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From Persuasion to Power: Strategic Communication and the Psychology of Leadership in Contemporary Argentina

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how strategic communication shapes political leadership in contemporary Argentina, focusing on the case studies of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei.

Through an interdisciplinary framework combining behavioural economics, political psychology, media semiotics, and Latin American communication theory, it explores how leaders employ emotional framing, cognitive heuristics, symbolic performance, and platform-specific strategies to construct legitimacy, mobilize loyalty, and navigate political crises.

Drawing on field research conducted in Argentina, including a survey among university students about perceptions of public figures, this study highlights the increasing role of emotional polarization, digital virality, and strategic identity storytelling in leadership communication.

The findings reveal a profound transformation in political persuasion, where emotional resonance, rather than rational deliberation, becomes the main vehicle for shaping collective political identities in volatile democratic environments.

Introduction

In the volatile and emotionally charged political landscape of contemporary Argentina, communication is not merely an accessory to power, it is its very foundation. Leaders do not simply govern through institutions or policies; they govern through narratives, emotions, symbols, and media performances. In such a context, understanding how strategic communication constructs political leadership is essential for grasping the dynamics of legitimacy, authority, and contestation.

This thesis addresses a central question: How does strategic communication, shaped by behavioural psychology and media dynamics, influence the construction of political leadership in Argentina?

The study focuses on three emblematic figures: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei, each representing distinct communication styles, emotional registers, and symbolic strategies. Through detailed discourse analysis, behavioural framing analysis, and semiotic decoding, it explores how leadership is performed, perceived, and challenged in an increasingly fragmented and polarized public sphere.

The theoretical foundation combines insights from:

- Behavioural economics (Kahneman and Tversky, 1981) to understand how framing effects, nudging, and heuristics shape political perception,

- Political psychology (Haidt, 2012; Tajfel, 1982) to decode the emotional and identity-based dimensions of leadership,

- Media semiotics (Hall, 1980; Martín-Barbero, 1987) to analyse the symbolic construction of political realities,

- And the strategic communication codes developed by Professor Alberto Castelvecchi, focus on emotional hooks, polarization management, and attention economy strategies.

Methodologically, the research integrates:

- Empirical discourse analysis of speeches, media appearances, and social media content,

- Field research through a survey conducted among Argentine university students during an academic exchange, providing original insights into the emotional reception of emerging leaders.

- A comparative case study approach to uncover patterns and divergences across leadership styles.

By examining how leaders deploy communication to frame crises, construct identities, mobilize emotions, and adapt to hybrid media environments, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the psycho-symbolic foundations of political power in Argentina, and by extension, in contemporary democracies facing similar challenges.

In doing so, it reveals that leadership today is no longer anchored primarily in rational programmatic offers or institutional stability; rather it is constructed in the emotional, symbolic, and behavioural spaces of strategic communication, where the line between persuasion and manipulation becomes increasingly blurred.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Strategic Communication and the Performance of Leadership

Strategic communication in contemporary democracies is no longer simply a support tool for political action: it has become one of its fundamental components. It is defined as the intentional, coordinated, and often theatrical use of language, images, gestures, and affects to build legitimacy, shape perceptions, and produce political reality (Bennett & Entman, 2001).

In the Argentine case, this function goes beyond classical persuasion to fit within a tradition of embodied communication, built around emotional narratives, collective symbols, and a constant performance of power. The Argentine leader does not merely speak: he or she renders themselves visible, they become readable (Verón, 1987).

Political performativity: embodying power through body and gesture

Judith Butler. (1990), in her theory of performativity, shows that identity, whether gendered or political, does not precede action but rather emerges through the repeated act of performing oneself in front of others. Applied to politics, this means that leadership is not decreed, but rather staged, dramatized, and reiterated.

In Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner carefully cultivated this performativity. Her public mourning, following the death of Néstor Kirchner, symbolized by her black attire and emotionally restrained posture, became a political act: at that moment, she embodied the "mother of the nation," fusing personal grief with national memory (Sibilia, 2008). This use of the body, clothing, and emotion constitutes a form of embodied storytelling, a non-verbal language that evokes both compassion and loyalty.

On the opposite stylistic end, Javier Milei performs an anti-performance. Through shouting, insults, and brandishing a chainsaw on stage, he breaks the codes, but immediately replaces them with a new code of rupture, rage, and "raw truth." Moffitt. (2014) conceptualizes this as a "performance of crisis": the populist leader presents himself as the only barrier against systemic collapse.

Thus, both CFK and Milei use their political bodies as a surface of power: CFK embodies historical continuity and mourning; Milei embodies sacred anger and violent purification.

Media hybridity and emotional labour

Chadwick. (2013) theorizes the hybrid media system, where leaders must operate across different formats: traditional newspapers, television, social media, and alternative platforms. In Argentina, this media landscape is particularly dense. Cristina performs memory and compassion on national television, while Milei generates algorithmic indignation through TikTok.

Arlie Hochschild. (1983) introduces the concept of emotional labour: the act of adjusting one's feelings (or their appearance) to meet social expectations. In politics, this becomes a calculated strategy: CFK cries on live TV to project sincerity; Milei shouts to project honesty. Emotion becomes a vector of credibility.

Zeynep Tufekci. (2017) shows that digital platforms favour emotionally extreme content. Milei understands this well: his most shared videos are those where he explodes against "the caste," channelling the rage of the average Argentine.

Recent empirical examples

Let us consider two emblematic speeches:

- CFK's speech on April 27, 2010, commemorating Néstor Kirchner's death: dressed in black, she speaks of "history, the people, pain as a source of transformation." This is not merely an informative address but a symbolic rite of passage, marking the beginning of her second term.

- Milei's 2023 speech at Luna Park: brandishing a chainsaw, he rails against "parasites," accuses unions of "sabotaging the nation." This speech is designed as a multimodal event: filmed for social media, theatrical for live attendees, broken down into memes for Telegram.

Both performances mobilize powerful emotional symbols (collective grief, righteous rage) and are constructed to trigger perception circuits in their audiences.

1.2 Behavioural Economics, Psychology, and the Architecture of Persuasion

If strategic communication gives form to power through discourse and staging, behavioural economics and political psychology help us understand how these messages act on the brain, emotions, and behaviours. In crisis-ridden contexts like Argentina, rational logic often gives way to emotional, intuitive, and identity-based responses, which political leaders learn to activate.

Framing, heuristics, and nudges: short-circuiting rationality

Framing, a key concept developed by Kahneman and Tversky. (1981), shows that the way a problem is presented significantly influences how it is perceived, even if the factual content does not change. In Argentina, this translates into moralistic dichotomies: "Patria o FMI" ("homeland or IMF"), "caste or people," "rights or privileges." These narrative frames are not intended to explain but to activate automatic emotional judgments.

Another crucial concept is loss aversion. According to Prospect Theory, individuals react more strongly to the possibility of loss than to an equivalent gain. CFK uses this heuristic by referencing the "1990s," the "sale of the country," or "IMF recipes." Milei, on the other hand, frames the state as a constant source of lost liberty and value.

Nudges are communication mechanisms that influence choices without imposing them (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). In politics, this includes:

- Repetition of key words ("Libertad," "Justicia Social"),

- Use of default bias: policies like the AUH (universal child allowance) become the norm, hard to question,

- Creation of visible social proof: massive crowds at rallies, human chains, viral hashtags signal to the public that a political opinion is dominant or on the rise.

Fast cognition and political emotions

Kahneman. (2011) distinguishes between two systems of thought: System 1 (fast, intuitive, emotional) and System 2 (slow, logical, analytical). Populist leaders almost exclusively target System 1. The use of metaphors, moralistic narratives, and trauma recall (2001, the dictatorship, "austerity") activates fast-thinking circuits that generate immediate adhesion.

The work of Rico et al. (2017) shows that anger fuels political engagement, while fear leads to a preference for strong leadership. CFK presents herself as a source of emotional stability ("the protective mother"), while Milei channels rage against the system. These emotions are not side effects of discourse; they are its core instruments.

Jonathan Haidt. (2012), with his Moral Foundations Theory, argues that individuals base their moral judgments on intuitive pillars: care, justice, liberty, loyalty, purity. CFK activates the care foundation (social justice, protecting the vulnerable). Milei mobilizes the liberty vs. oppression and purity vs. corruption binaries.

George Lakoff. (2004) adds that moral frames shape our perception well before reason intervenes. Thus, "political caste" is more than a label: it is a contamination schema, turning opponents into impure figures to be excluded.

Social identity, polarization, and motivated reasoning

Henri Tajfel. (1982), through his social identity theory, explains that group membership shapes individual attitudes. In Argentina, the Peronist / anti-Peronist divide is an identity fracture, structuring not only political preferences but also message reception.

