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'Welcome to favelas, but in Italy': Urban precariousness, right-wing ideology and phatic nihilism on social media

Helton Levy
London Metropolitan University, UK

Abstract

Numerous social media projects have depicted grim scenes of urban life in big cities. By exploiting crime or garbage collection problems, for example, these pages have created pessimistic ways of perceiving the city and engaging citizens in search of memes or viral videos. This research invested in two multiplatform projects based in Italy, *Welcome to Favelas* and *Simone Cicalone*, to verify their inclination to specific ideologies or political intent behind interventions on social media. Using visual metadata and LDA-generated topics, this paper anchors a visual and critical discourse analysis interested in mapping creators' phatic strategies. Exploratory results suggest a few formulaic, though elliptic, ways of manipulating audiences for crypto-ideological purposes mainly leaning to the right, theorised here as phatic nihilism.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, favelas, Instagram, Italy, phatic communication, Rome, urban studies, virality

The use of social media to frame life in modern cities has advanced in many directions. Studies have focused on how users can spread information about everyday issues in chains of affection that lead to 'contagion' (Hansen et al., 2011; Pancer and Poole, 2016; Sampson, 2012; Tsugawa and Ohsaki, 2015). By gathering social media results about any topic, one can see distinct processes of community affiliation, value-creation or confirmation (Guerini, 2011; Hoffman and Bublitz, 2017; Zappavigna, 2012).

While trying to make sense of modern living, users have resorted to phatic communication to express dismay at urban matters, infrastructure decay and precariousness. They can employ metaphors, symbols, hints or unrelated image sharing. This form of phatic communication provides an alternative sphere of conviviality between all sorts of people due to its minimalism but highly suggestive potential aided by algorithms (Jaworski and Lou, 2020; Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Vásquez and Creel, 2017). This paper focuses on two popular social media projects in Italy, *Welcome to Favelas* and *Simone Cicalone*, which have recently pivoted to a fresh phatic way of discussing many issues in Italian cities. These pages allow for an appreciation of the discourse spread by an otherwise vast ecology of outlets showing grim scenes of city life. The idea is to verify the degree to which political and ideological hints can stem from their message.

The precarious city on social media

In Italy, contentious urban issues loom large. Far from the Renaissance dream of a sym- metric, human-centred landscape, contemporary Italian cities and towns have never lived up to anything close to the ideal city (Overstreet, 2022). Metropolises like Rome or Naples have often hit the news due to their problems with public services and poor infra- structure. The faulty litter collection, for example, frequently triggers public opinion as much as it attracts wild boars roaming at random (Carlo, 2022). Sharing such urban issues may inspire laughable memes and shareable content at first. Still, urban chaos often gets sensationalised at the expense of a serious debate on broader socioeconomic issues. Namely, the backbone of austerity that has plagued populations suffering from declining living standards in Europe (White et al., 2014). In the public eye, these issues can easily mingle with other newsworthy facts that can be the object of ideological bat- tles. Undocumented immigration is one of these cases. On Italian social media pages, scenes of poverty, petty crimes, homelessness and degradation often conjugate with indi- viduals perceived as ‘migrants’ staying on the streets. In this chain of events, issues such as immigration are added to the bulk of the discourse of precariousness in the city while becoming ‘hyper-visible’. In turn, their images end up hijacked by right-wing media (Cancellieri and Ostanel, 2015).

Indeed, social media does carry a vital responsibility in bridging discourses around urban issues to the fore, but to what extent do they interact with specific ideologies? I often employ the term ideology here in an Althusserian meaning (Althusser, 1971) of reproducing discourse that echoes ‘relations of exploitation’ with the oppressed. For example, the recurrent employment of derogatory tropes against migrants to feed extrem- ism and echo chambers taps into right-wing and racist ideologies (e.g. Bright, 2016). The emotional underpinnings of such harmful content

can be ideologically efficacious in propagating ideas that may prompt dangerous actions (Weismueller et al., 2022). Past case studies saw social media references to right-wing ideologies blending with mentions of lifestyle but acting on ‘legitimate’ citizen concerns (Krämer et al., 2021). Likewise, emerging media-making knowingly ascribes a reflexive nature to minor incidents of urban life. Media practices provide a ‘nexus’ that mirrors distinct affordances, impediments and the micro-politics of the city (Rodgers et al., 2014). Social networks help concatenate old and new transformative rituals, such as new hot spots or celebrations, often creating ‘ambient affiliation’ (Zappavigna, 2011). While small, these little changes or additions to old facts can politicise the ‘every day’ by selling ideas of decadence or the fall of societies and civilisations (Beveridge and Koch, 2019).

