions, social media analyses started to assume the Internet as a valuable source of data for the study of public opinion. When the “object” of interest holds political features, such data are informative for political attitudes and preferences, and social networks provide a (digital) context where the supply and demand of the political communication process interact (Finlayson, 2020).

Social media platforms' role in politics, since their launch and active promotion, has been considered as one of the factors facilitating political mobilisation in different forms. For instance, Gil de Zúñiga *et al.* (2017) elaborated on the concept of social media social capital - presented as the way individuals make and develop connections with each other, foster their common values, and seek to talk about their community problems on social media - and its positive influence on offline political participation like engagement in political campaigns, social movements, donating money, attending a protest action, or voting.

At the same time, scholars observed an increased tendency of affective polarisation, understood as an individual's identification with a political position along the left-right spectrum, and further division of the world into a group of like-minded individuals and those who represent the out-group entity based not only on policy preferences but also on emotions cultivated during political campaigns (Iyengar *et al.*, 2012; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). Those online spaces where users interact only with like-minded individuals are defined as "echo chambers", constituted by networks of users discussing topics uniformly (Röchert *et al.*, 2020). This tendency started before the global spread of the Internet and was associated with the proliferation of cable television: homogenous communities lead to an increase in affective polarisation (Harel *et al.*, 2020), and uncivil discussions result in the increase of perceived polarisation in a society (Hwang *et al.*, 2014)⁴.

Social media platforms are characterised by polarising effects, which social and political researchers focused on. Sunstein (2018: 64) noted that people in a situation of plentiful opinions

"will take the opportunity to listen only or mostly to those points of view that they find most agreeable [...] There is a natural human tendency to make choices with respect to entertainment and news that do not disturb our pre-existing view of the world."

According to the author, pre-existing opinions direct the consumption of mass and social media, and pre-existing group identity and solidarity with the use of social media lead to more extreme polarisation. On the same point, Muller and Schwarz (2021) showed that posts and comments with extremist sentiments on Facebook not only predict criminal activity but also serve as a propagation mechanism for hate speech and offline actions confirming the thesis about social media as filter bubbles. The authors argue that criminal incidents against refugees occur in territories where a high level of online hate speech was observed. At the same time, when individuals can get access to different sources of information, the level of polarisation may decrease. Shugars and Beauchamp (2019) reported that individuals engage in discussions with ideologically far users more frequently. Additionally, focusing on Twitter, tweets with negative and emotional sentiments also lead to more active engagement of users (*ibidem*). A more comprehensive perspective on the role of social media in creating homogeneous communities or, on the contrary, overstepping their boundaries considering different contextual circumstances (social, economic factors, political and media system, peculiarities of political competition) and personal media usage habits is presented in a recent work by Vaccari and Valeriani (2021).

Different forms of incivility (including toxicity) on the Internet as a manifestation of affective polarisation attracted the attention of the research community. How incivility, impoliteness, and deliberation evolve on different platforms considering the sensitivity of the discussed topics was considered by Oz *et al.* (2018). Researchers also looked differently at incivility and toxicity in Internet discussions. For instance, Rossini (2020) suggested considering incivility and intolerance separately, arguing that the former is associated with disagreement and hence contains the democratic potential while the latter undermines the basis of an inclusive political environment and, therefore, undermines opportunities to represent different perspectives during discussions. This finding is worthwhile to

⁴ The definition of "uncivil discussions" carries subjective elements. However, literature reached some common ground on its meaning. Here we refer to Coe *et al.*'s (2014: 660) definition of incivility as "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics".

consider for a better understanding of the structure of political discussions but, at the same time, it is hard to replicate in a fine-tuned fashion when dealing with a huge amount of data.

The polarised and toxic nature of Internet discussions does not necessarily mean that people change their perception of the original content because of the environment in the discussion section and think about it through the lens of uncivil statements of other users. Kosmidis and Theocharis (2020) conducted a series of experiments that showed that uncivil debates accompanying some public statements made by elite actors induce higher levels of enthusiasm among those who are expected to align with the initial elite member's claim. Even though none of the possible explanations showed statistical significance (entertainment, issue salience, and affective polarisation), the authors still tend to think that the factor of partisanship may play a role in the perception of messages and discussions around them (*ibidem*). The points highlighted by these authors suggested that social media users holding similar opinions on a specific topic are likely to frame it in the same way, diverging from those who do not share their same worldview.