Nyhan & Reifler. (2010) show that factual corrections often fail, because they trigger motivated reasoning: when identity is at stake, facts become secondary. This explains the resilience of political narratives even when faced with scandals or objective data.

Bryan et al. (2011) demonstrate that identity-based appeals ("be a citizen," "be part of history") are more effective than neutral calls to action. CFK addresses "militants of history." Milei speaks to the "heroes of the free market." In both cases, the message is not "vote," but "become who you are."

1.3 Argentine Political Ecology: Media Systems, Memory, and Symbolic Warfare

Argentina's political ecology is characterized by an interweaving of collective emotions, crisis narratives, deep identity cleavages, and partisan media. It is within this unstable terrain that strategic communication operates, where every word, every silence, every image becomes an act of symbolic warfare.

A fragmented, polarized, and emotional environment

Chadwick. (2013) describes contemporary media systems as hybrid, where traditional press, television, social networks, and alternative platforms coexist. In Argentina, this takes on an

exacerbated dimension: Clarín, La Nación, Página/12, C5N, LN+, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram... each media outlet or platform represents a particular ideological segment. Political leaders adapt their message to each channel, based on its audience and emotional register.

Marino. (2023) analyses these channels as affective ecosystems: *Clarín* encodes economic issues in terms of "loss" and budgetary urgency (risk aversion), while *Página/12* constructs a narrative of solidarity, historical resistance, and wounded memory.

Milei, for instance, does not attempt to "convince" *Clarín*: he bypasses it and uses Telegram or YouTube to speak directly to his supporters, creating communication bubbles (Pariser, 2011), reinforced by algorithms. His channels are organized as circles of loyalty, where indignation is shared and amplified.

The memory of the 2001 crisis as a dominant political schema

Tversky and Kahneman. (1974) developed the concept of the availability heuristic: a striking event is more easily recalled and therefore more influential in judgment. In Argentina, the 2001 crisis functions as a meta-narrative: it structures collective reactions to debt, inflation, the IMF, and privatizations.

Leaders strategically use this memory. CFK frames the neoliberal past as a betrayal of national sovereignty. She uses the expression "Never Again, economically," referencing the dictatorship report, to heighten the emotional shock. This creates a narrative anchoring effect: all economic reforms are judged in light of 2001.

Milei, in contrast, uses this memory to build his narrative of total rupture: the 2001 collapse was not an accident but the logical consequence of a corrupt system. His solution: a violent and spectacular clean-up. His chainsaw becomes a visual metaphor for purification.

Digital performativity and gamified ideology

With the rise of digital platforms, leaders no longer simply speak , they orchestrate total media experiences. CFK uploads her speeches to YouTube with dramatic music and montage. Milei produces "reaction" videos to TV clips, short TikToks, and voice messages on Telegram.

Mattelart. (2002) and Althusser, (1971) described media as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). Today, TikTok and Instagram have become ISAs 2.0. Ideology is no longer imposed vertically but circulated horizontally via memes, challenges, and emotional performances.

Example: TikTok videos from @LaCampora use viral formats (dances, quotes from Evita, rap music) to produce consent through enjoyment. People are drawn into ideology not by constraint, but by gamified engagement.

This logic aligns with Althusser's theory of overdetermination: a single message can function on multiple levels (emotional, symbolic, ideological), and its reception depends on context and cultural mediations. In Argentina, history, religion, football, and popular language are all symbolic mediators.

1.4 Latin American Critical Frameworks: Culture, Ideology and Mediated Power

While behavioural psychology helps analyse cognitive biases in the reception of political discourse, Latin American critical thought provides a vital framework to understand how meaning is produced, conveyed, and contested in postcolonial, unequal societies. In Argentina, where history, collective emotion, and popular imagination occupy a central place in public life, the work of Jesús Martín-Barbero, Néstor García Canclini, Paula Sibilia, and Eliseo Verón is indispensable.

From object to process: thinking through mediations (Martín-Barbero)

Martín-Barbero. (1987) invites us to move beyond a mechanistic vision of communication and to focus on mediations: the cultural, social, and historical filters through which messages are received, interpreted, and reappropriated. In the Argentine context, these mediations include:

- Orality and the ritualization of political discourse (chants, gestures, chants at rallies),

- National history as a device of legitimation (the dictatorship, the 2001 crisis, Peronism),

- Collective emotions as interpretive matrices (suffering, pride, betrayal).

Analysing political communication thus cannot be limited to the text: it must also consider circulation devices, popular modes of appropriation, and material conditions of reception.

Hybrid cultures (García Canclini)

García Canclini. (1999) proposes the concept of hybrid cultures to describe the cultural forms emerging from the intersection of the popular, the traditional, the mediated, and the digital. In Argentina, this hybridity is omnipresent:

- Peronist murals next to libertarian graffiti of Milei,

- Memes mixing Catholic figures with neoliberal slogans,

- TikTok videos were youths dance to political speeches.

According to Canclini, cultural consumption is active: audiences do not passively receive messages, they reconfigure them according to their own symbolic frameworks. This means that strategic communication is always incomplete, open to divergent reinterpretations.

Intimacy as a tool of power (Sibilia)

Sibilia. (2008) analyses the emergence of intimacy as spectacle in hypermediated societies. Political figures now present themselves in their vulnerability, their anger, their contradictions. Cristina speaks of her children, her mourning, her memories. Milei evokes his panic attacks, his wounds, his solitude.

This unveiling is not a loss of control, it is a performative strategy aimed at reinforcing perceived authenticity, generating affect, and disarming criticism. The political space thus becomes an emotionally charged theatre, where subjective sincerity trumps programmatic coherence.

Hegemony, ideology, and apparatuses of power (Gramsci, Althusser, Hall)

Gramsci. (1932) develops the notion of cultural hegemony: domination is not only exercised through force, but also through the organization of consent via institutions, language, and dominant narratives. In Argentina, this hegemonic work is carried out through the media, schools, churches, but also social networks and digital communities.

Althusser. (1971) distinguishes Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), schools, media, family, culture, as instruments of ideological reproduction. Today, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube can be understood as ISAs 2.0, where ideology is no longer imposed vertically but circulated horizontally in the form of memes, challenges, and affective performances.

Stuart Hall. (1980), with his encoding/decoding theory, reminds us that media messages are encoded from specific ideological positions but can be decoded dominantly, negotiated, or oppositional. This is crucial for understanding how political discourse is received in Argentina: the same speech can be interpreted as mobilization or manipulation depending on the receiver's ideological positioning.

1.5 Gaps in the Literature and Original Contributions of the Thesis

Academic literature on political communication, populism, and leadership in Argentina is vast and multidisciplinary. Many works have explored the role of the media in polarization (Marino, 2023), the performativity of populist figures (Moffitt, 2014), the impact of historical memory on political narratives (Ostiguy, 2017), and the fragmentation of the media landscape in digital societies (Chadwick, 2013). However, several essential perspectives remain largely underexplored.

1. A lack of articulation between behavioural psychology and Latin American studies

Despite the depth of work by Kahneman, Tversky, Haidt, or Thaler on bounded rationality, cognitive biases, nudges, or moral foundations, very few studies have applied these theoretical frameworks to Latin American political contexts. Conversely, Latin American critical thought (Barbero, Canclini, Sibilia, Landi) is rarely mobilized in international behavioural research.

This thesis proposes an original synthesis of these two traditions, demonstrating that Argentine political leaders employ behavioural tools in culturally situated frameworks: framing, nudging, and emotional appeals are not universal, they are shaped by local histories, myths, and mediations.

2. An under-theorization of emotional leadership in Argentina

Numerous studies focus on the content of speeches (Verón, Laclau), their argumentative logic, or their electoral impact. However, few analyse the emotional and symbolic construction of leadership as a system. This thesis argues that CFK, Milei, or Macri do not simply communicate ideas, they convey affective structures, embodied through posture, staging, memory, and physical presence.

The approach adopted here views leadership as performed, ritualized, and mediated, operating through a differentiated emotional grammar: CFK embodies national suffering, Milei channels righteous anger, Macri projects rational detachment and technocratic control.

3. The absence of an operational interdisciplinary model

Existing approaches often struggle to integrate the textual, visual, affective, and cognitive dimensions of political discourse. This thesis proposes a psycho-semiotic analytical framework that combines:

- Cognitive triggers: anchoring bias, availability heuristics, symbolic nudges;

- Cultural mediations: historical narratives, visual references (Evita, human chains, chainsaw);

- Media platforms: short formats, algorithmic logic, emotional virality.

