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“Experience Doesn’t Pay the Bills”

Exploring the Identity-Populism Nexus in Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Political Activism

Abstract

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), currently the youngest Representative of the United States Congress, is intent on convincing the American political system to put the material interests of ordinary people above those of the economic elite. After her 2018 upset victory in New York’s 14th Congressional District, AOC seems to devote the bulk of her political message to establishing an identity-based connection with her constituents, especially through her Twitter account which she uses as an agenda-setting tool. However, her willingness to appeal to the people as well as her marked anti-elitist rhetoric have often aligned her with a populist identity which, this study poses, she leverages along with her personal, cultural and political identities to increase her relatability factor and legitimize her role as the people’s representative. The aim of this investigation is, therefore, twofold: firstly, to assess the extent to which this nexus or blend of identities influences AOC’s political activism and, secondly, to evaluate the impact of populist undercurrents on her style of communication. To this purpose, by applying a methodological framework that combines the resources of qualitative approaches, such as transitivity, appraisal and multimodal critical discourse analysis, this study analyzes a corpus of AOC tweets containing verbal and non-verbal instantiations of self-representational strategies and features that provide evidence of a nexus of identities and of how this construct can reconcile the coexistence of AOC’s multiple narratives.

Keywords: *identity nexus, multimodal critical discourse analysis, populist discourse, Twitter*

1. Introduction

On 26 June 2018, the freshman Democratic Representative of the United States Congress, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a 28-year-old Latina running her first campaign, beat the over ten-term Democratic incumbent Joe Crowley in New York’s 14th congressional district primary elections. By using an unapologetic and confrontational communication style that is rooted in her own experience as a third-generation Bronxite (Schwab 2019), AOC seems intent on putting the interests of ordinary people above those of the economic elite with her highly debated reform

proposals, such as the Green New Deal, the abolishment of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Medicare for All (Muñoz 2019).

The underlying assumption of this study is that AOC’s political manifesto, calling out the abovementioned high-profile issues, represents not only a set of policies deployed in the name of her party’s platform, but also her own effort to reinstate economic, social, and racial dignity for working-class Americans and especially for her constituency, with whom she shares the same ethnic and cultural background. In particular, the study explores the extent to which AOC’s home-style politics (Fenno 1978)—based on group identification, recognition, and support—has contributed to the shaping of her political identity as the people’s representative (Fukuyama 2018). Indeed, as a young woman of color whose activism is critical of a political system that has rarely rewarded people who look and talk like her, AOC heavily leverages her identity to narrate a story of rapid ascent from a Puerto Rican working-class background to Democratic national politics. It is a story that echoes the American Dream, but it is also a story that deploys discursive strategies and imagery that resonate with a populist identity (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

Against this background, the study also poses that AOC’s style of doing politics should be viewed as a nexus of identities, visually represented in Figure 1 as two chain links. In a nexus, our identities do not take different trajectories, but become part of each other, and are constantly renewed within a context characterized by social, political, and cultural phenomena (Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2003). In AOC’s case, her personal and cultural identity, represented as the center clasp in Figure 1, acts as a *trait d’union* between her political activism and her populist image, respectively referred to in this study as the constructs of identity-politics and identity-populism. Traces of these multiple identities, as argued in the following sections, are recognizable in AOC’s style of communication and self-representational strategies that are marked by her far-left political activism and anti-elite rhetoric in the name of the people (Judis 2017).

In the age of digitalization, politicians are frequently reported as having distinctive ways of speaking and behaving in mediatized environments (Chadwick 2013). This is particularly true in AOC’s use of social media platforms which has facilitated coverage of her identity in the name of her values and policies. In fact, the dataset that best represents AOC’s identity nexus is extracted from the social networking site Twitter¹ which, along with her Instagram account²

¹ <https://twitter.com/aoc>. Last visited 20/05/2020.

² <https://www.instagram.com/repaoc/>. Last visited 05/05/2020.

and YouTube channel,³ is one of her political agenda-setting tools and a platform for effective self-representation (Da Silva 2018). The corpus of this study, therefore, comprises a selection of tweets and retweets extracted from the @AOC Twitter account, containing ensembles of semiotic modes, including language, and instantiations of meaning-making resources (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006).

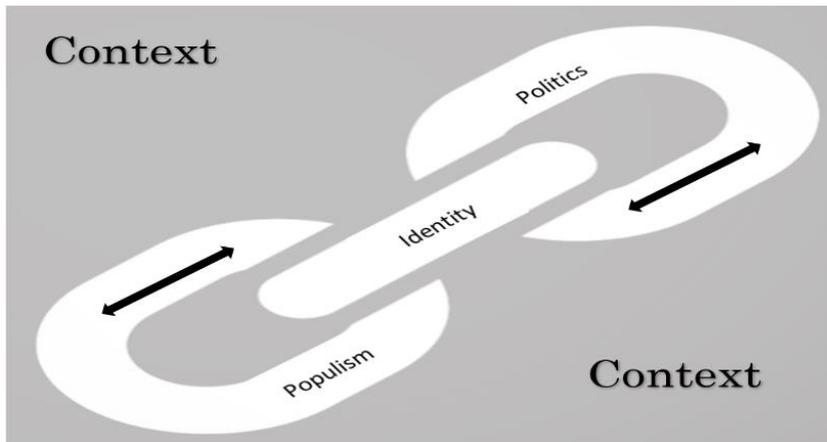


Fig. 1: The identity-nexus chain

Owing to the composite nature of the tweets, a multi-layered methodological framework of analysis was required. In particular, transitivity processes (Halliday 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) and appraisal categories (Martin and White 2005; White 2015) were employed for linguistic analysis, while Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin and Mayr 2012; Machin 2013; Van Leeuwen 2013) was used to analyze other semiotic resources, with specific reference to images (Machin and Mayr 2012).