4. Data and methods

Given the focus on digital media, we collected all the tweets containing the hashtag #iononmiinginocchio (and variations thereof) from the day preceding the Italian team's first game to the day following the final (11/06/2021 - 12/07/2021)⁵. The choice of focusing on Twitter is based on a combination of accessibility of data, which is granted by the fact that tweets are always public, and Twitter's role as a social media platform for political communication (Percastré-Mendizabal *et al.*, 2017). To collect the tweets, we employed the R package "academicwitter" (Barrie & Ho, 2021), which is based on the Twitter API. The resulting text data (10.501 observations) has been cleaned removing non-Italian and spam tweets⁶, as well as those tweets containing only the hashtag (*i.e.*, with no opinion content). The final dataset contains 10.069 valid tweets, the text of which was further cleaned by eliminating stopwords, punctuation, links, irrelevant/redundant words (such as the reference to the Italian team), and special characters (emojis, tags). After this, empty tweets have been removed from the dataset, and the analyses have been performed on 9.076 tweets, each word being stemmed.

Clean data was analysed through two types of text network analysis, one based on authors, and one based on hashtags. These have been followed by toxicity, or incivility, analysis. Network analyses are useful computational methods to study the constitution of like-minded groups of users discussing the same (current politically and civically relevant) topic online, a phenomenon referred to as "opinion-based homogeneity" (Röchert *et al.*, 2020). The first type of text network analysis allows one to identify the most central tweet authors (Bail, 2016), who were nonetheless left anonymous for ethical reasons, and the discursive connections among them, represented in the form of modules (*i.e.*, intra-network communities) graphically identified by different colours. The second type of text network analysis allows identifying the most discussed topics connected to the main argument and the connections among them. This is done using hashtags as a proxy to identify a topic in a post. This differs from other techniques such as topic modelling in that it shows connections among topics. Furthermore, tweets being very short does not allow for topic modelling and the existing packages for short-text analysis proved ineffective in our case. Finally, we conducted a toxicity analysis. As a measure of incivility, we use the toxicity score provided by the Google Perspective API (see Jigsaw, 2021). Toxicity is understood by the Perspective API developers as "a rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable comment that is likely to make people leave a discussion". This toxicity classifier is trained on millions of user-generated texts available in several languages, including Italian, and collected "from different platforms and reviewed by human annotators".

⁵ We also collected all the tweets containing the opposite hashtag #iomiinginocchio (and variations thereof). However, after text data cleaning, the inclusion of the resulting few tweets in the analyses did not provide different results than those presented in this and in the following section.

⁶ Spam tweets pertain to those which included automated marketing posts that simply contain any trending hashtag.

To summarise, while text network analysis on tweet authors allows us to observe the main “opinion leaders” and their connections, by focusing on a network of hashtags we reveal the topics debated, their connections, and their relevance. Applying toxicity analysis, we could look at the level of incivility in the language associated with the public debate on Twitter. These three methods allowed us to address such aspects of discussions as (a) “who” leads the public debate, (b) on “what” topics, and (c) “how” - *i.e.*, adopting which kind of language or frame.

In conducting the analyses, methodological choices have been driven by ethical concerns, too. In particular, it will be illustrated in the empirical section that the main individual leaders of the debate in question on Twitter are private citizens. While Twitter data is knowingly public and has been collected in compliance with Twitter’s terms of service, the use of data shared by private citizens for study purposes raises privacy concerns that had to be mainstreamed in the analysis. Notwithstanding this, the data collected allowed observation to be conducted.

To begin with, it is worth observing some characteristics of the analysed data. Figure 1 shows the number of valid and clean tweets over the 30 days of data collection. Relevant tweets were unsurprisingly more numerous around the date of the Italian team’s games.