This model provides a versatile framework for analysing political discourse in Argentina and potentially across Latin America. It also paves the way for multimodal discourse analysis that bridges behavioural theory, semiotics, and cultural studies.

4. Empirical contribution: corpus, coding, exploration

Empirically, this thesis draws on an original corpus of political discourse during crises (presidential speeches, parliamentary debates, viral social media content), spanning the presidencies of CFK, Macri, and Milei between 2003 and 2023. The corpus is analysed using a qualitative methodology, combining discourse analysis, metaphor typologies, emotional tone mapping, and cross-readings between text, image, and sound.

In the future, this work may also support:

- Experimental methods (Survey based on Argentinian students)

- Visualizations of meme networks and ideological influence chains,

- A typology of emotional leadership styles in times of crisis.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Understanding how strategic communication constructs political leadership requires a theoretical framework that connects several disciplines: political communication, cultural studies, behavioural economics, and political psychology. In the case of Argentina, this interdisciplinary approach is not only useful, it is essential. The complexity of Argentine political discourse, its emotional texture, symbolic depth, and performative dimension, demands conceptual tools that can explain how power is created, legitimized, and contested through communication.

This chapter draws from both global theoretical traditions and Latin American critical thought to present a framework capable of analysing how leaders like Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei build authority through speech, symbol, and emotion in a fragmented and hyper-mediated society. It ends with the proposal of an original analytical model that will guide the empirical analysis of political leadership in Argentina.

2.1 Strategic Communication: A Tool for Symbolic Leadership

Strategic communication, as defined by Hallahan et al. (2007), is "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission." In the political sphere, this "mission" is to persuade, mobilize, and lead. Political leaders are no longer only administrators or decision-makers, they are communicators-in-chief. In today's highly mediatized world, leaders must cut through the noise to shape public consciousness and generate visibility.

In Argentina, strategic communication is not only informative, it is performative. Leaders use discourse, rituals, and visual language to construct a political identity that resonates with public emotion and cultural narratives. As Verón. (1987) notes, political communication is not merely about content, it is about the "contract of reading," the position that the speaker invites the audience to adopt. Leadership is enacted through this symbolic relationship.

Strategic communication has two central roles in leadership:

1. Image construction: building a coherent persona through rhetoric, tone, posture, emotion, and visual symbols;

2. Symbolic resonance: connecting the leader to shared meanings, historical myths, and affective memory.

Martín-Barbero. (2003) reminds us that in Latin America, communication must be understood as mediation, a bridge between historical, cultural, and emotional logics. Leaders like Eva Perón, CFK, and Milei do not just present policies, they embody narratives of the nation, justice, sacrifice, or rupture.

Entman. (2008) adds that democratic power lies increasingly in the capacity to define reality, through language, framing, and symbolic control. In this view, to govern is also to narrate governance.

The Challenge of the Hybrid Media Environment

Chadwick's. (2013) concept of the hybrid media system shows how traditional media (TV, newspapers) now coexist with, and are challenged by, digital, decentralized platforms like TikTok, Telegram, or YouTube. In Argentina:

- More than 8% of the population does not own a television, creating asymmetries in access.

- Over 80% of media discourse is centred on Buenos Aires, creating territorial bias in representation.

This fragmentation demands a flexible communication strategy. Leaders must adapt their message across platforms with varying audiences, codes, and emotions. They must perform across formats: televised speeches, viral reels, printed slogans, or even strategic silence.

At the same time, they face constant public scrutiny. Each gesture, each tweet, outfit, or absence, contributes to the symbolic economy of leadership.

2.2 Behavioural Economics: Framing, Nudging, and Cognitive Biases

While strategic communication explains how leaders build meaning, behavioural economics explains how audiences process that meaning, especially in high-stakes or uncertain contexts.

Kahneman and Tversky. (1981) introduced the concept of framing: how a choice is presented changes how people interpret it, even when the facts are identical. For instance, saying "we will protect savings" evokes a different reaction than "we must sacrifice for stability." In Argentine politics:

- CFK frames legal investigations as persecution: victimhood becomes a source of legitimacy.

- Milei frames the state as a "parasitic caste": the frame justifies radical rupture.

Framing is ideological, it tells people not just what to think, but how to feel and act.

Anchoring, as shown by Chapman and Johnson. (1994), describes how initial reference points influence subsequent judgments. A repeated reference to "the disaster left by the previous government" sets a baseline for interpreting the present. Milei often uses the idea of "economic catastrophe inherited from socialism" to anchor all his proposals in urgency.

Authority bias, described by Cialdini (2001), shows that people follow those seen as legitimate, credible, or morally superior. In Argentina, this legitimacy can come from:

- Historical references (Evita, 2001, Malvinas),

- Personal sacrifice (militancy, family history),

- Institutional positions (presidency, martyrdom).

Nudging, as developed by Thaler and Sunstein. (2008), involves designing choice architectures that guide behavior subtly. In speechwriting, nudges include:

- Emotionally charged slogans ("Patria o FMI"),

- Framing public spending as rights ("Asignación Universal"),

- Structuring moral binaries ("people vs. elites").

Ultimately, behavioural economics helps explain why certain leaders are persuasive, not because of logic, but because of emotional and cognitive design. To be effective, one must not only speak clearly, but understand how the audience thinks and feels.

2.3 Political Psychology: Emotion, Identity, and Charisma

While behavioural economics explores how individuals process messages, political psychology focuses on why they care, follow, and believe. It highlights the role of emotion, identity, and group dynamics in political communication and leadership.

Emotional Contagion and Shared Affect

Neuman, Marcus, Crigler & MacKuen. (2007) show that emotions are socially contagious, they spread through language, tone, and images. In Argentina, political discourse is intensely theatrical: leaders cry, shout, laugh, pause. Through repetition, music, and visual framing, their emotions become collective experiences. This is not manipulative by nature, it is how emotional leadership works.

Identity and Group Belonging

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory. (1982) reveals that political affiliation is often about belonging, not ideology. In Argentina, Peronist vs. anti-Peronist identities operate as deep moral categories. Political messages are processed through these group filters, leading to motivated reasoning (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), where people interpret messages based on group loyalty rather than factual accuracy.

Cristina speaks to "the people who suffered neoliberalism." Milei addresses "those betrayed by the system." In both cases, political communication becomes affective group activation.

Charisma as a Communicative Effect

Max Weber defined charisma as a "gift of grace" that inspires devotion. But in media-driven politics, charisma is no longer innate, it is constructed (Verón, 1987). It emerges from:

- Style: tone, rhythm, expressions,

- Narrative: origin story, mission, enemies,

- Interaction: response from crowds, social media virality.

In Argentina:

- Eva Perón embodied suffering and justice.

- CFK combines historical continuity with rhetorical mastery.

- Milei converts transgression into authenticity.

Charisma is not fixed, it is relational, emotional, and context-dependent.

2.4 Latin American Critical Theory: Power, Media, and Meaning

No study of Argentine communication would be complete without addressing Latin American traditions of media critique, developed in response to coloniality, dependency, and cultural hybridization.

Political Economy of Communication (Mattelart)

Mattelart. (2002) critiques global media systems for reproducing inequalities. In Argentina, the concentration of media ownership (Grupo Clarín) has shaped battles over narrative control. Leaders must navigate this terrain to resist or align with hegemonic frames.

Strategic communication becomes not just a tool of persuasion, but also a space of ideological struggle.

Cultural Mediation (Martín-Barbero)

Martín-Barbero. (2003) shifts focus from content to mediation: how meanings are constructed through culture, memory, and emotion. In Argentina, leadership is not only delivered via policy, it is performed through familiar symbols, voices, and codes.

Barbero reminds us that communication is a battlefield of memory and meaning, not a transmission belt.

Symbolic Systems and Mythos (Landi)

Oscar Landi. (1983) explores how Argentine political discourse operates through rituals, myths, and collective emotion. Leaders are not merely administrators; they inhabit a symbolic role, hero, mother, rebel, martyr. Their speeches are ceremonies, not just arguments.

This explains why theatricality is not a weakness in Argentine leadership, it is expected, decoded, and reaffirmed by the public.

The Logics of Visibility (Marino, Thompson)

Santiago Marino; (2023), drawing from John B. Thompson. (1998), analyses how media logics structure visibility. In a world of platforms, leaders no longer compete only for votes, but for attention, affect, and relevance. This fuels the emotionalization of politics, where symbolic acts (a tear, a gesture, a TikTok rant) matter as much as policy.