The following research questions guide this investigation into AOC’s identity nexus:

1. What are the most recurrent linguistic and visual semiotic features that AOC uses as self-representation on her Twitter profile?
2. In what way do these features embody expressions of AOC’s personal, cultural, and political identity?
3. Is it possible to detect the forms and styles of populist rhetoric that resonate with a populist identity?

³ “The Courage to Change.” <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCElqfal0wzpzLsHlRuqZjaA>. Last visited 05/05/2020.

2. Theoretical background: identity politics, populism, and the populist ‘Zeitgeist’⁴

There are many possible applications of identity across a broad spectrum of disciplines as this social construct is pivotal to our ways of perceiving reality and to how we position and assert ourselves in the world. However, given the breadth of the topic and its ever-expanding vocabulary, the concept of identity is difficult to explain in exact terms as illustrated by some of the definitions briefly discussed below.

To begin with, identity is defined as one’s self-image which is often perceived in contradictory terms so that it can be unitary or multiple, real or constructed, stable or fluid, and personal or social (Taylor 1989; Vignoles 2011). These physical and psychological perceptions are not restricted to the individual but include the concept of the extended self (Belk 1988), or the relationships that one establishes with significant others, groups or social categories, thus posing a further complication in outlining the notion of identity.

Identity is also defined as a social category that is constructed over time and articulated according to context (Erikson 1968). Triandafyllidou and Wodak consider identity “as a process, as a condition of being or becoming” (2003, 210), which subsumes the element of personal commitment. This view is specifically relevant to the present investigation as it best supports the nexus metaphor of AOC’s multiple identities that shape and are shaped through space and time (Figure 1).

The diverse way individuals and groups define themselves is also an identity marker (Deng 1995). Indeed, the very act of addressing or naming people, acknowledged as a community, a constituency, a social group, and a nation (Canovan 2005), invokes a concept of identity that is related to national, ethnic, class and gender aspects, among others. It can, therefore, be assumed that by relating this notion of identity and its interconnectedness with political activity, as in the case of AOC, it is possible to obtain a better understanding of the crucial role of the political actor’s shared experiences with the people, such as collective injustice, non-representativeness and even subjugation as members of specific minority, social or ethnic groups.

In the political arena, identity is a significant presence as it plays an essential role in people’s thinking about, voting for and supporting political actors who are called to represent them in government. As mentioned in the nexus description, this political construct is commonly known as identity politics (Heyes 2018). The latter has increasingly become central in generating policy proposals targeted towards those who have experienced in-group deprivation and out-group

⁴ *Zeitgeist* can be translated as “the spirit of the times” (Mudde 2004).

threat, frequently referred as the ‘us’ vs ‘them’ polarization in the literature on populism (Block and Negrine 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). This cleavage is recognizable in AOC’s identity politics as she attempts to reinforce her political platform from within her constituency by claiming community commitment, solidarity, and protection against the establishment.

It seems fair to assume that AOC is probably riding the tide of a populist ‘Zeitgeist’ (Mudde 2004, 542), a term Mudde uses in his much-cited article to claim that these are populist times, suggesting that populist discourse has become mainstream in the politics of western democracies mostly owing to the populist allure, which consists in the promise of standing up for the ordinary people whose voice has been forgotten. With specific reference to AOC’s political context, both the Republicans and Democrats seem to have succumbed to the populist currents that are reshaping the internal dynamics of these two major parties rather than creating new ones (Kazin 1995). Block and Negrine point out that the widespread discussion about populism “also suggests that it is timely to approach [it] not as an aberration, but as a phenomenon that is part of democracy” (2017, 183), implying that there is something profoundly ineffective in the mainstream partisan approach that leads to the disenchantment of the people towards their political representatives. This view is supported by the results of the 2016 battle of populist styles in the presidential primaries with Democratic Bernie Sanders burgeoning a platform that challenged economic inequality, and Republican Donald Trump, who won the presidency that same year, championing the slogan “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), with specific references to building walls against immigration, and with protectionist claims against other countries, including allies. In summary, it would seem that populist interference in mainstream politics confirms Laclau’s view that it is more effective to ask to what degree parties or politicians are populist rather than asking whether they are populist or not (Laclau 2005b).

Populism is an ambiguous and elusive political phenomenon whose dimensions have inspired many research studies (Taggart 2000; 2002; Canovan 2002; Mudde 2004; Laclau 2005a, 2005b; Moffitt 2016) that cannot be discussed at length in this context. Nevertheless, three of the most influential ones are mentioned below as they are strictly correlated with the view of populism as a communication style or a collection of identity-based means and practices that enable political activity (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 2011).