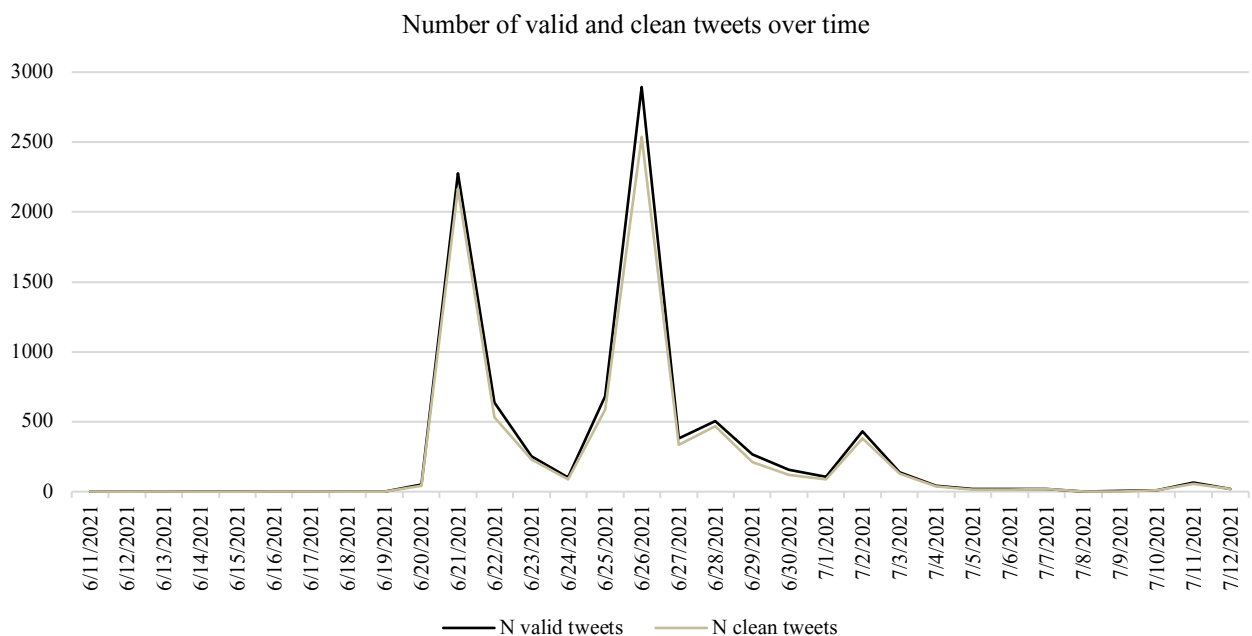


Figure 1. Number of valid and clean tweets over time.

However, prior to 20 June, the hashtag #iononmiinginocchio was not used, with the 20 June game opening the debate. On that day, Italy played against Wales, and for the first time, the team took the knee. As mentioned in section 2, the decision was not unanimous among team players, half of whom did not participate in the action. Other spikes were visible around 26 June, *i.e.*, the game against Austria, and 2 July, the game against Belgium. The latter was particularly meaningful given the team’s vocal support to BLM, with their striker Romelu Lukaku being one of the symbols of the campaign throughout Euro 2020 (Roddy, 2021), although the spike in the debate (at least in Twitter-related numerical terms) was reached between 26 June and 2 July.

Turning to stemmed words, it is relevant to look at the most used ones in the entire set of tweets. Figure 2 shows the top ten stemmed words according to their frequency, which exemplifies the strong politicisation of the debate: the first five words are “razzism”, “blacklivesmatter”, “razzist”, “gest” and “polit”. Indeed, “razzism” and “razzist” refers to “racism” and “racist”, “polit” refers to the political feature of the debate, while “gest” refers to the actual “action” to take the knee.

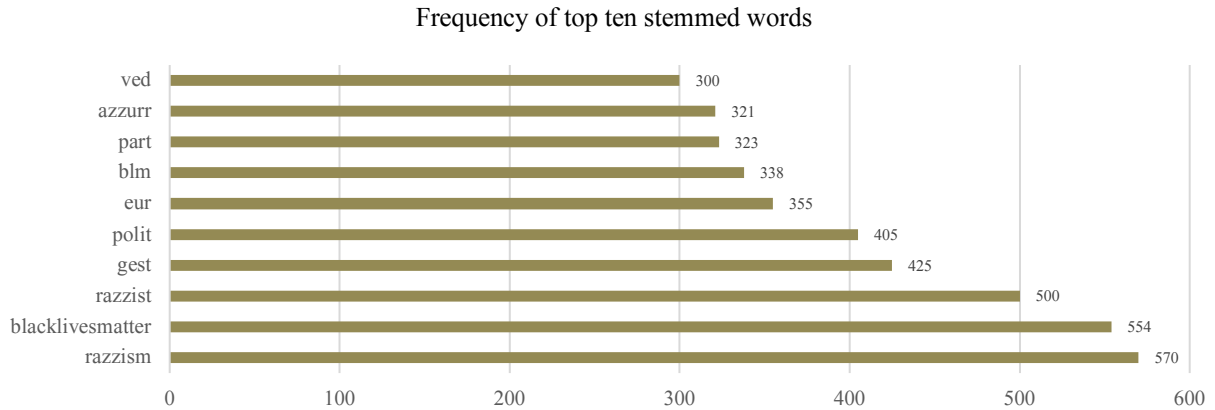


Figure 2. Frequency of top ten stemmed words.

The distribution of words and their importance in the debate triggered on Twitter by the #iononmiinginocchio hashtag are visible also through the word cloud depicted in Figure 3. This word cloud shows the stemmed words whose frequency in the entire set of tweets is equal to or greater than 60. Apart from the most common words already illustrated in Figure 2 (bigger in size in Figure 3), one can see further discursive political connections. For example, mentions of vaccines (“vaccin”) appear. Other more connected topics that recur in the analysed tweets are references to the anti-hate speech law proposal that was debated in the Italian Parliament in the summer of 2021 (the so-called “DDL Zan”). Other hashtags, such as #iostoconorban (“I stand with Orbàn”) and #iostocolpoliziotto (“I stand with the policeman”), explicitly state a connection between the use of the main hashtag in question and the political connotation of the debate.