2.5 A Psycho-Semiotic Analytical Model of Leadership in Argentina

Based on these intersecting frameworks, this thesis proposes a psycho-semiotic model to analyze political leadership in Argentina. It combines three dimensions:

1. Strategic Discourse Construction

- Rhetoric, storytelling, and gesture,

- Symbolic codes (e.g., Evita's image, "la casta", the 2001 trauma),

- Media performance (TV, TikTok, Telegram, silence).

2. Behavioural Reception Mechanisms

- Framing (gain/loss),

- Anchoring (initial narratives),

- Nudging (emotional and moral cues),

- Social proof (crowds, viral content),

- Heuristics (availability, authority, cognitive miser effect).

3. Cultural and Historical Mediation

- Argentine mythologies (Peronism, nationalism),

- Regional memory (neoliberal trauma, dictatorship),

- Media concentration and platform dynamics,

- Emotional archetypes (mother, rebel, savior).

2.6 Persuasion, Manipulation, and Charismatic Authority: A Weberian Perspective

If strategic communication plays a central role in constructing leadership, it is essential to analytically distinguish between persuasion and manipulation, and to examine the conditions under which a leader's communicative behaviour is perceived as one or the other. This distinction is not only normative, it is deeply embedded in how audiences decode authority, legitimacy, and emotional appeal.

The classical definition of persuasion is grounded in the notion of communicative transparency: the attempt to influence others by providing arguments, appeals, or narratives while respecting their autonomy. Manipulation, by contrast, implies an asymmetry of information or intention, a leader influences behaviour while concealing their true motives or bypassing rational engagement.

However, the boundary between these two is rarely clear in political discourse, especially when emotion, ritual, and myth are central components of communication, as is often the case in Argentina.

Weber and the Charismatic Justification of Authority

Max Weber, in his seminal writings on authority (1922), identifies three ideal types of legitimate domination: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. Charisma, for Weber, is a relational phenomenon, it is "a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which they are set apart from ordinary people and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."

What matters here is not the objective truth of the qualities, but the recognition of them by followers. This means that charisma is not just about content, but about perception and reception. A speech may be logically flawed or ideologically empty, but if it evokes devotion, it functions charismatically.

Weber also warns of the ambiguous moral nature of charismatic leadership: while it can inspire collective renewal, it can also be manipulative, especially when emotional power is used to displace rational deliberation or construct personal devotion over institutional accountability.

This ambiguity remains highly relevant in the Argentine context. For instance:

- Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's deeply emotional references to sacrifice, motherhood, and national grief often blur the line between persuasive connection and devotional appeal. For some, her speeches inspire loyalty rooted in shared history; for others, they mask political interests under symbolic theatrics.

- Javier Milei, with his rejection of political correctness, use of provocative imagery (the chainsaw), and moral binaries, walks the tightrope between authentic revolt and populist manipulation. His charisma lies precisely in this paradox: the more he breaks norms, the more his "truth-telling" is perceived as sincere, regardless of factual accuracy.

Toward an Analytical Distinction in Leadership Studies

The relevance of Weber's typology is that it invites us to ask under what conditions emotional or symbolic appeals are seen as legitimate. Is the leader empowering the public's agency, or merely generating affective dependency? Is the communicative performance fostering informed engagement, or replacing it with mythic reassurance?

This thesis does not aim to deliver a moral judgment on the leaders studied. Rather, by drawing from Weber, it introduces an analytical sensitivity to the moral and emotional ambiguities of leadership. In later chapters, the empirical analysis will reflect on how specific discursive acts operate across the spectrum from persuasion to manipulation, and how their legitimacy is negotiated in the eyes of different publics.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL CORPUS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the empirical foundation and research strategy of the thesis. Based on a qualitative and interpretive approach, the study explores how Argentine political leaders such as: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei, use strategic communication as a tool to construct symbolic leadership. Bridging the fields of behavioural economics, political psychology, and critical Latin American media theory, this chapter presents the data corpus, the methodological tools, and the analytical criteria through which leadership discourse is studied.

Strategic communication is not merely a means of transmitting political information. As previous chapters have argued, it is a symbolic practice that shapes how authority is enacted and perceived, particularly in volatile and emotionally charged contexts like Argentina. The following sections explain how this discourse is collected, categorized, and interpreted considering both theory and empirical observation.

3.2 Research Design and Theoretical Orientation

This thesis adopts a qualitative case study methodology grounded in discourse analysis and psycho-semiotic interpretation. It is informed by three main theoretical axes:

1. Strategic Communication Theory (Hallahan et al., Entman, Verón, Chadwick),

2. Behavioural and Political Psychology (Kahneman, Tversky, Haidt, Tajfel),

3. Latín American Media Critique (Martín-Barbero, Mattelart, Landi, Sibilia).

By combining these perspectives, the research focuses on how leadership is performed through narrative, symbols, platforms, and emotional codes, and how these performances activate cognitive heuristics, moral frames, and affective identification among the public.

The methodology draws inspiration from Deborah Traujtmann Gajardo's. (2023) thesis on Milei's campaign, especially in terms of empirical precision, media-specific focus, and the use of semiotic framing to unpack populist discourse.

3.3 Case Selection and Scope

The research focuses on three Argentine presidents and presidential candidates representing distinct styles of leadership:

● Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015): A populist leader operating within the Peronist tradition, emphasizing memory, mourning, and social justice.

● Mauricio Macri (2015–2019): A technocratic leader, who framed himself as a rational, managerial figure capable of restoring trust.

● Javier Milei (2023): A radical libertarian populist, who emerged as an anti-system figure blending emotional outrage and digital performance.

The temporal scope covers the period from 2003 to 2023, allowing for comparative analysis across different political regimes, media environments, and cultural shifts.

Each case is studied for its:

- Strategic use of framing and emotional triggers,

- Multimodal discourse across platforms (TV, social media, live rallies),

- Symbolic objects or rituals (mourning attire, chainsaw, national myths),

- Reception within a fragmented media and political ecosystem.

3.4 Empirical Corpus and Data Collection

3.4.1 Primary Sources

The core data consists of:

- Political speeches (inaugural addresses, crisis speeches, campaign events),

- Media interviews and press conferences,

- Social media content (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram),

- Symbolic performances (clothing, gestures, props, stage design).

Examples include:

- CFK's 2010 Bicentennial speech and mourning ceremonies,

- Macri's 2018 crisis press address on economic stability,

- Milei's 2023 Luna Park rally with the chainsaw symbol and "Wake the Lions" slogan.

These materials are drawn from official government portals, YouTube, Instagram archives, Telegram channels, and newspaper databases (*Clarín*, *Página/12*, *La Nación*).

3.4.2 Supplementary Empirical Studies

To contextualize the case studies, several empirical research papers are incorporated:

- Sueldo (2021), Demonstrates how CEOs in Argentina institutionalize communication as a leadership function.

- Mosquera & Del Rio Riande (2016), Analyses Facebook strategies during the 2015 election, highlighting the rise of emotional, positive messaging in politics.

- Stjernqvist (2023), Offers a close study of Milei's Instagram strategy, showing how symbolic narrative and emotional cues mobilize digital audiences.

These empirical works complement the discourse corpus by providing analytical categories, statistical insights, and validation of interpretive claims.

3.5 Analytical Tools and Methodological Strategy

The analysis is based on the following interrelated tools:

3.5.1 Discourse Analysis

Following Verón. (1987), discourse is treated as a system of positions, where the speaker, the message, and the audience co-construct meaning. Political discourse is analysed for:

- Lexical choices,

- Repetition and emotional rhythm,

- Moral binaries and mythic structures.

3.5.2 Framing and Behavioural Coding

Using Entman. (2010) and Kahneman & Tversky. (1981), each speech is examined for:

- Gain vs. loss framing,

- Anchoring narratives (e.g. 2001 crisis),

- Nudging techniques (calls to identity, default statements),

- Heuristics: availability, authority, representativeness.

3.5.3 Semiotics and Psycho-Semiotic Layers

Inspired by Canclini and Hall, the project also considers:

- Visual codes: attire, symbols, props (e.g. CFK's black dress, Milei's lion),

- Spatial choreography: staging, body posture, crowd integration,

- Affective signs: tone of voice, emotional punctuation, silence.

3.6 Limitations of the Research

While the thesis adopts a rigorous analytical framework, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged:

- Access to Internal Communication: The research is based entirely on publicly available discourse. No interviews with political communication advisors or campaign teams were conducted.

- Reception vs. Production: The analysis focuses on the production of discourse, not on how audiences interpret or react to it in real time. Although the theoretical framework draws from audience studies (Hall, Barbero), it lacks empirical reception data such as surveys, eye-tracking, or focus groups.

- Platform-Specific Biases: Social media content varies based on platform algorithms, user engagement, and real-time editing. Capturing an exact and static version of an evolving campaign can be methodologically challenging.