Laclau’s view is based on the argument that populism is a discursive and performative construction of the people against the system, specifying that this construction is done “in the performative dimension of naming” (Laclau 2005a, 103), and is therefore grounded in discourse. In essence, Laclau’s discourse theoretical approach to populism is capable of articulating identities, interests, and needs that have been delegitimized by parties on both sides of the

political spectrum. Hence, it brings together different demands of the people in opposition to a common enemy (Laclau 2005a).

Cas Mudde (2004) offers an ideology-based conceptualization, viewing populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (2004, 544) whose core value depicts society as divided into two antagonistic groups: ‘the people,’ deprived of their rights, values and identity, and the usurping elite and dangerous ‘others.’ Mudde explains that as a ‘thin-centered’ ideology, populism can be easily combined with very different host ideologies or affiliations to either right-wing and left-wing political parties and policies (2004, 543). This view is not in opposition to Laclau’s definition as it broadens its focus to include not only the contents of populism but also how these are articulated in discourse (Laclau 2005a).

Moffitt’s (2016) definition of populism is that of a communication style characterized by the use of identity, rhetoric, and media, allowing political actors to project their *persona* in public, private and institutional spheres through a variety of media channels. It is, therefore, an extension of the discourse approach which goes beyond text or content analysis to create a more interactive affiliation with wider categories that include both linguistic and visual semiotic instantiations of meaning-making resources (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006); the latter identifying with the more performative and aesthetic aspects of populist behavior, exemplified by tabloid-style elements (Canovan 1999; Mazzoleni 2008), such as imagery, accent, gestures, props, and attire.

In considering the above definitions of populism, the outstanding feature seems to be the divide between the collective will of ‘the people’ and the ‘elites’ or the establishment, commonly operationalized in the construct of exposing societal grievances (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Moffitt 2016). This construct draws on a Manichaeian mindset (Wodak 2015), consisting in the identification of Good with the will of the people *vs* Evil with a conspiring elite (Rasulo 2017), along with playing the proverbial underdog while displaying a bullying attitude towards the establishment (Block and Negrine 2017). These core discursive features, along with others listed in Table 1, are considered markers of populist rhetoric, and are employed to intercept possible variations of use in AOC’s political communication style, thus contributing to the creation of an identity-populism nexus.

3. Corpus description

The corpus consists of 8,000 tweets and retweets selected from the @AOC Twitter account by using Google Chrome’s Data Miner, a data extraction tool which scrapes data from any HTML web pages into CSV files or excel spreadsheets (.xls .csv .xlsx .tsv). In terms of the time range,

the tweets are dated between 1 June 2018 (just before AOC’s primary election on 26 June) to 31 December 2019 (slightly over one year after her general election on 6 November 2018). The setting of this time range is important as it is wide enough to observe AOC’s political style in a variety of circumstances, which is also the reason behind the selection of only AOC’s tweets and retweets as they afford an exclusive view of the issues she chooses to discuss. At the time of writing, AOC has 6.2 million followers on Twitter, and it is interesting to note that she runs her own account, and is considered a master of the interactive, multimodal and high engagement tweets that are not limited to the allotted 280 characters but are accompanied by emojis, memes, hashtags, images, gifs, photos, videos, either originating from her own post or embedded as quotes. According to Herring (2004; 2017), these online communication features are indicators of authentic behavioral attitudes that are more commonly associated with verbal language. The content of the message, however, remains a priority for AOC, and multimodal features (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006) never take the place of language but are integrated to create a natural flow of the discussion. AOC’s Twitter communication is, therefore, a verbal and visual testimony of her campaign style, set of beliefs, policy-making proposals, personality traits, lifestyle sketches, that are not only closely related to her personal and cultural identity, but also impossible to separate from her political *persona* (Hong 2013).

As can be inferred from the corpus description, the study acknowledges the crucial role of the Twitter environment in shaping digital communication, but a full account of all its digital affordances cannot be provided within the context of this paper as it goes well beyond its scope. The analysis, however, does present evidence of how verbal and non-verbal affordances are exploited by AOC on social media to substantiate her online communication style (Turkle 1995; Herring 2004; 2017).

4. Methodology

The transitivity system (Halliday 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) is one of the approaches that make up the study’s three-fold methodological framework. Transitivity is based on six process types: material processes express doing; mental processes express sensing; relational processes express the state of being; verbal processes express the act of saying; behavioral processes express physiological and psychological activities; existential processes express the act of existing and are usually accompanied by the verb *to be*. Identifying transitivity proved to be an essential component of the study’s linguistic analysis as it consisted in taking special notice of the kind of action-reaction dynamic occurring in the diverse contexts that involved AOC, thus revealing essential aspects of her identity.

Analyzing texts through appraisal theory entails describing how language is used in communicating emotion and opinion (Martin and White 2005; White 2015) and consists of three subsystems that operate interactively: attitude (resources for construing emotional responses and value judgements, both ethical and aesthetic), engagement (resources to adjust the speaker’s commitment to his or her evaluations), and graduation (resources to quantify, intensify and compare these evaluations). Appraisal analysis not only contributed to the evaluation of the “condensed yet rich performances of the self” (Papacharissi 2012, 1989) embedded in the linguistic resources of the tweet-retweet message typology but also supported the analysis of the processes conducted through the transitivity system.