Figure 3. Most used stemmed words (wordcloud).

Based on the data and methods illustrated above, the forthcoming section will address the analysis we conducted and move to conclusions on Italian public opinion’s reaction to the practice of taking a knee against racism and in favour of the BLM movement.

5. Empirical findings

Following the methods illustrated in section 3, this section will look at the “who”, “what”, and “how” aspects of the #iononmiinginocchio debate in this order.

To begin with, text network analysis based on authors⁷ (Figure 4) shows that two users “lead” the Twitter debate, identified by their pseudo-author IDs (which for privacy reasons are not conducive to their actual Twitter profiles), are more central than others in the network. In other words, it means the tweets posted by the nodes in question include the same terms and words employed by other users to discuss the same topic⁸. Such nodes also lie at the intersections among modules, where a module is a group of nodes maintaining a stronger but not exclusive relation to each other. In other words, it is an intra-network community (Blondel *et al.*, 2008). In Figure 4, modules are represented in different colours and one can see that the two most central nodes all maintain contact with nodes of different colours, *i.e.*, nodes lying in different modules. The central role in the network played by the two nodes in question is also given by their position as contact points among different modules.

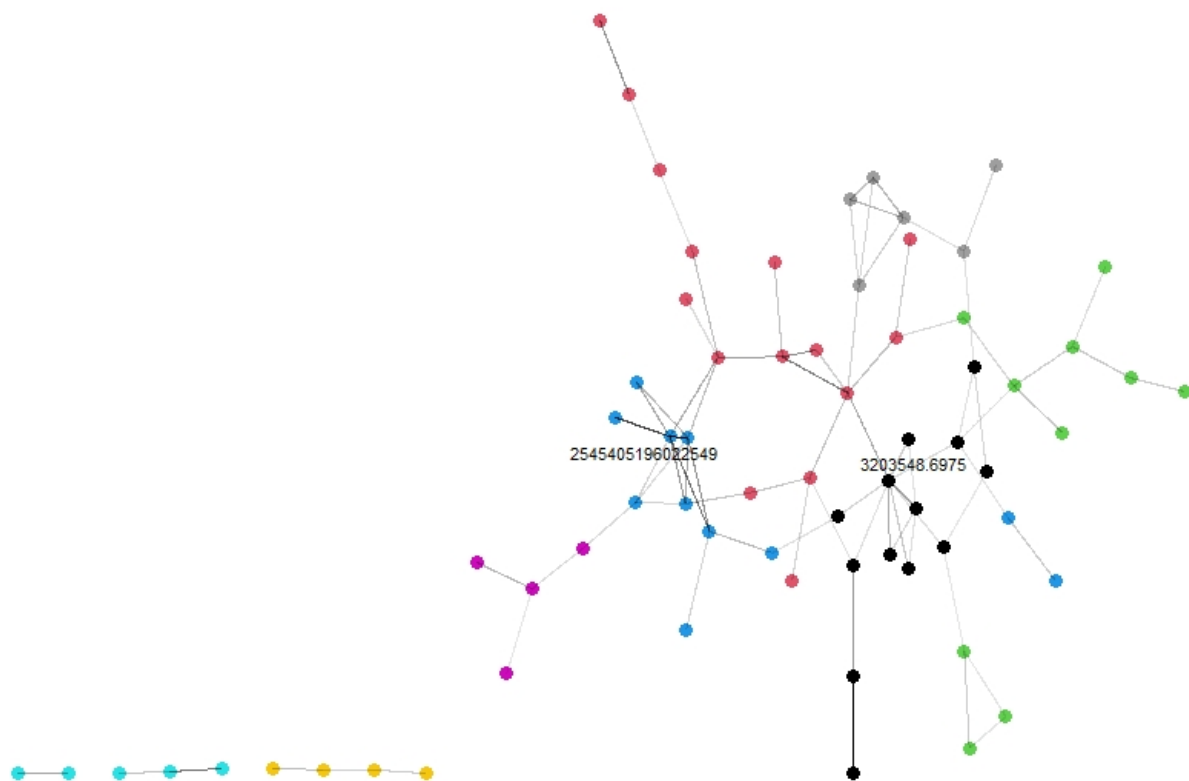


Figure 4. Author-based network

Such users (3203548.6975 and 2545405196022549), despite their centrality, appear to be private citizens with no public persona. For this reason, no further information on their political activity has been observed in order to protect their privacy. However, it is important to underline how such a central role in the #iononmiinginocchio Twitter debate has not been played by public “opinion leaders” such as national-level politicians, but by private citizens. These citizens posted tweets that encompass the main ways in which the event has been discussed on social media by the Italian public.