In Italy, a whole political force, the M5S, or Five Stars Movement, had, for over a decade (2009–2022), capitalised on failing public services to promote a managerial version of politics anchored in conquering city councils (De Falco and Sabatino, 2019). Despite their recent waning popularity, their politicians have successfully coordinated postings between the former Twitter and Facebook (Martella, 2022) to promote ill-judgements of longstanding problems, such as the irregular garbage collection in Rome, as a significant argument for having them in power (e.g. Ansa, 2018).

This scenario hints at social media adding to a larger blueprint of perceived urban issues elsewhere. Other countries have seen similar waves of popularity of digital media projects that sell a discourse of chaos. Like the sarcasm found on Welcome to Favelas, another Italian Instagram page, @case_popolari, has depicted difficult living in Italy’s most precarious estates. In France, @ConflictsFrance and @upgrayedd34 hit over 200,000 followers, publishing about street disturbs and gilet jaune protests in the country. In the U.K., @realshitlondon prioritises garbage and derelict left astray. On Reddit, r/PublicFreakout, focused on the U.S. and British-based r/GreenandPleasant, mixes conflictual urban encounters and failed public campaigns with humour and pessimistic commentary.

This ecology presents citizen-generated footage attached to crypto-facts, that is, those rarely verified or introduced chronologically (Wu, 2019). These projects have paved the way for a nihilist view of events as the corollary of a significant change in urban policies, in which solutions are often predicated on stringent or authoritarian controls to avoid an imaginary decadence. As we shall observe, these cues appear in the two case studies discussed in the article. Both provide a theoretical foundation of phatic communication and discourse analysis by seeing small textual tricks employed in concerted and strategic ways.

Phatic communication, the conviviality discourse and metaphorising precariousness

The concept of phatic communication supports us in seeing these bits of text, small talk and self-explanatory as assets conducive to solidify people's impressions on social media. As Miller (2008) contends, text, or snippets of it, aided by persuasive media visual resources (gifs, videos, photo effects, filters), enhance communicative possibilities to a new level of perception. In activism, the potential of phatic communication lies in the process of 'coping' by sharing subtle perceptions of issues that are not immediately available to all. By addressing the status quo in minimal expressions (Miller, 2017) or conveying personal or private matters through slang, creators coopt viewers as victims or witnesses. As such, digital media users are quickly engaged in situations of poverty (Fie, 2015), sexual harassment (Hosterman et al., 2018) and student issues (Ask and Abidin, 2018). Recent 'alternative-right' groups, which in Italy include the Brothers of Italy party (Puleo and Piccolino, 2022) and their social media-savvy Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, have exploited memes as phatic examples based on 'masculine iconographies', using storytelling to convince viewers of looming crises (Lamerichs et al., 2018).

In the public discourse, fragmentary text brings issues together in a concerted sense and vision. On Instagram, this occurs when distinct images appear unified in the same stream (Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017). 'Phatic news sharing' has facilitated perceptions of an imagined 'social cohesion' within the same platform (Duffy and Ling, 2020). The 'affiliation' forged by electronic text allocates the same hashtags and pieces of text to forge alignment between users of disparate origins and locations (Zappavigna, 2012). The situation gets more complex when irony is employed to favour situational images, either encounters or clashes, which, in turn, leave the meaning ultimately implicit (Lestari, 2019). The conjugation of these resources and ideas leads to online bonding, which, nonetheless, happens without the proper 'indexing' and 'signifying' of one's politics (Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänem, 2020).

Sociological ideas on conviviality assist us in locating and problematising this type of connection on social media. Gilroy (2006), for instance, discussed 'conviviality' as an alternative, a communicative bridge that can cut through deep divides of contemporaneity, racism and xenophobia by forging a sensation of 'living together'. Anthropological thought has appreciated basic practices of conviviality among migrant populations, which result in 'negotiation, interaction and translation in open spaces' (Heil, 2020). Eventually, the virality of pages such as Welcome to Favelas has positively paved the way for conversations that ordinary Italians do not

see on their deeply institutionalised TV: Uncensored expressions, characters, or very unpopular issues such as immigration and illegal occupations blend in with confrontations, arrests, bribe-taking and squatting. On the other hand, the discourse of conviviality of social media may have different consequences. As Rampton (2015: 89) analyses: ‘the temptation to look for conviviality in contemporary super-diversity – to dwell on creative translingual sociability or polylingual business-oriented improvisation – needs to be tempered by attention to fear, unease and their systematic cultivation as modes of control’. If discussing urban living can inspire positive curiosity, it can also reinforce suspicion and culpability of everyday issues amidst regimes of fear and securitisation in modern societies (e.g. Khan, 2014). The latter point is probed in this article by inquiring into the dialogic nature of this discourse, as existing in nuggets of visual or textual conversations about urban precariousness. Even if creators do not point to the culprits for urban chaos in such a straightforward manner, it is possible to theorise whether layers of text and visuals can code precariousness according to present or past political ideologies.