Multimodal analysis is the term coined by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) to indicate a systematic way of studying not only language but other semiotic modes. Multimodality draws on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), and specifically on the three metafunctions, namely the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual (Halliday 1985) which Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) align to their own representational, interactional and compositional model. In particular, this model identifies how language and visual resources, such as images, photographs, diagrams and graphics, work to create meaning through specific choices made by the author of the visual or verbal text. The representational metafunction identifies two kinds of structures, the narrative and the conceptual; both used to distinguish what happens in the images. Narrative structures make use of vector lines and are realized by action, reactional, speech and mental processes, while conceptual structures trigger classificational, analytical and symbolic processes. The interactional metafunction can be examined from three aspects: contact (demand or offer achieved through gaze), social distance (intimate, social, or impersonal size of frame), and attitude (involvement, detachment, viewer power, equality and representation of power perspectives). The compositional metafunction deals with the layout of the aspects on a page in order to discern whether these create or represent a coherent and cohesive whole. It is realized through three interrelated systems: information value (given or new, ideal, or real), saliency (achieved through size, color, tone, focus, perspective, overlap, and repetition) and framing.

MCDA (Machin and Mayr 2012; Machin 2013; Van Leeuwen 2013) draws on the seminal work described above but places an added emphasis on the critical aspects of semiotic modes and the author’s underlying choices. Machin and Mayr, referring to Fairclough and Wodak’s work, describe this focus as the adherence to “the sense of being critical” (2012, 9), which is the basic principle underlying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1995; Fairclough and Wodak 1997). MCDA is, therefore, interested in “showing more clearly *how* [semiotic choices]

make meaning as well as *what* they mean” (Machin and Mayr 2012, 10), which consists in knowing about the contexts where these semiotic choices were produced in, the social relations, and the shared ideology (Ledin and Machin 2018).

4.1 *The identity analysis framework*

For the purpose of aligning the corpus data with the study’s analytical approaches, it was necessary to develop an operational framework based on the following procedure. Firstly, a preliminary exploration of the selected tweets and retweets was required to isolate the linguistic and visual semiotic resources employed in AOC’s self-representation by keeping in mind the identity nexus previously described. Secondly, for data coding purposes, it was essential to cluster the selected features into similar but more comprehensive categories or constructs (Table 1, column 1). Thirdly, the approaches, along with the major categories that were applied in the linguistic and visual semiotic analysis, were added to the framework (Table 1, columns 2 and 3).

1. Identity Constructs	2. Linguistic analysis	3. Visual semiotic analysis
<p><i>1a. Shared cultural roots:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family values • language, childhood, employment • grassroots involvement with the people • community/neighborhood belongingness, support, solidarity <p><i>1b. Political activism:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immigration, border control, taxation, unemployment, green energy, corporations, violence and gender issues <p><i>1c. Media engagement:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • harassment issues • manifestations of national reach, national pride • signature traits: fashion, humor, irony 	<p><i>Transitivity processes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • material • mental • relational • behavioral • verbal • existential <p><i>Appraisal categories:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attitude • engagement • graduation 	<p><i>Metafunctions:</i></p> <p>Representational</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • narrative • conceptual • Interactional • vectors • gaze • smile • hand/arm gestures <p>Compositional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information layout • salience • color and tone • vestemics • formatting conventions

Tab. 1: The identity analysis framework

With specific reference to the populist component of the nexus, this first reading was carried out by focusing on the adherence of the content to key populist messages. This selection criterion consists in the retrieval of core aspects of populist rhetoric (Mudde 2004; Laclau 2005a, 2005b; Moffitt 2016; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017) that possibly contribute to the shaping of AOC’s populist identity. According to previous research, these messages are generally expressed as two overarching conceptualizations, namely ‘people-centrism’ and ‘anti-elitism’ (Mudde 2004; Ernst, Engesser and Esser 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). As core concepts, they are common to all definitions of populism as they best express societal grievances or the populist “perennial cry” that “power has been stolen from ‘the people’ by politicians and special interest [groups]” (Canovan 2005, 5), and are therefore expected to be rooted in many of AOC’s tweets and retweets. Below is this study’s adaptation of these two message categories, drawn from a more comprehensive analysis conducted by Ernst, Engesser and Esser (2017), describing how the people and the elites are generally perceived by the populist political actor.

People-centrism messages:

- The people are bestowed with morality, competence, responsibility; consistency; strength; resilience.
- The people deserve representation and a life-changing development plan.
- The political actor belongs to the people, speaks for the people, agrees with the people.
- The political actor claims to represent or embody the people.

Anti-elitism messages:

- Elites are racist, undemocratic.
- Elites are denied morality, credibility, competence, consistency.
- Elites do not belong to the people, do not know the people, do not speak for the people.
- Elites sabotage the interests of the people for their own benefit.

5. Findings

The tweets analyzed in this section are only a small representative sample selected from the total number contained in the corpus.

The findings are presented and discussed according to construct (1a, 1b, 1c) - selected tweet(s) - linguistic analysis - visual semiotic analysis. It must be pointed out that in order to facilitate

the location of the analyzed linguistic item(s) or utterance(s) within the general commentary, bold font, italics, and square brackets for the transitivity and appraisal resources are used.

Construct 1a. Shared cultural roots: family values, language, childhood, employment, community/neighborhood belongingness, support, solidarity.