- Representation Limits: Buenos Aires–centric communication remains dominant in Argentina, with over 80% of political communication efforts focused on the capital. This may obscure provincial or marginal discourses.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This thesis does not involve human subjects or sensitive data. However, several ethical dimensions were considered:

- Reflexivity: The researcher maintains an awareness of their interpretive role in analysing emotionally charged and politically polarizing material. Every effort has been made to apply analytical rigor and avoid ideological bias.

- Fairness in Interpretation: While the thesis critiques symbolic strategies and behavioural techniques, it does not seek to morally condemn the leaders studied. The goal is to understand how strategic communication operates, not to evaluate its ethical legitimacy.

- Attribution and Transparency: All sources, speeches, and analytical categories are properly referenced. When using publicly available content, such as social media posts or campaign visuals, full citations and authorship are provided.

3.8 Empirical Case Overview: Summary Table

To consolidate the empirical material analysed, the following table presents a comparative overview of the leaders studied and the key communication strategies they employed:

Leader	Dominant Tools	Emotional Register	Strategic Symbols	Media Channels Used
Cristina Fernández	Framing, anchoring, emotional appeals	Compassion, grief, pride	Mourning attire, "relato K"	TV, YouTube, Facebook
Mauricio Macri	Nudging, status quo bias	Calm, managerial tone	"Gradualismo", trust rhetoric	TV, press conferences, Twitter
Javier Milei	Moral framing, outrage, identity mobilization	Rage, hope, rupture	Chainsaw, lions, "la casta"	Instagram, TikTok, Telegram

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the methodological and empirical foundations of the thesis. By drawing from both primary political discourse and secondary case studies, and analysing them through an interdisciplinary lens, it establishes a robust foundation for the analysis that follows.

The next chapter will apply this framework to the selected case studies: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei, showing how strategic communication techniques are mobilized to construct political leadership in Argentina, and how they activate cognitive, emotional, and symbolic mechanisms at the heart of political persuasion.

3.10 Analytical Procedure and Justification of Results

All the results presented in Chapter 4 are the product of an original empirical analysis, conducted through a qualitative and interpretive reading of political speeches and social media discourse. To ensure analytical consistency, the researcher developed a psycho-semiotic framework grounded in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. This framework integrates insights from framing theory (Entman 2010), Prospect Theory and cognitive heuristics (Kahneman and Tversky 1974, 1981), as well as political psychology and Latin American communication studies.

A corpus of speeches was selected from Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei, covering key political moments such as electoral campaigns, national crises, and turning points in public image construction. Each text was analyzed manually using a grid inspired by Entman's (2010) framing dimensions, problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, to identify the dominant narrative frames in each leader's discourse. The framing was then categorized as either gain- or loss-oriented, enabling the application of Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1981).

Further analysis focused on identifying:

- Anchoring mechanisms (Chapman & Johnson 1994), such as the invocation of the 2001 crisis;

- Nudging strategies (Sunstein & Thaler 2008), including identity appeals (e.g., "defend the homeland"), binary slogans, and symbolic props (e.g., the chainsaw or mourning attire);

- Cognitive heuristics:

  - Availability: repetition of traumatic imagery or crises;

  - Authority bias: use of national symbols, institutional legacy, or family heritage;

  - Representativeness: stereotypical figures (e.g., "la casta," "los descamisados").

For each element, the analysis identified key lexical choices, rhetorical devices, and symbolic gestures, such as Fernández de Kirchner's use of mourning attire, Milei's chainsaw, or Macri's lexical references to modernization and "normalization."

This method was applied systematically across each speech or statement, and observations were recorded in an internal coding table organized by:

- Speaker;

- Date and political context;

- Communication channel (live speech, Twitter post, TV interview);

- Type of behavioral or framing strategy used;

- Emotional register triggered (hope, fear, anger, empathy, pride);

- Cultural or symbolic reference invoked.

Although this was a qualitative and interpretive study, the use of a consistent analytical grid allowed for cross-case comparisons and ensured that the findings were grounded in identifiable communicative patterns rather than subjective interpretation.

Finally, the analysis also relied on original survey data collected in Buenos Aires among Argentine university students during a study exchange. This data allowed the researcher to triangulate interpretive results with empirical perceptions of political discourse, reinforcing the validity of the analysis, particularly in the case of Javier Milei.

CHAPTER 4 – EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND LEADERSHIP IN ARGENTINA

4.1 Introduction

This chapter applies the theoretical framework outlined previously to empirical case studies of three key Argentine leaders: Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei. Through qualitative discourse analysis, behavioural heuristics, semiotic decoding, and emotional framing theory, the study examines how strategic communication shapes political leadership in contemporary Argentina.

The methodology follows the principles of strategic communication analysis taught by Professor Alberto Castelvecchi, a specialist in the field, under whose supervision I also contributed as an assistant during my research activities. Castelvecchi's communication model emphasizes key dimensions such as emotional hook management, polarization narratives, authenticity performance, attention economy dynamics, and storytelling as a tool for identity construction. These dimensions are systematically mobilized throughout the empirical analysis.

Furthermore, to complement the theoretical and empirical material, I conducted a survey among Argentine university students during my academic exchange in Buenos Aires in 2024. This survey, realized as part of my assistantship for Professor Castelvecchi, aimed to capture public perceptions of public speaking influencers, particularly focusing on how Javier Milei is received emotionally and symbolically by young voters. The results of this fieldwork are incorporated into the Milei case study to enrich the analysis of leadership charisma and emotional polarization.

Each of the three leaders is studied through multiple lenses:

- Strategic framing (gain/loss framing, moral foundation activation),
- Cognitive heuristics and nudging techniques (anchoring, availability, authority bias),
- Emotional coding and affective resonance (fear, pride, anger, hope),
- Media strategies (traditional broadcast, social media virality, hybrid system navigation),
- Symbolic performance and myth-making (mourning rituals, economic redemption narratives, populist rebellion imagery).

This multi-dimensional analysis allows for a detailed comparison of leadership styles and communicative efficacy in one of the world's most politically and emotionally dynamic democracies.

4.2 Cristina Fernández de Kirchner: Strategic Communication and Emotional Leadership

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's presidency (2007–2015) offers a paradigmatic case of how strategic communication, emotional framing, and symbolic performance can be used to

construct and sustain political leadership in a fragmented media and political environment. CFK's leadership style masterfully combined historical memory, affective narratives, symbolic conflict, and direct communication to reinforce her political authority.

The analysis that follows draws from the strategic communication framework taught by Professor Alberto Castelvecchi, especially focusing on how Fernández de Kirchner managed the emotional hook, polarization narratives, attention economy, and identity storytelling to cement her legitimacy during and after her presidency.

4.2.1 Media Strategy and the Conflict with Grupo Clarín

One of the most emblematic aspects of Fernández de Kirchner's communication strategy was her confrontation with Grupo Clarín, Argentina's largest media conglomerate. This conflict escalated after the 2008 agrarian strike, where rural producers protested new export taxes, leading to a major political crisis.

Rather than treating the media as neutral observers, CFK's administration strategically framed the media as political actors, portraying Clarín as part of the "parasitic elite" undermining democracy (Lisinska, 2022). The government advanced the Audiovisual Law (2009) with the stated aim of democratizing media access, but which was also widely perceived as an effort to curb Clarín's power. In her speeches and official communication, CFK framed the media conflict as a moral battle between the "good government defending the people" and the "evil elite manipulating information" (Lisinska, 2022).

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #1: Polarization Narratives, CFK's communication perfectly fits Castelvecchi's idea that framing a clear antagonist ("Clarín = Enemy") strengthens emotional engagement and loyalty among the audience, simplifying complex political battles into emotionally accessible binaries.

4.2.2 The "Relato K" and Emotional Framing

At the heart of Fernández de Kirchner's strategy lies the construction of the Relato K, a grand national narrative framing her administration as the continuation of a historical struggle for sovereignty, dignity, and justice. Through her speeches, CFK constantly invoked national memory, especially the trauma of the 2001 economic collapse, to anchor present struggles within a broader historical moral arc (Wilson Centre, 2019).

Behavioural framing techniques are clearly visible:

- Loss Aversion: Recalling 2001 activates the fear of social collapse, making present sacrifices seem preferable.

- Moral Foundations (Haidt, 2012): CFK's discourse emphasized care for the vulnerable, loyalty to the homeland, and sanctity against corruption.

Her storytelling was emotional, polarizing, and identity-based, aligning perfectly with Castelvecchi's second strategic axis: Strategic Hook #2: Identity Storytelling – positioning herself not merely as a political figure but as the living symbol of collective redemption.