Welcome to Favelas and Cicalone Simone: Two case studies

Informing the choice of *Welcome to Favelas* lies the visual information that hardly resembles storytelling or a narrative – publishers couple tragic-comic scenes to convey what few commentators call tragic symbols of the country’s decadence. Following what Mohanty (1991) argued about the metaphorisation of all things third world, gendered poverty and precariousness with expressions such as third world woman, the use of favela here can similarly equate to an overarching stereotype associated with poverty that otherises subjects or individuals actually living in Italy. The archetypical Brazilian community have come to symbolise precariousness worldwide. The project’s name may thus echo an Italian fear of being associated with poverty. In this phatic communion (Coupland et al., 1992; Zuckerman, 2021), creators have built relationships with the audience and distributed knowledge that builds upon damaging assumptions with unpredictable connotations.



Figure 1. Welcome to Favelas Instagram page grid (snapshot).

In a politically concentrated Italy, the subtlety of this social media critique against its main cities only scratches the realm of institutional politics. However, it could still affect citizens' perceptions and consciousness regarding political choices founded uniquely on minor urban urgencies. The case of Welcome to Favelas gathers content that helps deconstruct the notion of beauty globally tied to the Italian identity. The page has grown past the 1-million subscriber mark, and its name has become a catchphrase for many of the country's issues. The cross-platform coverage and citations in the main-stream press have led to a world of absurd, funny and unbelievable circumstances embedded in news reports. For example, a car drives through Rome on a rainy day and quite suddenly, the driver goes past a building entirely covered in flames as someone laughs. In another video, piles of trash appear on the stream just after two young women wearing the page's merchandising t-shirt (Figure 1), which, in turn, precedes the images of two cars crashing against a tree and a streetcar. In yet another post, a small truck submerses in a tourist spot in what seems to be the Tiber River. A strong reaction from the audience accompanies these images. To the burning building in central Rome, a user wrote: 'What is happening with the world?' Another passage hints at sexist jokes and images of urban decay in Italy.



Figure 2. Simone Cicalone video still with subtitle (snapshot).

The case of Simone Cicalone is akin to the latter but much better articulated. These videos are made by a 50-year-old Roman ex-pugilist who started teaching self-defence lessons, the so-called *Scuola di Botte*, in 2017 (Palmieri, 2022). With more than a half million followers on Facebook and the same number on YouTube, he has also become viral on TikTok due to his ability to interview former outlaws, people without housing, migrants, drug addicts, fighters, and anyone who accepts his interviewing style, walking in vast swathes of degraded land. In the company of several young men, among them ex-fighters, Cicalone manages to destabilise the normalcy of life by triggering laughter and highlighting cultural differences while also exposing failing public services. Cicalone, perhaps inadvertently, follows encounters that flesh out an emerging multicultural Italy, where migrant agglomeration in city centres has become popular on social media (Neal et al., 2019). Each post revolves around what Heil (2014) had seen as the ‘minimal consensus’ that conviviality allows for. In short, general agreements and disagreements among Italophones impute a common denominator. His most popular videos on YouTube include interviews with famous criminal figures while walking down in the city. ‘Bomba Anarchica tells his true story’ (24 March 2021), or the exposés of dangerous parts of the Italian capital, ‘The criminality of Rozzano, solidarity and redemption, the criminal quarter’ (04 August 2021) (Figure 2).

While different in their objective and content, both digital projects concatenate graphic images, simulated chaos, and a phatic narrative that transpires an uncomfortable way of living in the city that links to an unlimited stock of negative associations. In *Welcome to Favelas*, a video of a rat eating from the buckets of a supermarket showcase reads: ‘In Rome, all is fresh’ (26 May 2021). A long queue image has the caption: ‘Vaccinal

chaos in Bologna' (02 June 2021), a shark swimming closely to beachgoers at Taranto couples with a clip of a random man on a horse: 'From Ventimiglia to Rome' (01 June 2021), it reads. In Cicalone, images of the degraded Colosseum or records of criminal Rome receive avatars that juxtapose Cicalone and the men as if fighting or threatened by those around them, insofar as the video otherwise portrays dialogue and calm scenes. Aware of difficulties in harvesting social media data without comprising data integrity, user privacy and ensuring methods' reproducibility (Puschmann, 2019), it was the case of consciously focusing on small data samples due to the criticality of the content at stake. This research adopted what scholars have seen as the 'thickening' of small data- sets, thus guaranteeing their robustness and reliability (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017). These two media projects have proven to affect users from Italy and abroad. While featuring highly unusual content that turns out to become viral, that is, grim urban scenes in traditional tourist spots, unusual associations and jokes, They have occasionally acted as a source of images or stories for the mainstream media, affecting the reading of these images by larger audiences. As Gradinaru (2018) argued, the phatic nature of contemporary media is not necessarily dialogic. Each page invokes a voice engaged with a mix of urban issues, social prejudices and comic episodes that stir virality on one side, as it can weaponise and politicise it on the other.