Figures 2 and 3 are representative of shared cultural roots. In the image on the left, AOC chooses **the largest** [graduation: focus] Spanish newspaper to emphasize that she is part of the Puerto Rican **family** [positive appreciation], represented by the flag which is **bonita** [positive appreciation (beautiful)]. In this representation, her neighborhood defines who she is: the **newsstand, the bakery**, where people are resilient even after experiencing a **hard** [graduation: force] year. She uses a material process in Spanish which emphasizes her commitment to her people: *luchando* [material (fighting)]. This personal narrative is realized by the close-up image and the transaction of two vectors: her hand, used as a pledge to the people, and her gaze, used to trigger a heartfelt reaction from the crowd.



Fig. 2: Shared cultural roots: language

In the image on the right, a transactional-reactional process is realized by the vectors of arm and gaze. AOC kneels down to the child, conveying a caring attitude and a high degree of adaptability to the situation. Family values matter to her as she takes time out to describe *este princesito* as the **cutest** thing [graduation: force], emphasized by the emoji that indicates she has been deeply touched.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez @AOC · 1 Jun 2018
So many people came to our office opening that we took it outside & held an impromptu gathering in the streets.

Gave a speech between roaring subway cars. We need to bring democracy to people, instead of the other way around.

📷: vintage Polaroid, taken by supporter Gregory T.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez @AOC · 4 Jun 2018
This is what a movement candidacy looks like 🇺🇸

Big Hearts, Big Minds, HARD WORK > Big Money



Fig. 3: Grassroots community involvement

Figure 3 expresses AOC’s involvement in the grassroots community which is representative of her identity politics. In both images, she is pictured in long shots in order to showcase her exact positioning in the crowds. These centered compositions do not create social distance but give her salience among the people, without placing her above the people. In the tweet on the left, she uses the inclusive *we* to express the idea that she knows what they **need** [mental]. Also, she mentions the **roaring** [affect: emotional response] subway cars to indicate positive appreciation of the place and the familiarity of the sound. Particularly revealing is her natural disposition to speak for the people, as shown by her arm-hand movements related to the content of the accompanying speech (McNeill 1992). In the image on the left, her arm and hand pointing to the ground seem to be emphasizing the message that **democracy** occurs **in the streets**, among the people, **outside** office walls. On the right, her elevated arm emphasizes that the people are **big** [graduation: force], to mean they are strong, resilient, and **hard** [graduation: force] working.

The images are narrative structures containing transactional-reactional processes realized by using her arm and her whole body as vectors that reach out to the people. The background information in these images is especially important: the people and the subway cars on the left, along with the side pictures of AOC activities on the right, are circumstances of means without which the narrative processes described in the analysis would not be complete.



Fig. 4: Community belongingness

With the tweet in Figure 4, AOC establishes her descentance from Sephardic Jews who fled to Puerto Rico during the Spanish Inquisition (Stanley-Becker 2018). To highlight this

extraordinary testimony of **community** belongingness, AOC uses inclusive pronouns *we* and *our* as well as the Jewish terms *Chanukah* and *Shamash*.⁵ It is interesting to note that the word *Shamash* is next to her name in the image, followed by the words: “**the light which sparks all others.**” One might question whether she perceives herself as a light among the people. She occupies the right panel, which, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), indicates what is new, what is to be. Indeed, the last line of her tweet expresses her future expectation that **tonight’s light** (or her light) **may spark** [engagement: deontic modality] **many others** [graduation: force]. This last comment is indicative of the complexity of this image, which is realized by a narrative process but contains some elements of a conceptual process. In brief, while a transactional-reactional process is enacted by the presence of another participant, the image also reinforces AOC’s claimed Jewish identity connection, via the candle vector, with the highly symbolic attributive of the Menorah.

The image shows a screenshot of a tweet from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@AOC) dated June 22. The tweet text reads: "Please share this info widely & make sure your neighbors have it. If your home can be a safe space or haven for others, let your neighbors and community know - even if it's just to relax in the stress of this time. Plan, prepare, + protect our neighbors." Below the tweet is a graphic from United We Dream (@UNITEDWEDREAM) dated June 21. The graphic contains the text: "WE HAVE TO PROTECT IMMIGRANTS!! SHARE widely, our community needs to know what are our rights. #HereToStay". It also mentions that the message is translated in 11 languages and includes a link to "Show this thread". The graphic itself is divided into four quadrants with instructions in multiple languages: English, Chinese, Spanish, and Portuguese. The English instructions include: "to remain silent! Don't sign anything ICE gives you without talking to an attorney. REPORT & RECORD! Report immediately, UWD hotline 1-844-363-3423. Take pictures & video unless you're on federal government property. Take notes of badge numbers, number of agents." The Chinese instructions include: "牢记和记录 记住日期和条件，但是千万别在政府部门的建筑里做这件事。记录下他们的徽章编号，有几个一起来的，什么时候来的，开什么车的和你们之间发生什么事情。反击！ 找一个你能信得过的律师来讨论对你的案件的所有可能性。如果被拘留了，你有可能获得保释 - 别放弃希望！加入你的当地组织来保护自己！" The Spanish instructions include: "EN CASO DE REDADAS ¿QUÉ PUEDES HACER? NO ABRAS LA PUERTA La migración solo puede entrar a tu casa con una orden de arresto emitida por un juez de la corte criminal, o si tu le abres la puerta. ¡No abras la puerta! GUARDA SILENCIO Tienes el derecho a permanecer callado/a. Si te confrontan agentes de inmigración, di: 'Uso mi derecho bajo la quinta enmienda, y tengo el..." The Portuguese instructions include: "O que Fazer SE À POLÍCIA DE IMIGRAÇÃO (ICE) VIERA SUA PORTA NÃO ABRA AS PORTAS A polícia de imigração (ICE) não pode entrar sem nenhum mandado assinado por um juiz do tribunal criminal. Eles só podem entrar se você deixá-los. PERMANEÇA CALADO A polícia de imigração (ICE) pode usar qualquer coisa que você diga contra você em seu caso de imigração, então reivindique o seu direito de permanecer calado!"