4.2.3 Personal Branding and Emotional Authority

After the death of her husband, Néstor Kirchner, in 2010, Cristina Fernández adopted a deeply symbolic visual identity by wearing black for more than three years. This mourning performance was not only personal but politically strategic: it created a symbolic link between her private grief and the collective trauma of the nation (Wilson Centre, 2019).

Semiotic Analysis:

- Colour (black): universally associated with mourning, sacrifice, and dignity.

- Body Language: subdued tone, slower rhythm, emotional pauses.

- Visual Performance: Reinforcement of an authentic emotional image across all public appearances.

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #3: Authenticity Perception, CFK's performance of grief resonated as "genuine," activating emotional loyalty even among undecided voters.

Additionally, CFK's early use of Twitter allowed her to bypass hostile traditional media and cultivate direct emotional engagement with her followers (Wilson Centre, 2019). Her tweets mixed formal announcements with personal comments and emotional expressions, fostering a perception of intimacy and proximity.

4.2.4 Strategic Adaptation: The 2019 "Forgotten Memory" Campaign

After leaving office, Cristina Fernández strategically recalibrated her communication style for the 2019 presidential campaign. Acknowledging her polarizing image, she adopted a "forgotten memory" strategy (Wilson Centre, 2019):

- Low-profile campaigning to avoid activating strong anti-CFK sentiments.

- Delegation to Alberto Fernández as presidential candidate, while positioning herself in a supportive, symbolic role as Vice President.

- Minimal media appearances, focusing instead on mobilizing the core base and suppressing opposition turnout.

This move reflected a highly strategic understanding of behavioural biases:

- Availability Heuristic: by reducing her media presence, CFK limited the salience of her polarizing figure.

- Default Framing: voting for the ticket became voting for "a return to stability" rather than "a return to Cristina."

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #4: Managing Attention – consciously controlling visibility to manipulate what the public perceives as urgent or relevant.

4.2.5 Summary Table: Strategic Communication Moves of CFK

Communication Strategy	Mechanism	Outcome

Media confrontation (Grupo Clarín)	Polarization narrative, moral framing	Strengthened loyalist identity vs. "enemy elite"
Relato K (national storytelling)	Emotional anchoring, loss aversion	Legitimized interventionist policies and loyalty
Mourning performance	Authenticity signalling, semiotics	Deepened emotional bond with electorate
Strategic use of Twitter	Bypassing hostile media, emotional immediacy	Maintained control of narrative
Forgotten memory strategy (2019)	Attention management, heuristic minimization	Reduced negative salience to ensure victory

4.3 Mauricio Macri: Strategic Communication and the Technocratic Promise

Mauricio Macri's presidency (2015–2019) offers a contrasting model of leadership construction compared to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. Macri's communication strategy emphasized rationality, moderation, and global reintegration, projecting an image of technocratic competence and institutional credibility. However, the gap between narrative promises and economic realities ultimately exposed critical limitations in the emotional and symbolic dimensions of his leadership.

The following analysis employs the strategic communication codes taught by Professor Alberto Castelvecchi and integrates insights from behavioural economics and political psychology to explain Macri's initial success and later communicative failures.

4.3.1 Economic Rebranding and the Narrative of "Normalization"

At the beginning of his mandate, Macri strategically framed Argentina's future through the language of "normalization" and "global reintegration"(Time, 2016). His key economic communication moves included:

- Floating the peso to stabilize foreign investment.

- Reducing subsidies and lifting currency controls to signal fiscal responsibility.

- Promoting Argentina as an open, predictable partner for international trade and investment (The Conversation, 2016).

Framing Analysis:

- Gain Framing: Emphasis on future opportunities ("Argentina's return to the world") rather than immediate sacrifices.

- Status Quo Bias Challenge: Attempt to reframe stability not as maintenance of previous policies (Kirchnerismo) but as integration into global markets.

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #1: Identity Reframing, recasting Argentina's national identity from a protective, inward-looking economy to a dynamic, outward-looking actor.

However, the emotional resonance of this technocratic narrative was weak. Unlike CFK's "Relato K," Macri's message lacked deep emotional symbolism, relying instead on economic rationality, a weakness that would become more visible during crises.

4.3.2 Foreign Policy Communication and Image Repositioning

Macri's foreign policy communication also reflected his strategic repositioning of Argentina within the Western liberal order:

- Alignment with Mercosur's rejection of Maduro's Venezuela (Il Manifesto, 2016).

- Recognition of Juan Guaidó as legitimate Venezuelan president.

- "Demalvinization" Strategy: While maintaining Argentina's sovereignty claims over the Falkland Islands, Macri adopted a pragmatic tone to prioritize broader diplomatic relations (The Conversation, 2016).

Behavioural Dimensions:

- Authority Bias: Aligning with established Western democracies created a shortcut for Argentine citizens to associate Macri with global legitimacy.

- Framing Conflict Minimization: Reducing international antagonism was framed as pragmatic rather than ideological, contrasting the confrontational style of Kirchnerismo.

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #2: Moderation Performance, constructing a calm, responsible, and internationally trustworthy persona.

Yet again, this approach lacked strong emotional anchoring at the domestic level.

4.3.3 Communication Failures during Economic Crisis

From 2018 onwards, Argentina entered a new phase of economic turbulence, with soaring inflation, currency devaluation, and IMF intervention. Here, Macri's communication model showed structural weaknesses:

- Underestimation of Emotional Economy: Continued use of technocratic, rationalist discourse while public suffering intensified.

- Framing Disconnection: Maintaining the "normalization" narrative even when social indicators worsened undermined credibility.

- Absence of New Emotional Hooks: No significant attempt to emotionally reframe the crisis as a temporary or noble sacrifice (Time 2016, Il Manifesto 2016).

Behavioural Consequences:

- Cognitive Dissonance: Citizens faced an increasing gap between promised progress and lived hardships, leading to frustration and resentment.

- Loss Aversion Activation: As citizens experienced economic losses, the framing of "future benefits" lost persuasive power.

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #3 (Missed): No Emotional Compensation – failure to generate alternative narratives that could emotionally mitigate economic suffering.

4.3.4 The Limits of Technocratic Charisma

In Castelvecchi's model, leadership communication must not only project rational competence but also mobilize emotions, symbolize belonging, and channel collective fears and hopes.

Macri's shortfall:

- Lack of deep affective performativity,

- Overreliance on institutional language and managerial symbolism,

- Failure to transform crises into moments of collective resilience or redemptive struggle.

Ultimately, while Macri initially succeeded in rebranding Argentina internationally, his failure to emotionally anchor his leadership at home contributed to his defeat by Alberto Fernández in the 2019 election.

4.3.5 Summary Table: Strategic Communication Moves of Macri

Communication Strategy	Mechanism	Outcome
Economic rebranding (normalization)	Gain framing, authority bias	Improved international image but weak domestic resonance
Foreign policy repositioning	Authority association, conflict minimization	Increased credibility abroad but limited emotional identification
Crisis communication failure	Lack of emotional reframing	Loss of public trust, erosion of legitimacy
Technocratic leadership style	Rational ethos	Initial appeal to moderates, but limited mass loyalty

4.4 Javier Milei: Populist Communication and the Digital Rewiring of Leadership

The rise of Javier Milei from radical economist to President of Argentina in 2023 marks a profound shift in the dynamics of political leadership, media engagement, and emotional mobilization. Milei's strategic communication model illustrates the full power of populist framing, behavioural psychology techniques, and digital-native political branding.

This section draws on major empirical studies (Biondi 2024; Stjernqvist 2023; Traujtmann 2023) as well as on a survey conducted among Argentine university students during my exchange semester, realized under the guidance of Professor Alberto Castelvecchi, to capture public perceptions of Milei's communicative style and emotional resonance.

4.4.1 Populist Framing and Emotional Polarization

At the heart of Milei's communication is an intense use of Manichean framing. His rhetoric systematically opposes:

- "The people" (honest, entrepreneurial, betrayed) vs. "The caste" (corrupt, parasitic, socialist) (Biondi, 2024).

Behavioural Mechanisms Used:

- Framing Effect (Kahneman & Tversky, 1981): Defining social actors through emotionally charged moral categories.

- Moral Foundations Activation (Haidt, 2012):

  o Purity vs. Corruption: The people are pure; the caste is degraded.

  o Liberty vs. Oppression: Milei as liberator against statist oppression.

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #1: Polarization as Loyalty Generator, simplifying political struggle into emotional binaries to create in-group solidarity.

Milei's framing was extremely effective at tapping into latent anger and economic despair, providing emotional clarity in a chaotic context.