⁷ A network analysis of the “texts” written by specific authors focuses on the words these authors used to express their own opinion on the same topic. Accordingly, the tweets posted by the same author are grouped together as they constitute a unique “full text”. Those users characterised by less than ten tweets in the dataset were excluded from the network analysis because their final “full texts” would be too short to detect associations with other users’ “full texts”. We employed the R package “textnets” to prepare the data and visualise the network. The visualisation function enables to trim non-informative edges. The same function also enables to label the most informative nodes. Owing to the lack of a general rule for such a parameter, we decided to label those authors with more than five connections, which we noted would provide the most interpretable network.

⁸ The bolder the connection between two nodes, the larger the proportion of words employed by the two nodes.

Among the tweets posted by the users 3203548.6975 and 2545405196022549 (see Figure 4), the final dataset includes, respectively, 13 and 10 tweets. Therefore, their centrality is not due to a large number of tweets (the user who posted the largest number of tweets has 73 tweets in the final dataset). The most salient tweets for each of the two users are now presented. These tweets underwent a non-literal translation, limiting the possibility to trace back the actual post and the author accordingly.

“They [the Italian soccer team players] must not take the knee! This is just a circus” (3203548.6975, 23/06/2021)

“Italy is not a racist country, and NO ONE should take the knee for an American practice” (2545405196022549, 26/06/2021)

“Italy has other problems” (2545405196022549, 26/06/2021)

“I am not a hypocrite unlike you radicalchic [replying to an Italian singer who supported the practice]” (3203548.6975, 27/06/2021)

It should be highlighted that both the accounts show the Italian flag beside their name and follow far-right and right-wing Italian politicians, mainly Giorgia Meloni (leader of Brothers of Italy) and Claudio Borghi (The League’s Member of Parliament)⁹. Moreover, the four tweets provide three main points. First, despite the negative assessment of the practice, their way to frame it summarises the main elements of its perception by the Italian social media users. Such a perception may also be positive, employing the same elements. Second, the practice is defined as a “circus” and as something “American”, therefore far from the Italian social context, which is defined as “not racist”. Third, usual populist discourses’ elements are detected (see Graziano, 2018): other issues are conceived more prominent than racism, since the country is not defined as such (differently from the United States), and those who support the practice are “hypocrites” and “radical chic”, terms usually referred to centre-left politicians and voters.

Moving to Figure 5, one can observe connections among topics circling around the main hashtag. For the sake of parsimony and readability, we chose to include only 50 hashtags. Expectedly, the strongest connection (graphically represented as the thickest edge) is between the main hashtag #iononmiinginocchio and #blacklivesmatter. Indeed, such a practice has been backed by the BLM movement since Kaepernick’s politicisation of sports events (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Boykoff and Carrington, 2020). During the cleaning process, variations on the two hashtags were incorporated into a sole one. For example, #blm and #blacklivesmetter (misspelled) were collapsed into #blacklivesmatter. Apart from this main connection, it is interesting to observe which topics were raised during the online debate. Those who supported taking the knee were dubbed “pseudo-Italians” (“pseudoitaliani”) by the opponents, while many on the latter side directly attacked the main Italian centre-left party (Democratic Party) with such hashtags as #pidioti (a pun between the party’s Italian acronym and the word “idiots”) and #maipiùpd (“Democratic Party Never Again”). Hashtags such as “I stand with Orbàn” and “I stand with the policeman”, whose use was illustrated in section 3, are directly connected to the main hashtag, along with #bloccostudentesco (the name of the far-right party Casapound’s youth section). Connections were also made with opposition to the law draft against hate speech (known as “DDL Zan”), then debated in the Italian parliament (#nodd1) and with George Soros (#georgesoros), whose name is often used in far-right rhetoric to associate left-wing globalism and corrupted financial capitalism putatively controlled by a Jewish elite (Kalmar *et al.*, 2018). It can be noted in Figure 5 that #nodd1, #iostoconilpoliziotto, and #iostoconorban are connected among each other, showing a discursive entrenchment between support for Orbàn, opposition to DDL Zan, and open support for “the policeman” - which refers to the police officer who killed George Floyd in May 2020. After all, the presence of such hashtags as #primallitalia (“Italy first”) and #primagliitaliani (“Italians first”) exemplifies the connection between criticism of BLM and right-wing populist stances (Graziano, 2018; Scrinzi, 2021).

⁹ Despite both users follow more than one League’s deputies on Twitter, only the user 2545405196022549 also follows Matteo Salvini (leader of The League).