Both pages were critical because of their uniqueness in leaving phatic conviviality behind to promote other sorts of relationships with urban Italy. A few scholars have noticed this loss of innocence regarding other casual, everyday interrogations of the status quo on social media. In the recent past, 'phatic violence' brought waves of antipathy channelled through the reporting images of Muslims always associated with the War on Terror (Szpunar, 2020). The 'dehumanising' media metaphors on immigrants in the U.K. have resulted in 'automatic' forms of mentioning vast parts of the country's diverse population (Musolff, 2015). Political posts embedded metaphors in the media discourse for deceptive purposes (Chatti, 2019). Such metaphors do not allude to immediate effects or direct connections to topics or agendas. Instead, they advance deep-seated images that relate directly to a broader phenomenon (Lakoff, 2008). In the following, I outline this research's method to extract data from these projects despite their differences and lack of proper explicative context.

Understanding the discourse of precariousness on social media

By combining visual and textual discourse analysis, this study has departed from well-established literature on critical discourse analysis (CDA; e.g. van Dijk, 2015) to elucidate discourse patterns that show the appropriation of urban issues to other agendas. As van Dijk (2015: 3) puts it, the CDA framework relates to: 'The socio-cognitive interface that links mental

representations of communicative and other social situations and events'. In the case of Welcome to Favelas, these discursive patterns spring primarily from Instagram, TikTok and stills published on both platforms. Over the years, Welcome to Favelas has held many social media accounts, some of which fell victim to platform censorship. Even though some brief text often captions each post, the page's appeal resides in its solid visual assets. In the case of Simone Cicalone, the central discourse generated lies in lengthy dialogues published on YouTube videos and TikTok snapshots. In his videos, images do not play such an essential role as audiences engage in conversations about life stories and performative scenes that average 30 minutes long. The photos are not especially exciting, as the presenter walks across rundown estates and dirty corners. Otherwise, the interactive nature of these videos reveals the textual potential of discussing topics, drawing frequent associations, and eventually, indicating the most frequent.



Figure 3. Example of metadata analysis using a visual sample.

From a qualitative point of view, discourse analysis studies that focused on phatic communication have, to some degree, aimed at the same kinds of semiotic, social- linguistic, discursive articulations between content, participation and audience (Bouvier, 2018; Djonov and Zhao, 2013; Griebel et al., 2020; Leppänen et al., 2017). Consistent with this research's intention was to advance the 'visual metaphor' (Sorm and Steen, 2018) using principles seen in multimodal discourse analysis literature (van Leeuwen, 2013). These methods would satisfy the need for 'a form of cross-domain mapping' (Steen et al., 2010) or the projection of one subject (or domain) over another to what concerns the articulated word and image data. For example, listing the physical reality, the materials featured in videos or the statistical correlation between terms employed allowed for an interpretation of their visual or textual articulations that can confuse,

mislead, or make users prioritise the reading of some elements in the discourse and not others (Figure 3).

In the case of Welcome to Favelas, the biggest challenge was to arrive at a representative sample of what actual content is visible and it appears for a long time. Despite the page's success on Instagram, platforms have banned their creators multiple times. It was unclear how much content existed in previous accounts. Eventually, I scrapped 2120 unique images from Instagram's API. Various snapshots of 1020 TikTok videos allowed for the generation of image caps, which, in turn, grounded an automated analysis. This number seems reasonable, given that a limited stock of images and videos is available during the retrieval. A computer vision algorithm (Google, 2022) identified essential metadata from these images (Malik and Tian, 2017). It simulated a computerised reading of textual, faces and objects found in each picture, as it would happen in a social media setting. Following what Burgess et al. (2021) defined as 'critical speculation' in visual methods, this effort consists of 'descriptive, forensic and speculative' use of metadata patterns to engage with the computerised reproduction of such images. Here, the CDA helps to cut through ways of replication or absence of phatic and non-phatic aspects in materials identified by computer vision and the topics raised, thus interpreting the value of the list of repeated objects and not others as a predominant discourse.