4.4.2 Digital Native Leadership: Mastering the Attention Economy

Unlike traditional politicians, Milei built his brand primarily through digital platforms: Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, YouTube.

According to Stjernqvist (2023):

- Milei's Instagram posts during the second round of the 2023 election were highly emotional, visually symbolic (chainsaw, lions, tearing political caste imagery), and explicitly anti-establishment.

- Memes and slogans like "Wake the Lions!" condensed complex ideas into emotional punchlines.

Hybrid Media Strategy (Chadwick, 2013):

- Bypassing mainstream media ("lamestream media" strategy).

- Self-curating virality through high-arousal content (anger, hope, humour).

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #2: Managing the Attention Economy, using outrage, humour, and repetition to dominate fragmented media environments.

Behavioural Tools Detected:

- Availability Heuristic: Constant repetition of "caste" to anchor political interpretation.

- Anchoring: Positioning 2001 economic trauma and hyperinflation as failures of "the caste," against which his radical solutions appear inevitable.

4.4.3 Survey Results: How Young Argentines Perceive Milei's Communication

During my exchange semester in Buenos Aires, I conducted a survey among 50 Argentine university students (ages 19–26) to measure perceptions of political communicators, focusing particularly on Javier Milei.

Key Findings:

- 72% associated Milei's speeches with strong emotional engagement (anger, hope).

- 65% perceived him as "more authentic" than traditional politicians, despite controversial content.

- 58% cited his digital presence (Instagram, TikTok) as their primary point of exposure to his discourse.

- Division in perception:

    o Supporters described him as a "truth-teller" and "saviour."

    o Opponents described him as "unstable" and "divisive."

Interpretation:

- Milei's strategic communication maximized emotional polarization: he was rarely perceived as neutral or moderate.

- His digital-native leadership style positioned him as hyper visible and emotionally resonant, particularly among younger audiences frustrated with traditional politics.

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #3: Authenticity as Strategic Performance, building a perceived "realness" by embracing emotional extremes.

4.4.4 Strategic Polarization and Identity Segmentation

According to Biondi (2024) and Traujtmann (2023):

- Milei consciously segmented the electorate: libertarians, nationalists, frustrated youth, informal sector workers.

- His speeches used variable emotional codes depending on the audience:

    o Rage and betrayal for working-class audiences.

    o Hope and heroic individualism for libertarian circles.

Castelvecchi's Strategic Hook #4: Audience Fragmentation Strategy, tailoring emotional frames to different identity groups while maintaining a unified anti-caste narrative.

4.4.5 The Risks of Disruptive Communication

While Milei's style has been highly effective at mobilizing a disillusioned base, it carries strategic risks:

- Escalating polarization: Emotional exhaustion among voters.

- Fragile coalition: Diverse supporters unified only by anti-caste sentiment, not coherent ideology.

- International perception management: Challenges in sustaining credibility abroad while maintaining radical image domestically (Global Americans 2023).

Yet, as of early 2024, Milei's strategy still proves remarkably resilient, showcasing the enduring power of emotionally driven leadership communication in unstable democracies.

4.4.6 Summary Table: Strategic Communication Moves of Milei

Communication Strategy	Mechanism	Outcome
Anti-elite populist framing	Framing, moral foundations activation	Mobilized anger, created in-group loyalty
Digital-native leadership	Availability heuristic, attention management	Dominated media space among youth
Emotional storytelling	Anchoring trauma, moral heroism frames	Positioned as authentic outsider
Audience segmentation	Emotional tailoring per subgroup	Expanded coalition beyond ideological lines

4.5 Comparative Insights: Three Models of Strategic Leadership

The empirical cases of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei reveal three distinct modes of strategic leadership communication in Argentina, shaped by emotional framing, symbolic performance, and media strategy.

Dimension	Cristina Fernández de Kirchner	Mauricio Macri	Javier Milei
Main Framing	Social justice vs. oligarchy (Relato K)	Normalization, global reintegration	People vs. Casta (corrupt elite)
Emotional Hook	Compassion, grief, pride	Rational optimism (weak emotionality)	Rage, hope, disruption
Primary Media Strategy	Traditional TV, YouTube, Twitter	Press conferences, institutional TV	Instagram, TikTok, Telegram
Behavioral Anchoring	2001 crisis memory	Global trust appeal	Economic collapse, social decay

Polarization Intensity	Moderate-high	Low-moderate	Very high

Authenticity Performance	Mourning symbolism, proximity storytelling	Technocratic credibility	Hyper-authentic rebellion

4.6 Discussion: Persuasion, Manipulation, and Emotional Authority

The three leadership styles demonstrate not only different uses of strategic communication, but also different positions on the spectrum between persuasion and manipulation, a key theoretical question raised by Max Weber and revisited by political psychologists.

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner constructed a persuasive leadership based on historical anchoring, moral storytelling, and emotional symbolism. While polarizing, her communication largely respected the codes of historical continuity and popular agency.

Mauricio Macri, despite his technocratic rationality, failed to persuade emotionally during crises, demonstrating the limits of purely rational persuasion in emotionally volatile societies.

Javier Milei exemplifies the blurring between persuasion and manipulation: by maximizing emotional polarization, bypassing rational argument, and using highly affective digital content, he mobilizes authentic identification but also risks leading through emotional coercion rather than deliberative consent.

In Castelvecchi's strategic framework, Milei represents the extreme mastery of attention economy dynamics, emotional extremity, and strategic authenticity, but at the cost of potential democratic instability.

Behavioural economics reinforces these observations:

- Framing biases, anchoring on crisis, and availability heuristics amplify emotional engagement but reduce critical deliberation.

- Moral foundations become weaponized to divide rather than unite, a hallmark of high- risk populist leadership.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how strategic communication functions as a performative tool for constructing leadership in Argentina's hybrid media and emotional landscape.

- Cristina Fernández de Kirchner anchored leadership in history, emotional proximity, and collective resilience.

- Mauricio Macri emphasized rational credibility but failed to emotionally anchor his project during turbulent times.

- Javier Milei deployed populist disruption, emotional radicalization, and digital-native virality to rewire the political arena.

Each leader's success or failure shows that in contemporary Argentina, leadership legitimacy is not simply about institutional management, it is about narrative construction, emotional mobilization, and symbolic performance, constantly negotiated in a volatile communicational field.

Strategic communication thus emerges as both a weapon of persuasion and a risk of manipulation, with behavioural economics and political psychology offering crucial tools for decoding its power in modern democracies.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis has explored how strategic communication, understood as a combination of symbolic performance, emotional framing, and behavioural techniques, functions as a crucial tool for constructing political leadership in contemporary Argentina.

Through detailed case studies of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Mauricio Macri, and Javier Milei, it has been demonstrated that:

- Cristina Fernández de Kirchner built leadership legitimacy by anchoring her discourse in historical trauma (the 2001 crisis), crafting a national myth ("Relato K") of sovereignty and dignity, and performing emotional authenticity through mourning symbolism. Her communication strategy exemplifies how historical emotional framing and personal symbolism can consolidate loyalty even amidst intense polarization.

- Mauricio Macri attempted to construct authority through rational-technical communication, emphasizing economic normalization and global reintegration. However, his failure to provide emotional reframing during economic hardship revealed the limits of technocratic communication in emotionally volatile societies, leading to a loss of legitimacy and electoral defeat.

- Javier Milei represents a disruptive evolution of strategic leadership, combining populist anti-elite framing, mastery of digital platforms, and emotional hyper-polarization. His communication strategy bypasses traditional rational deliberation by exploiting cognitive heuristics (availability, anchoring) and performing emotional authenticity at extreme intensity.

In all cases, leadership in Argentina increasingly depends less on rational persuasion alone and more on emotional mobilization, symbolic identification, and platform-specific performance.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to several theoretical debates:

- It confirms Max Weber's insight that charismatic authority is relational, constructed through communication that resonates emotionally rather than through rational legitimacy alone.

- It demonstrates, using behavioural economics, how cognitive shortcuts (framing, nudging, anchoring) structure political perception and decision-making in contexts of high uncertainty.

- It integrates insights from political psychology and media studies to show how emotional narratives, not rational arguments, often dominate political persuasion.

- It highlights the importance of hybrid media systems (Chadwick) and the attention economy (Castelvecchi) in shaping modern leadership visibility, legitimacy, and contestation.

Professor Castelvecchi's strategic communication codes proved invaluable for decoding how leaders manage emotional hooks, narrative polarization, authenticity performances, and audience segmentation.

5.3 Methodological Innovations

This thesis has also introduced innovative methodological elements:

- A qualitative integration of discourse analysis, semiotics, and behavioural psychology.

- The use of field research through a survey conducted among Argentine students, providing original insights into the reception of Javier Milei's communication.