It must be stressed that the practice of taking the knee has been spreading all over the sports events since the Floyd murder (Evans *et al.*, 2020; Chen, 2021). However, the connections between this practice, the BLM movement, and other current (national and international) political topics highlight the role played by the sports arena in delivering political messages. Focusing on the phenomenon under investigation (Tomlinson and Young, 2006), the hashtags illustrated seem to underline associations between the main topic and other debates focused on civil rights. Those actors who either did or did not support the practice dominate the network (for example, Orbàn and the Democratic Party) became protagonists of users' debates. On one side of the spectrum, conservative political actors were blamed for a tacit aversion to such a kind of initiatives (Hylton, 2021). On the other hand, broad sectors of the conservative right observed the BLM movement as explicit opposition to non-Black lives (Evans *et al.*, 2020). Hashtags such as #whitelivesmatter, #cancelculture, and #reverseracism exemplify this point.

Conversely, hashtags related to support for Black Lives Matter and the practice of taking the knee seem to be more isolated, with no relevant one appearing in the main network. On the contrary, direct connections between the hashtags #stagista (“intern”) and #casabianca (“White House”) illustrate the misogynist nature of discourse among those opposing Black Lives Matter. These two hashtags refer to the Lewinski case that brought the Clinton presidency to an end and draw a parallel between the practice of taking the knee and the sexual acts entailed in the Lewinski case – with no regard to questions of consent and power dynamics.

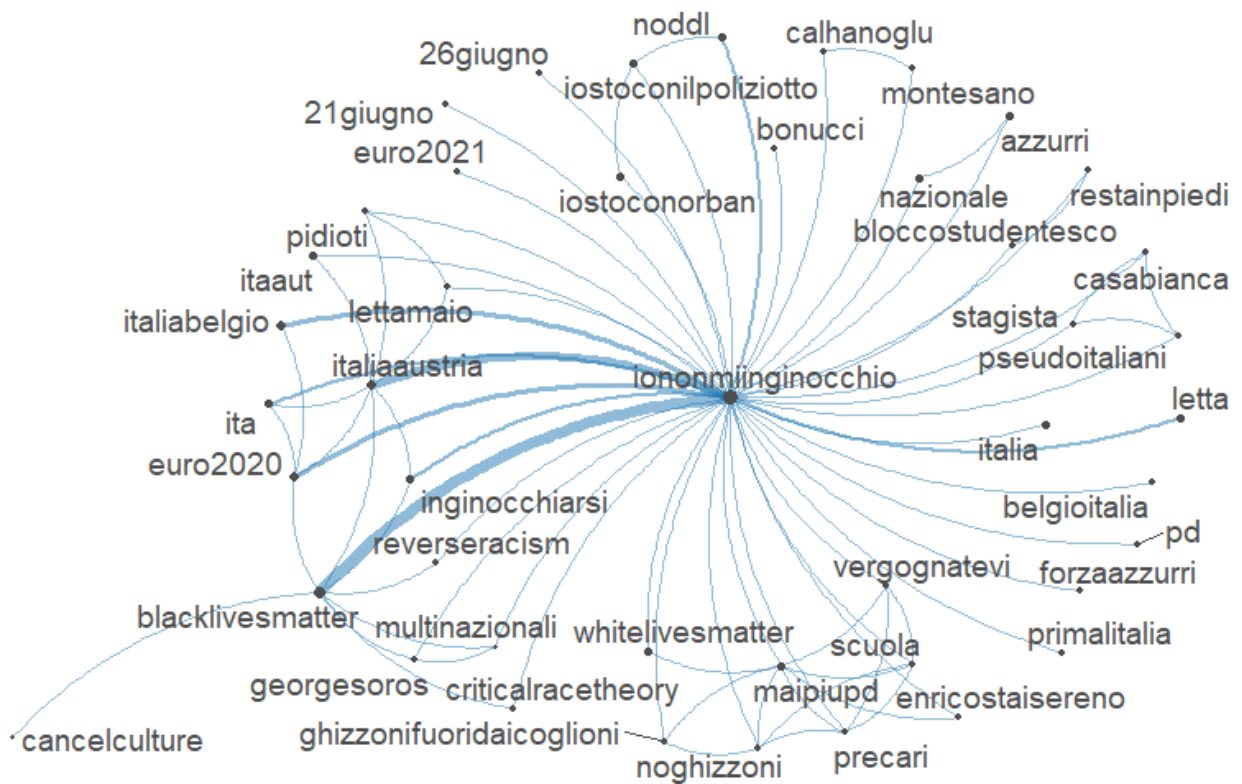


Figure 5. Hashtag-based network

This last aspect connects us directly to the third analytical part of this article, where we measure toxicity in the debate. The distribution of tweets toxicity is presented in Figure 6 which compares 6.321 messages which opened the discussion threads (non-reply), whereas 2.755 tweets were left in threads. Both types of messages show similar toxicity patterns. Yet, non-reply tweets tend to be slightly more “uncivil”.