Fig. 5: Community support and solidarity

⁵*Chanukah* is a Jewish festival commemorating the rededication of the Temple by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C. and celebrated for 8 days beginning the 25th day of Kislev. *Shamash* is the candle used to light the other eight candles of a *Hanukkah menorah* (Johnson 2019).

In Figure 5, the tweet and the embedded tweet are emblematic of how AOC supports and protects her community by a show of solidarity. In fact, she warns her neighbors of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids and does so by providing a translation in Spanish (*no abras la Puerta, guarda silencio*). The tweet states that the community **must protect** immigrants, the home **must be safe** [affect], and the information **must be shared** [mental] **widely** [graduation: force]. The process of sharing is particularly representative of community belongingness as it represents an affective and desiderative need that must be met. These linguistic resources reveal a high level of commitment on AOC’s part of, expressed by using engagement resources of deontic modality. She concludes by saying that the community needs to **plan, prepare, and protect** [material/mental] each other. These processes are essentially material as the agentive subject (the community) voluntarily carries them out. However, there are also traces of desiderative undertones that are typical of mental processes. The urgency is also conveyed by the diffused capitalization of many statements in the same tweet which, according to Herring, (2004, 2017) means shouting or saying something forcefully.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  @AOC · Aug 1 

Organizing isn’t just for elections, it’s part of community life.

That’s why I strapped on my chanclas & hit the subways this week for Census 2020 - to educate early & push locally.

The Census is hiring now. Bronx & Queens residents should apply!



AOC Makes a Bronx Census Push Amid Fears of Lost House Seats
More than a quarter of the residents in freshman Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’ district are non-citizens — the highest percentage in the state.

Fig. 6: Community support and solidarity

In Figure 6, AOC is also supporting her community by distributing flyers hand to hand, informing the locals about a job opportunity, to **educate** [material] and **push** [material] locally. She **strapped on** [material] her *chanclas* and **hit** [material] the subways in Queens and the Bronx: once again, roots, language, home. With reference to the image, vestemics play an important role. She intentionally wants to convey a strong, credible image of herself by wearing a suit and red lipstick which is considered to be one of her signature traits. Although her gaze is not directed at the viewer, her full smile invites unknown others to establish an interactional affinity, also emphasized by the close-up shot which occupies the right panel of the image as if to represent innovation. Hence, the image is a narrative structure realized by a non-transactional reactional process in which AOC, once again, reveals a high level of adaptability to the circumstance. She is in her neighborhood/district, as shown by the participants who, in this case, are not interacting directly with her because she is now playing the institutional role of their representative, but are nevertheless connected to her by similar action processes.

Construct 1b. Political activism: immigration, border control, taxation, unemployment, green energy, corporations, violence and gender issues.



Fig. 7: The people *vs* corporations

Figure 7 comprises three images of AOC going against corporations and extreme wealth. In the image on the top left, by embedding a video about one of her congressional hearings, AOC effectively uses her slogan-like language: **people are not** [relational] **commodities**, and this simile is established by lifting a cell phone when these words are pronounced. In the image on the right, AOC uses the same slogan-style language, supported by an open arm gesture (McNeill 1992), which usually signals ‘trust what I’m saying,’ to reiterate the message that corporations are **a huge Ponzi scheme** [graduation: focus], a term which refers to a huge fraudulent deal.⁶ In the third image, AOC pokes fun at billionaires who agree [mental] that **billionaires shouldn’t exist** [engagement: epistemic modality], which is what she firmly believes in and fights for in her political commitment. In fact, she ends her tweet with a rhetorical question addressing the capitalist elites by calling them **extreme wealth** [graduation: force] **worshippers**. This figure also illustrates non-transactional reactionary processes realized by two vectors: AOC’s arm gestures that accompany what she says, and her gaze that focuses towards unknown phenomena which also suggests the universal quality of her message. Here, too, the locative circumstances are essential to the interpretation of the seriousness of what she is discussing: seats, microphone, name plaque, and vestemics place her in an institutional role. In Figure 8, AOC’s use of slogan-like language is once again foregrounded. The exclamatory statement, **experience doesn’t pay** [material] **the bills**, is strongly voiced by gazing straight at the viewer, and cupping her hands around her mouth. This utterance, however, is also voiced by the other two politicians in the image as AOC uses the inclusive *we* when she peremptorily adds that **this is what we have to say** [verbal] **about that**. Regarding the involvement of Rep. Tlaib and Rep. Pressley, although AOC is not looking at them directly, the enacted narrative process can be considered transactional-reactional as they are connected by the vectors of smile and eyeline, as well as by the circumstance of context.