In the case of Cicalone, 10 of his videos with over 1 million views on YouTube (n = 37,002 words) made this sample. A Python-based application performed an LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) (Daniel, 2019; Negara et al., 2019) with the textual content extracted from these videos. This method was crucial to calculate the distance between words as they appear in conversations between the creator and his guests. The resulting position and repetition of these words suggest they form groups of topics as they pop up in speech. This research focused on the top ten topics generated. These topics enlightened specific trends, the diversion into other matters or, possibly, the embedding of political or ideological factors. The CDA here also interpreted these topics' salience or absence in one area and not others as the potential to enhance, reduce, or change the meaning of words and texts into ideological tropes. The core of this analysis lies in its political content versus urban issues. Observing these elements also involved assessing computer vision techniques to the extent of their accuracy at computerised ways of obtaining the reading of a situation.

Metaphorical favelas, metadata and missed social connections
Research on the convergence between computer vision and social readings of social media images has experimentally established that this technology leads to an inventory of materials and objects that may offer little insight

into social or political realities (e.g. Levy and Diamanti, 2023). However, the potential of metadata associated with each image can reside in the material relationship between the depicted objects and their role in narrating a particular episode. For example, on 'Welcome to Favelas' Instagram, repeated metadata pointed to circumstances that objectively related to the immediate settings of each scene. Vehicle, bicycle, automotive, car, equipment, bridge and co-related keywords have attested to the reproduction of conditions connected to the viewer's transitory relationship with the situations they chose to share.

These elements denote images quickly extracted after passing across a specific scene, foregrounding a particular type of discourse associated with this rapid impression. More than the criticality or urgency around these objects, their representation is more indebted to this movement than to the accompanying words or frames. The keywords below emerge from the conditions or limitations seen in most images. They also call into question authenticity issues, that is, the sheer voyeuristic reproduction of situations from someone who does not necessarily stay in the scene. The metadata list confirms that much of Welcome to Favelas resides in scenes shot in any form of transportation. The blurred photographs and videos characterise the circumstances of one's mobility involved in the production, which emerges as a discourse of urgency and chaos, even if not mentioned (Figure 4).

On the other hand, the phatic aspect lies typically in the zooming in and out. From an observational standpoint, the images excuse explanation but, at the same time, they maximise juxtapositions against people's stereotypes, accompanied by short messages, emojis, or simply, the tagging of real or metaphorical locations. For example, when users geotag neighbourhoods such as Tor Vergata or Tor Bella Monaca, Roman peripheral communities seen as prone to social issues, creators can be based elsewhere. This critical interplay with geotagging adds a phatic discourse of negativity that crowns would-be neutral scenes, such as broken cars or underprivileged citizens on their own. This factor emphasises the lesser-known negative effect of phatic communication on creating negative discourse around known issues, leading to nihilistic narratives and comments. Besides that, this geotagging turns into discourse, compromising its reliability. When analysing generic keywords such as apartment or house, many of the scenes linked to these keywords corresponded to buildings in flames or suffering a severe hazard, for which I found no other reference. When adding flame to the same metadata, images on display are not classified under the previous tag, pointing instead to other occurrences outside the city, wildfires and cars in flames, but not these types of buildings or urban casualties.

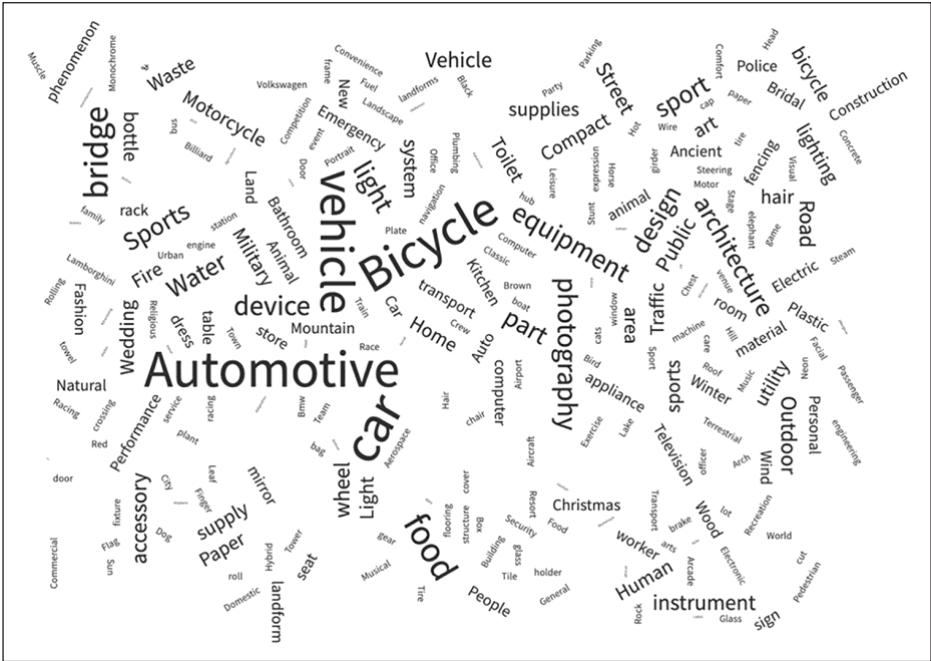


Figure 4. Word cloud with metadata extracted from the images published on the Welcome to Favelas Instagram account.