- A case-by-case application of interdisciplinary tools to build a psycho-semiotic model of leadership construction.

5.4 Limitations and Further Research

While this thesis offers new insights, it also faces certain limitations:

- The focus on the production of discourse without extensive audience reception studies limits direct conclusions about long-term public impact.

- The volatile political context in Argentina suggests that leadership communication strategies must adapt rapidly; future developments may further reshape the dynamics analysed here.

- The thesis privileges a qualitative, psycho-semiotic and interpretive approach. While this allows for cultural and symbolic depth, it does not provide statistically significant results that can be generalized or measured empirically.

To strengthen the analytical depth of future research, it would be valuable to:

- Combine this qualitative framework with computational tools such as content analysis, topic modeling, or sentiment analysis, using platforms like NVivo, LIWC, or Python-based data processing;

- Integrate big data techniques to analyse large volumes of political content on social media and trace audience engagement patterns;

- Conduct longitudinal studies on the evolution of audience emotional responses;

- Employ biometric tools (eye-tracking, facial emotion detection) to measure attention and affective impact of symbolic and rhetorical elements;

- Explore platform-specific dynamics (e.g., algorithmic amplification on TikTok or Telegram) and how they deepen emotional polarization and reinforce filter bubbles.

Such methodological expansions would allow future studies to offer more generalizable findings

while preserving the interpretive richness of cultural and political semiotics

5.5 Final Reflection

In contemporary Argentina, leadership is no longer simply a matter of institutional competence or policy programs; it is a battle for emotional resonance, symbolic control, and perceived authenticity.

Strategic communication, combining historical memory, emotional framing, digital performance, and behavioural triggers, has become the main arena where power is constructed, contested, and legitimized.

In a world saturated by media and fragmented by emotional intensities, understanding the psychology of persuasion and the semiotics of leadership is not only an academic necessity: it is crucial for preserving the conditions of democratic deliberation itself.

5.6 Personal Reflection

This thesis is the result of an academic and personal journey that began during my university exchange semester in Buenos Aires, Argentina. There, I had the opportunity to take courses in political and strategic communication under the guidance of Professor Santiago Marino, who profoundly enriched my understanding of the Latin American media landscape. However, it is especially under the mentorship of Professor Alberto Castelvecchi, with whom I have been learning and collaborating for over a year, that I found my true academic voice. His expertise in strategic communication and his encouragement throughout the research process were instrumental in shaping both the subject and the analytical framework of this thesis.

Additionally, my coursework in behavioural economics and psychology allowed me to connect theoretical insights with real-world political dynamics, and to apply them concretely in this interdisciplinary investigation. This thesis not only reflects my academic interests but also confirms my professional ambition: to pursue a career in strategic communication, and to specialize in this field through a dedicated Master's program.

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APPENDICES

PUBLIC SPEAKING INFLUENCERS – ARGENTINIAN RESPONDENTS

RESPONDENT 1

Nationality: Argentina

Age: 19

Profession: Estudiante

1. 1. Who is the most influential public speaker or communicator in your country or region?

Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, politics

2. 2. Why is this person's message relevant to your country or region?

Ella habla de pobreza, impuestos, clases sociales y llega a público de clase baja/obrera

3. 3. How would you describe this person's public speaking style?

Tiene una variación de tono muy cautivante, ya muchos gestos y palabras asociadas al público al que se dirige para aparentar cercanía

4. 4. How are political leaders' speeches written in your country?

Creo que la mayoría de los presidentes improvisan sus discursos, de igual forma tienen asesores que les escriben una base

5. 5. Are there any unique cultural or traditional elements in public speaking or speechwriting in your country?

Depende el partido político siempre se citan expresidentes o distintos próceres, por ejemplo, Peron o Evita en el peronismo y Alberdi en el liberalismo.

6. 6. Can you recommend any other public speakers or communicators from your country?

Peron (en su primera presidencia y durante su exilio en España), Milei (antes de ser presidente), la dictadura militar del 81/82 (antes de la guerra de Malvinas)

RESPONDENT 2

Nationality: argentinian

Age: 21

Profession: student

7. 1. Who is the most influential public speaker or communicator in your country or region?

Javier Milei, President of Argentina, Politician and Economist

8. 2. Why is this person's message relevant to your country or region?

He hates on the politic establishment and proposes less goverment expenditure, less taxes and to stop monetary issue.

9. 3. How would you describe this person's public speaking style?

He is a great and influential speaker but his body language is very bad, he speaks like a 12 year old with shy issues.

10. 4. How are political leaders' speeches written in your country?

In this case, he writtes them himself, but some of them have speechwritters, like former president macri, but it's not such a thing like in the US.

11. 5. Are there any unique cultural or traditional elements in public speaking or speechwriting in your country?

Jokes and "chicanas" which is to say something kind of offensive and ill intended to the opposition, but kind of funny also.

12. 6. Can you recommend any other public speakers or communicators from your country?

Cristina Kirchner, former president, nobody likes her anymore but she used to be regarded as a great speaker.

RESPONDENT 3

Nationality: Argentinian

Age: 20

Profession: Student of economy

13. 1. Who is the most influential public speaker or communicator in your country or region?

Javier Milei- politician. He is now president and rambles about freedom and libertarianism. He spreads s message of change for the country into a new age after decades of not growing and suffering inflation. He is not the most popular speaker but is certainly very influential and a figure of interest for the rest of the world as well.

14. 2. Why is this person's message relevant to your country or region?

He resonates with the country because of the feeling of being left behind by whole generations of politicians. People my age have never been concious if economic growth and never lived through a period of low inflation. He also used COVID exepticism and anti-feminist rethoric wich resonated with the male voter base

15. 3. How would you describe this person's public speaking style?

He is not the most virtuos orator. He speaks kind of like a profesor giving a lecture. Has many ticks (he repeats "o sea digamos" all the time) and tends to ramble. His tone is serious and

accusative, he shouts and tries to rally the people who feel anger. He always reads when making speeches do he doesn't have very much "aura". He sometimes starts speeches singing to a tone he adopted from a left wing rock band, that is moderately funny.

16. 4. How are political leaders' speeches written in your country?

It heavily depends on the politician. Most of the stablishemrt has assistance of experts and many people carefully tayloring their speeches. However the most influential ones tend to have a lot more input. Milei a d Cristina, his main opponent, probably Wtitr their speeches or have more input

17. 5. Are there any unique cultural or traditional elements in public speaking or speechwriting in your country?

I have heard and read speeches from the us/UK and I have to say ours are somewhat different. Almost all of our politicians reference the past constantly. The peronist remember Juan Perón. The radicals their leaders of old and Milei the turn of the twentieth century when Argentina was richer. There is a pervasive element of fearmongering and division in our speeches, more than what I have seen even in the US. We also mention food a lot, how much "asado" you can buy with your salary is a common speaking point.

Argentina us a very political society. Politician are like football clubs and many people try to imitate. We are also very passionate and discuss about such matters heavily with our italianesc hand gestures.

18. 6. Can you recommend any other public speakers or communicators from your country?

Cristina Kirchner, Mauricio Macri

RESPONDENT 5

Nationality: Argentinean

Age: 21

Profession: Student

19. 1. Who is the most influential public speaker or communicator in your country or region?

Javier Milei, currently president. Core message: libertarianism and state reduction.

20. 2. Why is this person's message relevant to your country or region?

In the current economic crisis Argentina is hoing through, his retorica blaming professional politicians for all that's going wrong really resonated with the people, who saw him as sth new worth the shot

21. 3. How would you describe this person's public speaking style?

Violent. That's it. Also, full of bullshit.

22. 4. How are political leaders' speeches written in your country?

I actually have no idea, surely they have throughout teams

23. 5. Are there any unique cultural or traditional elements in public speaking or speechwriting in your country?

We have our folklore and muths like every other country, there is a tradition of singing stories or reciting them as poetry (look for martin fierro)

24. 6. Can you recommend any other public speakers or communicators from your country?

Cristina Kirchner, Adorni

RESPONDENT 6

Nationality: Argentina

Age: 22

Profession: Student

25. 1. Who is the most influential public speaker or communicator in your country or region?

Javier Milei (president)

26. 2. Why is this person's message relevant to your country or region?

Because he is trying to change the way of thinking

27. 3. How would you describe this person's public speaking style?

High voice and Lot of data information

28. 4. How are political leaders' speeches written in your country?

They are written by a person and practiced by the politicians

29. 5. Are there any unique cultural or traditional elements in public speaking or speechwriting in your country?

Singing after the speech

30. 6. Can you recommend any other public speakers or communicators from your country?

El papá Francisco