⁶Named after Charles Ponzi who orchestrated the first one in 1919, a Ponzi scheme is a fraudulent investing scam promising high rates of return with little risk to investors. In many Ponzi schemes the fraudsters do not invest the money. Instead, they use it to pay those who invested earlier and may keep some for themselves. <https://www.investor.gov/protect-your-investments/fraud/types-fraud/ponzi-scheme>. Last visited 29/04/2020.



Fig. 8: The people *vs* unfair wages



Fig. 9: The people *vs* border control

Figure 9 is a direct appeal to America as a nation as she is pictured near a children’s refugee camp. Mental processes such as **forget**, **saw**, **love**, **need** are particularly salient in this tweet to convey an extremely emotional moment. Material processes are used to denounce that America **steals** [material] refugee children, and **cages** [material] them. In the expression **more**

kids, she uses the graduation term **more** to draw attention to the material process **died**, which is followed by the statement that **no one has been held accountable** [negative judgement] for this act. Therefore, **we need to save** [material] them. The exclusive **we** perpetrates the ‘us’ vs ‘them’ polarization as it presumably dismisses that part of America that has remained silent. In this set of pictures, AOC is visibly distressed, but the background becomes more salient than her own image. In fact, her gaze is directed at the viewer in only one image (top left), while in the others she is either looking away or covering her eyes. This seems to indicate that AOC is urging the viewer to focus on the locative circumstances (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) of the border control scene rather than on her person.

Construct 1c. Media engagement: harassment issues, manifestations of national reach, national pride, signature traits.



Fig. 10: Harassment from political actors and media reporters

AOC is often verbally bullied by political actors, members of the media and even President Trump. She answers back with the same dose of straight talk and material processes that she frequently uses in her congressional hearings and campaign activities. In Figure 10, the first tweet on the left is from Trump’s counselor Kellyanne Conway. AOC accuses her of not **actually**

[graduation: force] **doing** [material] her job as she **ran away** [material], **skipping** [material] work. In reply to John Cardillo’s tweet, in which he criticizes her about her upbringing, AOC picks a fight with him, the **dude**. She tells him not to **birther** [mental] her, a ‘you-don’t-belong-here’ term referring to Obama’s dubious US birth. The prosodic use of asterisks that mark the terms ***always*** and ***birther*** are an indication that she is probably saying these words with added stress or pitch. In the tweet dated July 5, AOC replies to Newt Gingrich and other GOP politicians who accuse her of lying about important issues. She uses appraisal strategies of graduation [force], such as **96% of scientists** and **millions of Americans**, to establish her knowledge of facts against their denialist claims.



Fig. 11: Harassment from President Trump

AOC addresses her bullies head on, including the President. In the image on the left in Figure 11, AOC uses a mix of informal and formal register, such as the colloquial expression **Mr. President, you’re from Queens, and I’ll call [verbal] your bluff**, to mean that she knows exactly what he is aiming to do. At this point, she establishes a clear polarization of ‘**you**’ (the President, the establishment), *vs* ‘**I**’ (we, the country). She ends by stating **exactly** [graduation: force] what **we must do**, using inclusive action and deontic modality to challenge a President who commits impeachable acts: he **obstructs** [material] and **advises** [verbal] to **ignore** [mental cognitive]. In the tweet on the right, AOC clearly establishes that she **is** [relational] **of the people** and she **knows** [mental] that she has **more** [graduation: focus] **strength** than others and signs off as **Evita Peron**, in a humorous confrontation with the President. In terms of the compositional metafunction, AOC’s picture in the left panel is in stark contrast with that

of the President, placed in the right panel to indicate what is unknown, and perhaps untrustworthy as emphasized by a half-smile or smirk. AOC’s gaze is not directed at the viewer but is defyingly looking towards an unknown phenomenon which shows her intention of going beyond the here-and-now of the tweet, in a sort of dismissal of the President’s offence.



Fig. 12: Manifestations of national reach and national pride

The two images in Figure 12 are representative of AOC’s going beyond the local community and district to reach larger audiences. The image on the right is a pinned tweet of a simple to-do list of DOs, ironically called a **radical, extreme-left** [negative appreciation] agenda. In the image on the left, AOC’s inclusive **we** and the mental process **need** are used to push for **comprehensive, restorative** [positive appreciation] action for those who have suffered. In this conceptual representation of a timeless image of AOC looking above and beyond the moment in time, the American flag in the background is a symbolic attribute (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) that *The Guardian* uses to identify who and what she stands for. The oblique angle shot, and her hair worn behind her ear convey a sense of authenticity, but also of control, self-confidence, and national pride.

In typical Ocasio-Cortez fashion, she also uses humor to reply to her haters and address the wealthy who are reluctant to pay taxes. In Figure 13 below, in the left image, she is **waiting on** [behavioral volitional] **the haters** [object or phenomenon of the process] to attack her. This is a non-transactional reactionary representation of this process as she is savoring the moment **the haters apologize** [material] so that **we were proven right** [positive appreciation].