These shortcomings of computer vision allow for other meanings that accidentally confuse indexing systems, as crucial information is invisible to the algorithms that could potentially classify, promote, or ban these images according to content guidelines. The occasional virality of such graphic material could link to the inability of the metadata classification to deepen in the subject shown in each image. Otherwise, controversial subjects appear de-emphasised in the same analysis. Labels such as violence, spoof, medical or adult purport to identify scenes not representative of violence or adult content. These labels have tagged pictures of people walking on the margins of a road, wild boars eating from a garbage container, or Mark Zuckerberg memes received labels of safety issues, violence and adult content.



Figure 5. Images containing metadata related to the word apartment as produced by computer vision technology.

This mismatch between metadata and each posting reveals a loss of context that seems pivotal for Welcome to Favelas to exploit as a very arbitrary reading of urban realities. Elements read by computer vision instead concentrate on fleeting depictions obtained from afar. But these conditions, else, are not neutral on the receiving end. These images will likely boost falsities, exaggerations or obfuscate scenes that genuinely align with the page's claims of providing a public service. Next, the videos by Simone Cicalone about precarious Rome take us into other challenges of understanding resulting discourses out of the bulk of the metadata generated by his most popular videos.

Cicalone's reinterpretations of Rome

The second case study opens more thoughtful avenues on how Rome's precariousness reaches the viewers through online conversations. The word crime appears repeatedly in Simone Cicalone's topics, as the data yielded various topics concerning the conversations held by the YouTuber and his guests (Table 1). His most watched videos consisted of several episodes in which he walks and talks to different interlocutors present at the city's peripheries. Cicalone's conversations have engaged convicts, undocumented immigrants, street sellers and anyone present in public places whose personal narratives meet the context of urban degradation. However, the list of topics retrieved here expands much of the initial clickbait image trick that sells emotion, confrontation and violence (Figure 6). For commercial or algorithmic issues, these snapshots sell an oversimplified theme of these videos that falls short of these

conversations' content and word positioning.

Table 1. Topics verified in the Simone Cicalone videos with over 1 million visualisations.

Topic name	Keywords (method: Gibbs)
Life stories	Everyone, axis, life, chameleonic, people, side, shoot, word, orbital, nice, therefore
Work or occupations	Well, state, today, capable, Ragusa, demons, station, outside, elderly, farmers
Criminal cases	Bosses, Corleone, Totò, little, damage, divine, negativity, high-sounding word, music, buy
Migration	Note, left, around, revolves, assimilating, inside, managed, practically, war, incredible
Mafia	Mafia, one, otherwise, criminal, boss, world, life, terminal, everything, smashed
Police or other forms of persecution	Police, tool, follows, quarrels, twist, long, filmed, claims, floor, attacked
City life	Sure, panettone, talking, say, cities, Chago, Odimodi, Kabyle, chameleon, entered
Attacks or hostilities	Known, Aoubari, day, punches, factor, authorisation, income, caliber, originally, hostilities
General observations	Color, must, lady, obviously, sofa, asleep, cult, ask

These clickbait montages used as avatars obscure personal stories or views told in lengthy conversations throughout videos that can last 40 minutes or more. The list of topics (Table 1) suggests lesser-known stories that carry substantial knowledge of Italy from perspectives that rarely get any publicity in mainstream media. Secondly, several terms pinpoint subjects that come and go in the interviews due to the lack of interest in continuing those conversations or the interviewer's interruption. These may relate to past migratory journeys and their drawbacks, general impressions of the city and episodes of violence from multiple fronts. Conversely, the visuals attached to each video production can also hide what interviewees may disclose as an institutionalised level of prejudice



and racism they suffer, which fades away amidst incomplete stories and understated biographies. Cicalone and his companions instead highlight mafia characters, the police, the poor urban maintenance in Rome, and its degraded rail stations and monuments.

Even if not an exhaustive exercise, these topics underline that Cicalone's Rome is a projection based on specific reinterpretations of the city. Data shows that the creator's language to relate to Rome primarily relates to jokes, slang, broad references, or personal memories. Either through historical revisionism or a controversial take on current affairs, crime, or Figure 6. 'Termini by Night' – Snapshot of YouTube avatar of Simone Cicalone (2023a) where he explores the Termini Station, one of Rome's busiest, by night.