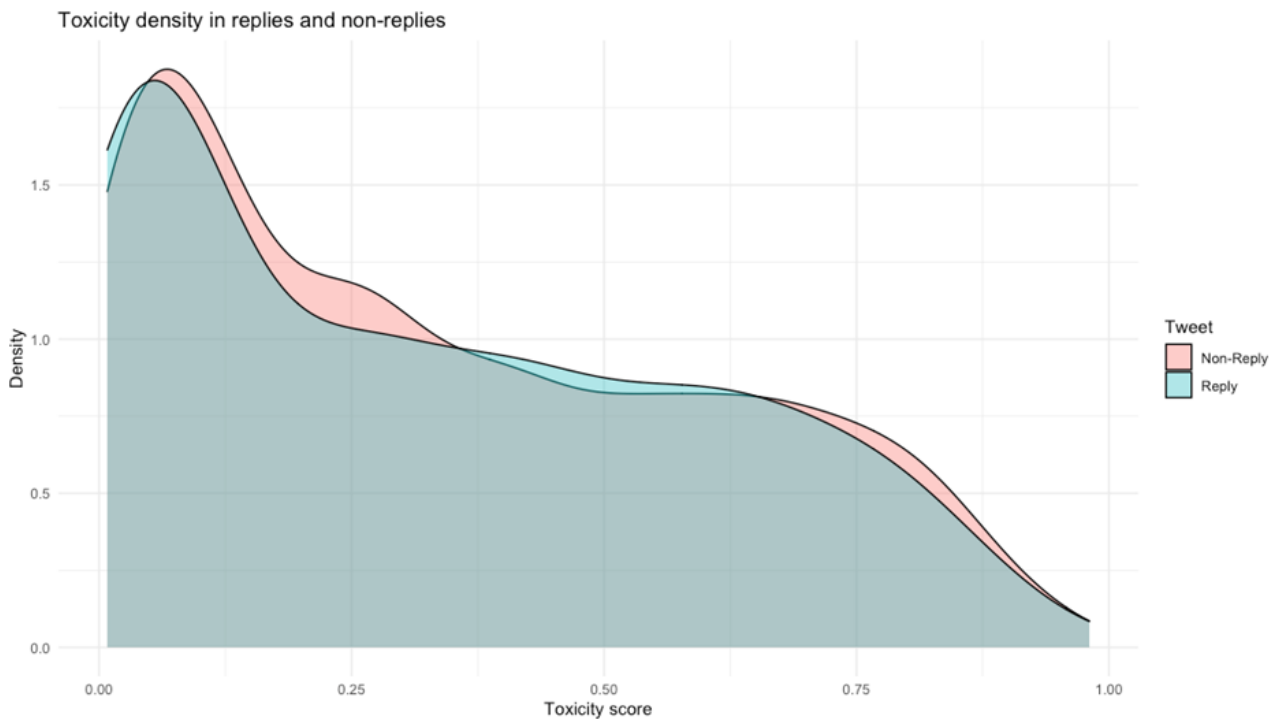


Figure 6. Toxicity of reply and non-reply tweets (the pool set). $N = 9,076$ tweets.

However, if we look at the subset of the most active Twitter users who engaged in the discussion, *i.e.*, those who left at least ten tweets, toxicity density for non-replies and replies changes. In this case, replies (1,210 tweets) are more toxic than messages which open conversation (1,220 tweets), except in the right-hand tail where non-replies on aggregate are more toxic than replies (Figure 7).