Fig. 13: Humor

She is virtually sitting on them, with her body used as a vector that connects her to the yellow sofa, a color which typically indicates cowardice; the reference to this group is clear. In the image on the right, she embeds a tweet from Public Citizen, picturing her between two founding fathers of America who also believed in the Robin Hood-ideal of taxing the rich to give to the poor. However, with this same image, she is also boldly engaging in a dialogic exchange with the elites that consider her an outsider, telling **everyone** that she has found a way to pay for her policies.

The two tweets in Figure 14 are both narrative processes. The first on the left is a non-transactional process but invites unknown participants to join in the discussion about her **debate** [positive appreciation] lipstick, clearly disrupting a more serious electoral interview. AOC is possibly giving us a glimpse of her natural self as she casually responds to viewers with her reply, **I GOT YOU** in capital letters, and the emoji and name of the lipstick brand. The image on the right is also a narrative representation realized by a transactional process consisting in a sporty all-around **air-fiving** arm gesture, contrasted by the all-white attire worn by participants who are taking part in an institutional event. In this tweet, she also resorts to graduation strategies to count the success of elected democratic women in congress: ***36*** total; shouting **1 (ONE)** to highlight the GOP result; **35 Dems**.



Fig. 14: Signature traits: lipstick and high-five



Fig. 15: Signature traits: hope

Perhaps, the most emblematic of all self-representational posts is the image in Figure 15. This is a conceptual representation in which AOC is the Carrier or Symbolic Suggestive of the sentiment of **hope**, used as a **daily reminder** [graduation: force]. This image allows AOC to bring to the surface the many layers of her identity as a woman of color, a Puerto Rican daughter, a bartender, a political activist, a congresswoman. She strategically selected a

graphic-style design which bears a resemblance to some hero-like characters, with her authentic signature lipstick and long hair worn behind one ear that makes her very people-relatable, along with her professional attire as a US Representative.

6. Discussion

This section intends to summarize the findings according to constructs 1a, 1b and 1c in Table 1, with a review of the two key messages of people-centrism and anti-elitism, and the nexus components in Figure 1.

Construct 1a takes into consideration AOC’s personal and cultural identity. Findings illustrate that AOC’s experience working in and for her community expresses who she is and how she intends to carry out her role as a US Congresswoman, thus enacting the identity-politics nexus. Within this construct, it is also possible to intercept the identity-populism nexus, mainly expressed through people-centrism references, such as grassroots community involvement and commitment, and the ruthless behavior of the perpetrators or the elite.

Construct 1b particularly represents AOC’s political activism. This construct, which best enacts the identity-populism nexus, expresses her anti-elitism message contained in the tweets directed at the heartless and undemocratic corporations, billionaires, extreme-wealth worshippers that are intent on using the people as commodities, virtually stealing from them to protect their own self-interests. The elite cannot be held accountable as they do not represent millions of Americans who hope for a better life.

Media engagement is the object of Construct 1c. The tweets analyzed under this construct illustrate three different representations that AOC intends to reveal. The first group represents the harassment that AOC receives on the part of the current establishment or the elite. She is undermined as a woman, ridiculed for the way she speaks, criticized for her family upbringing. The second group present manifestations of national reach and pride that features of the identity-politics nexus are indicative of her view of the people as deserving recipients of political representation and life-changing battles. The third group of tweets are AOC’s signature traits that articulate the populist messages of anti-elitism and people-centrism. For example, she instigates the haters/elite/corporations/establishment to go after her, and she does so by using a good dose of humor and irony. By picturing these social actors as cowards, she is telling the world that they are inherently incompetent and should be denied credibility and morality. Ultimately, her daily reminder to the people is: **I GOT YOU**, meaning that she is their **HOPE**; an attitude that is highly representative of the identity-populism nexus.

7. Conclusion

In addressing the study’s research questions, it can be stated that the investigation has provided sufficient evidence that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez adopts a communication style that is the result of a blend of identities and life experiences, correspondingly sharpened by the presence of populist behavior. The self-representational discourse strategies that she employs mainly consist in anti-establishment and anti-elite expressions realized through the use of polarization, provocation, retaliation, warnings and counterattacks, on the one hand, and people-centric expressions of legitimation, inclusivity constructs, emotional and motivational statements, humor and irony on the other. As argued in the linguistic and visual semiotic analysis of the tweets, these strategies employ a plethora of idioms and fixed phrases, expressions of a context-specific sociolect, and a series of digital communication devices, such as bullet-point lists, emojis, and other typographical elements, that are inherent in her linguistic repertoire, strengthened by her iconography of politics consisting in her walkabouts among the people, visits to refugee camps, congressional hearings in which she expertly deploys body language, and the symbolic use of props and other elements of circumstance. Indeed, by projecting the image of herself as a young but confident representative with a distinctive communication style that relates her to the people as she is one of them, AOC is seemingly planning to enhance her credibility in mainstream politics by transforming her party’s ideological bent (Castells 1997) while catering to the needs of her own constituents. The evidence is the nexus of identities that she creates to galvanize her political base from which she draws her power, considering that her institutional authority is still quite limited. In doing so, she looks towards the power of populist rhetoric, which she effortlessly uses to motivate political feelings, aspirations, and needs of those who feel disenchanting. Thus, the nexus of identities not only intensifies her self-representation but is also the foundation of her political persona.

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