Roman culture, it is harder for the viewer to pinpoint the content without its clickbait strategy. Two of the best-watched videos are testament to these claims. The first one is titled *Termini Station by Night: True Danger and Degradation in the Centre of Rome*, published in 2021 (Cicalone, 2021a). In this video, Cicalone tours the arcades of enormous 19th-century buildings near the Termini station, the biggest in Rome, where he and his companions blend in with the company of street vendors, migrants and by-passers, with only a few women. Cicalone introduces these characters as 'historical, interesting', those who 'are mentioned in the news but are rarely given the chance to speak to his audience'. The video intersperses short testimonials with jokes and cuts that focus on sensationalised disclosures edited to appear at the beginning of each video, as Cicalone (2021b) narrates (translated by author and verified by a Roman Italian speaker):

Dear friends of Scuola di Botte. Today, we are again at Termini [station] [. . .]. We came in the evening to go on until the night. We'll take you around. Today, there are more people. There are historical characters, very, very interesting characters. So, I would advise you to stay [watching the video]. Then, folks, as usual. Stay if the video interests you. Otherwise, there are machines here that sweep the ground. Come to have them sweeping your arses! (1:56"-2:24')

Cari amici di Scuola di Bottei. Oggi siamo di nuovo a Termini. [. . .] Siamo venuti di sera per anda' avanti fino alla notte. Ve porteremo in giro. Oggi c'è più gente. Ci sono personaggi storici, personaggi molto, molto interessanti. Perciò io vi consiglierei di rimanere. Oh, poi, raga, come ar solito. Se ve interessa il video, rimanete. Sennò ci sono ste macchinette qua che spazzano per terra. Venite qua per fare spazzare le chiappe! (1:56"-2:24')

During the video, Cicalone and his companions ask individuals about the crime situation around Termini station. Standing close to degraded spots, they start speaking about the broader status of undocumented migrants, jail facilities, male prostitution, women's experiences and other citizens 'who cannot defend themselves'. The repeated use of chameleonic, a word that appears in more than one LDA topic in the list, reveals the metaphoric description of those living at the margins, a word used to denote all sorts of precarious situations. 'What a chameleonic life you had led' (Cicalone, 2021a, 2021b: 1'38"). This quote is repeated multiple times to street-based characters. The video shows footage of people sleeping rough as the interviewers attempt to speak with African immigrants whose fluency in the Italian language is limited but enough to disclose their status as refugees and talk of 'overcrowded' (affollata) jail cells. Repeated sentences such as *posti pericolosissimi*, or 'super dangerous places' contrast with the banter and laughter that follows as the YouTuber group instead seems to be enjoying safety while denouncing these issues.

Among several of these fragmentary experiences, scattered voices eventually con- verge into, if any, a discourse of criticism against a general idea of the status quo. Each of the analysed videos comprised serious allegations of failures in human rights by the Italian government, more salient than any possible criticism of city issues. In the past, Cicalone's content appeared to feed hatred against the same marginalised people he interviewed (Renzi, 2024). One guest was known for his right-wing affiliations, as shown below. The evidence nonetheless shows an extensive approach to people in a state of homelessness. Hence, categorising Cicalone's interventions as only having a right-wing bias is a limited assumption, as the YouTuber has recurrently denied this association (Cicalone, 2023b, 2024).

The second video, *The Pietralata Neighbourhood with the Brasiliano* (Cicalone, 2021b), discusses the ethical implications of committing a crime based on the guest's life trajectory. Cicalone explores the Roman neighbourhood of Pietralata, notorious for its social issues. His guest is the so-called *Il Brasiliano*, or Massimiliano Minnocci, an ex- convict who had previously voiced right-wing sympathies (La Repubblica, 2023). In the past, Minocci has reportedly joined a protest with the Casa Pound group, a racist organisation with fascist values. As an introduction, Cicalone tries dismantling prejudice regarding Pietralata as a 'criminal' neighbourhood. Then, the video progresses following educational messages from *Il Brasiliano*:

Cicalone: Brasiliano, what did you do in prison? (. . .)

Il Brasiliano: I said this time [in prison] was the first and last time [. . .] negativity brings negativity, got it? If you lead a specific kind of life. Eh. . .in which you have all that shit around you. Instead, if you become positive, if you become better, if you become joyful. It doesn't mean it is a synonym for being stupid or submissive. But I can tell you, if you go to work you don't go to jail. (0'26–0'52)

Cicalone: Brasiliano, che hai fatto in carcere? (. . .)