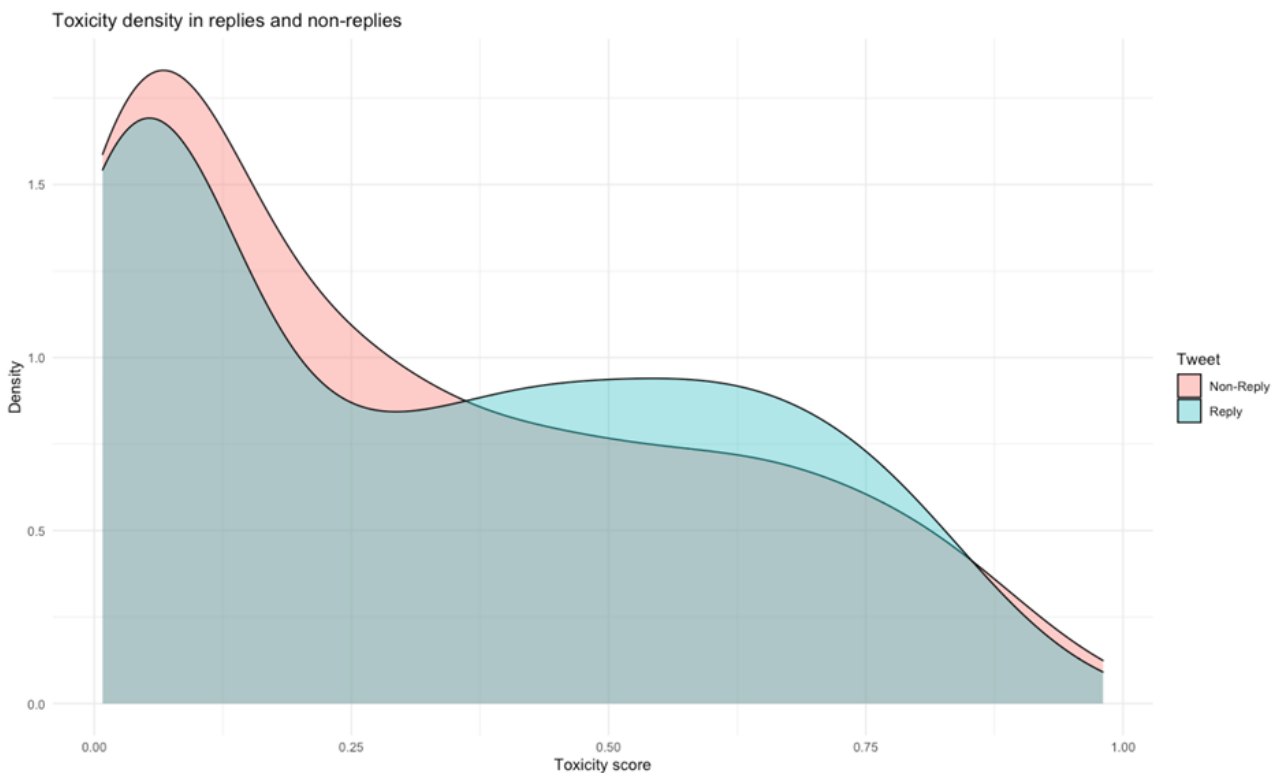


Figure 7. Toxicity of reply and non-reply tweets (subset of the active users who wrote at least ten tweets with a hashtag). $N = 2,430$ tweets.

6. Conclusions and venues for future research

Based on the findings illustrated in the empirical section, three main observations can be drawn. To begin with, despite the active role of leading national politicians in the debate, such as Matteo Salvini and Enrico Letta (Open, 2021), often mentioned in the hashtags too, the most central users in the Twitter discussion were private citizens. While the exploratory analysis presented in this article does not allow generalisations, this finding carries implications for future research on social media polarisation and the role of opinion leaders in agenda-setting and eventually shaping public opinion. In particular, the extent to which a topic, once launched, escapes the control of opinion leaders is a venue for research.

Second, the debate was most strongly driven by a use of language typical of populist/nationalist right wings (Graziano, 2018). While this is not surprising given that the main hashtag is a right-wing response to an antiracist symbolic action, the Twitter debate came to be dominated by connections between the topic in question, the contrast to legislation against hate speech, and the open support for such political figures as Viktor Orbán. Conversely, language supportive of the practice of taking the knee remained more marginal.

Third, we observe that answers to tweets tended to display higher degrees of toxicity than the main tweets on average. Recent evidence shows that aggressive language online, with particular reference to hate speech and harassment, has a silencing effect on non-violent users, especially when they belong to marginalised and/or discriminated communities (Nadim and Fladmoe, 2021). Arguably, this connects to the previous statement in that more extremist and toxic language tends to prevail in online debate and become more present by silencing other types of speech.

The paper provides further insights into the study of the perception of sports politicisation events by the public (Intravia *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2020), focusing on a specific case study and on a specific context of the debate, *i.e.*, social media. Venues of research remain open as far as aspects of toxicity in online debate and “opinion leadership” are concerned. In particular, we found obstacles in conducting sentiment analysis on tweets due to the lack of existing suitable Italian language dictionaries for such purposes and the inability to code tweets for further supervised machine learning because of financial and time constraints. Furthermore, future research could aim at comparing users’ opinions posted on different platforms, which for matters of space could not be done in this article. Finally, ethical concerns emerged throughout the research process amid the risk of making private citizens identifiable in the final article. Addressing such a concern, future research could focus on the connection between opinions expressed online and socio-structural cleavages through the aggregated and anonymised use of demographic data (Intravia *et al.*, 2019). Researchers may also be interested in analysing the reasons behind the virality of the hashtag in question over the others. Indeed, this last point traces back to the different use of social media by people characterised by different political ideologies and attitudes.

Nonetheless, this article sheds light on users’ behaviour in online communication in the context of sports politicisation, namely supporting and contrasting symbolic antiracist practices in soccer (Evans *et al.*, 2021). By observing the Italian-speaking Twitter usership on a country-specific political issue, this article contributed to observing the development of Italian public opinion in connection to international events such as the George Floyd killing and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

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