Il Brasiliano: Ho detto questa volta [in carcere] è la prima e l'ultima volta [. . .]: la negatività porta alla negatività, capito? Se tu fai un determinato tipo di vita. Eh. . .che c'hai tutta quella merda intorno. Invece, diventare positivi, diventare più buoni, diventare allegri. Nun vuol di'. . .Non è sinonimo che siete scemi o siete soggetti. Però vi dico, er carcere non ve lo fate perché andate a lavora'. (0'26–0'52)

In both videos, Cicalone feeds an expectation of violence, outrage and urban chaos, whereas the conversation consists of random and positive conversational stances. He and his contributors broker a view of the famous peripheral voices whose discursive value lies in their visuals (avatars, blurry footage, cuts that frame marginalised folks), meta- phors (chameleonic, barrels) and negotiated stances established with other influencers. Words such as assaulted (*aggrediti*), killed (*uccisi*), arrested (*arrestato*) or guerrilla (*guerriglia*) do not report cases of facts but compose a panorama of past stories that escape the reality of modern Italy.

These reinterpretations of Rome's issues reminisce of a classical view of phatic communication: forging conviviality through one's embedding in local vocabulary. As in the case of *Welcome to Favelas*, Cicalone exaggerates the actions taken in the videos, prefigures extremely chaotic situations, and helps discredit the public infrastructure. The ideal order taps into a consolidated ideology of decadence and societal decline. Accessorised by victimised voices, the validation of hygienic views of the city alludes to some dwellers as undesirable inhabitants. The embodiment of Romanness or Italianness through the role of retaking these corners is not an unrealistic possibility under the current right-wing government. Even if Cicalone inhabits the realm of the phatic parlance and denies such intended meaning, his channel remains an open venue for potential inflammatory discourses. Next, the article ends with a reflection on the role of phatic communication in such digital media projects and its ideological significance.

From environment sensing to loss of context to phatic nihilism: Tentative conclusions

An expanding social media repertoire predicated on urban precariousness advances a scenario where sociologists have seen ICTs as helpful for ‘environment sensing’ (Phillips and Wiegerling, 2007: 5). Dichotomic uses of technology aid a new interaction with ‘objectivity’, ‘signs’, but also forging pseudo-stories. Ultimately, both projects have given the audience a discourse that is more than the sheer explanation of the environment to its dwellers. De Souza e Silva (2006) defined ‘hybrid spaces’ as opportunities where material life is somewhat less worthy than the descriptive properties that form them. In both case studies, metadata transforms phatic elements because of the lack of association between the content of conversations and the urban reality that creators have depicted. As a result, one arrives at an entirely decontextualised space, where the discourse via the visual metaphor relates to urban precariousness not because of random associations or memes but primarily because of the minoritised individuals of colour, migrants and street sellers that appear in these images. Creators’ visual and textual narratives assign precariousness to elements, some bizarre and construed on these images (Whittaker, 2002).

Phatic nihilism amounts to this emphasis on precariousness through tokenised, dis- connected visual or textual resources available on social media. First, phatic nihilism happens when cues lead to a discourse of rejecting city spaces because of sensationalised failings. The latter reinforces an expressive binary between satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the depicted surroundings, but not only directed at public services. In effect, users will strengthen their dismay at social media-built expectations of beauty or efficiency. Secondly, the intertwining of these images with expensive brands and locations is far from ordinary: the car brands present in these images, for example, enable contrast with overexploited chaotic situations, achieved through the constant zooming in or out of disconnected situations. Those conditions favour phatic nihilism because they enhance the probability of generating clickable postings while attracting negative feedback from a disarmed audience.

Considering this research’s small scope and exploratory intent, it is appropriate to suggest that phatic nihilism can become a discursive opportunity that may inspire further research on ideological leanings encrypted online. In Italy, as elsewhere, phatic nihilism invites values and practices that return to other episodes of surveillance seen in the country. In our case, it is enough to remember fascist vigilantism, the time of urban squadristo, and the hounding of political opponents on the streets and urban peripheries (Gattinara, 2019). Likewise, one sees the ideological

underpinnings of phatic nihilism applied to modern Italian cities. Data has also shown how ‘likeable’ right-wing values can become when they appear in viral memes (Bobba and Roncarolo, 2018). Future research can take on additional forms of multimedia discourse (e.g. audio) that develop phatic nihilism into a trans-historical, crypto-ideological co-opting of citizen action by promoting a second-level form of participation in the city. Contradicted by the history of grandeur, economic under-development and exploited imaginaries, Rome’s urban issues are far from invented or projected, but future inquiries can yet verify the extent to which phatic nihilism corrupts views of solidarity or progressive citizen action.

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ORCID iD

Helton Levy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4986-7954>

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Author biography

Dr Helton Levy is a Lecturer in Digital and Visual Media at London Metropolitan University. He is the author of *Globalised Queerness: Identities and Commodities in Queer Popular Culture* (Bloomsbury) and *The Internet, Politics, and Inequality in Contemporary Brazil* (Rowman & Littlefield).