
Miscellaneous

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Like, share, influence: The role of populist content in shaping social media user engagement - A systematic review

Abstract

This systematic review synthesizes existing recent knowledge on the relationship between populism and user engagement on social media. The objective is to understand how populist communication style impacts user interactions on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Employing the PRISMA methodology (Moher et al., 2009), we conducted a comprehensive search across Sage Research, Web of Science, and Scopus databases for articles and book chapters published between January 1, 2019, and January 1, 2024, using the keywords “populism,” “user engagement,” “social media,” and “populist.” Thirty-six sources met the predetermined eligibility criteria for full-text review, which were then analyzed and coded. Our findings suggest a positive association between populist content and visibility on social media, although conflicting evidence exists in the literature. Hence, populist communication style and message features tend to drive higher levels of user interactions, but variations arise due to platform affordances, user attitudes, and contextual elements (i.e., level of polarization). Additional factors, such as content subject, matter, and negativity also play significant roles. Moreover, given the relevance of social media for political communication, this research highlights

the implications of populist messaging for democratic discourse, political polarization, and misinformation spread on the Internet. However, further research is still needed to explore mechanisms driving engagement with populist content, particularly on visually oriented platforms, and the influence of linguistic aspects (i.e., metaphors) on engagement levels.

Keywords

Populism, political communication, social media, user engagement, literature review

1. Introduction

The digitalization of political communication has significantly impacted the way political actors engage with the public, with social media platforms providing new opportunities for spreading messages and connecting with supporters (Bennett et al., 2012). Moreover, according to market research, by early 2024, nearly 5.07 billion people were connected to social media, representing more than half of the world's population (Chaffey, 2024). In this context, the phenomenon of populism gained increasing attention, with politicians and



parties leveraging these platforms to amplify their particular narratives (Engesser et al., 2017). Thus, the relationship between populism and user engagement on social media platforms became a subject of growing scholarly interest, with researchers seeking to understand how the distinctive features of such communication influence user interactions with political content online. This field of research is particularly relevant given the potential implications of populist messaging for democratic discourse, political polarization, and the spread of misinformation (Pérez-Curiel & Rivas-de-Roca, 2022).

The objective of this systematic review is to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the existing knowledge on the relationship between populism and user engagement on social media platforms. The review investigates the specific ways in which populist communication styles and message features impact user engagement across various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and emerging platforms like Telegram. However, it is important to note that this phenomenon is nuanced and influenced by various contextual factors, such as the subject matter of the content (e.g., immigration-related topics), the level of negativity, and the degree of polarization within the country (Bene et al., 2022), which will be addressed in this review.

Despite the growing body of literature, there are still gaps to be addressed, including the question of what drives engagement with populist posts, whether it is the message content, the style of political actors, or other factors. With this in mind, the main goal of this paper is to present the current evidence on one critical research question: What is known about the relationship between populism and user engagement on social media platforms, and which key characteristics of populist content are associated with user engagement?

One challenge in studying populism is the difficulty of defining it comprehensively (Toth, 2020). Scholars have conceptualized populism in various ways, including as a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a political style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), an ideology (Pauwels, 2011), a strategy (Engesser et al., 2017), and a political logic (Laclau, 2005). It is important to recognize that these terms share common traits, including anti-elitism, a focus on the people, “Us vs. Them” dichotomy, and simplicity of message (Abromeit, 2017; Bracciale & Martella, 2017; Canovan, 2002; Krämer, 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Stanley, 2008). This interchangeable use of terminology reflects a broader understanding of populism and sets the context for the findings presented in this article.

2. Populist Political Communication Style

Due to the nature of our research questions, it is important to note that this study focuses particularly on the communicative aspect of populism. In the communication-focused approach, populism is considered a quality of the message rather than the speaker. This means that politicians, parties, and their statements or speeches cannot be definitively categorized as populist or not (Rooduijn, de Lange & van der Brug, 2014). Hence, populism is understood as communicating and constructing narratives rather than adhering to concrete ideological tenets.

Furthermore, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) argue that merely referencing “the people” lacks the substance to be considered a distinct ideology or political movement. In line with Canovan’s (1981, 1999) conception of “politicians” and “populism,” Jagers and Walgrave (2007) define populism as a style rather than an ideology. They claim that populism is a political communication style employed by various political actors, including politicians, parties, movement leaders, interest group representatives, and journalists, who refer to the people. In this context, style “refers to the perceived distinctive manner of expression, just as there is a perceived manner of doing things” (Wales, 2014, p. 397).

Populism functions as a “communication frame” that appeals to and identifies with the people, claiming to voice their sentiments (Taggart, 2000; Canovan, 1981; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In other

words, populism operates as an overarching narrative, a means to frame diverse issues under the banner of championing the populace. This approach recognizes that despite contrasting ideological positions, parties such as the Greek far-left Syriza and the French far-right National Rally share a tendency to adopt a populist communication style (Mayer, 2013; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). This reflects the notion that populism can manifest through a specific communication style, irrespective of its ideological positions. Yet, separating populism into categories of ideology and discourse is an artificial distinction because both manifestations ultimately belong to the same realm of cultural context (Bennett et al., 2020).

In line with these arguments, to observe populist communication on social media, the framework of Political Populist Communication Style (PPCS) is adopted. According to PPCS, populism is essentially a political communication style that transcends ideological boundaries (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Tóth, 2020). PPCS views populism as a style that simplifies messages and relies on emotional appeals, often leading to fragmented communication that emphasizes certain aspects while neglecting others (Hameleers, 2018; Müller et al., 2017; Tóth, 2020). The next section explores how this communication occurs on social media platforms to promote user engagement.

3. Social media user engagement and populist communication

User engagement has become an important element for communication on social media, and this also includes the ways politicians, parties, and governments try to amplify their messages nowadays to influence public opinion (Bene et al., 2022). In most platforms, engagement is measured by likes, shares, comments, and reactions, thus determining the content's resonance and reach. Therefore, high engagement often signals that the message has reverberated with that audience, allowing it to spread more widely across the network (Christison, 2023). This virality is essential for politicians, who rely on broad support and the ability to mobilize “the people” (Jost, 2020).

Although social media utilizes complex algorithms to determine which content becomes visible to users, lacking transparency in this process, something is already clear: It is largely based on engagement metrics (Christison, 2023). These algorithms assume that content with high levels of interaction is more relevant and interesting to other users. This creates a feedback loop where engagement generates more visibility, which in turn fosters more interactions. Populist content, which often includes ‘Us vs. Them’ dichotomy together with emotionally charged and polarizing messages (Bobba, 2019; Bracciale, Andretta & Martella, 2021), is particularly effective in this environment, as it tends to provoke strong reactions and discussions. Engesser et al. (2017) support these observations by revealing that social media platforms provide an ideal environment for populist messages due to their fragmented and decentralized nature, aligning with anti-establishment and direct communication strategies. Hence, social media platforms have the power to reshape civic engagement and potentially undermine democracy by steering individuals toward specific viewpoints (Olaniran & Williams, 2020).

Governments and political entities have adapted to these processes by crafting strategies specifically designed to maximize social media engagement, while also tailoring their messages to specific demographics. Bossetta (2018) explores how the features and user demographics of different social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) influenced political campaigning strategies during the 2016 U.S. election. The study identifies four key architectural elements—network structure, functionality, algorithmic filtering, and datafication—that shape how political messages are crafted and disseminated, demonstrating the importance of platform-specific actions.

Kalsnes (2019) further illustrates how parties with a populist style strategically use social media to enhance their communication and mobilization efforts. Using a mixed-methods approach that

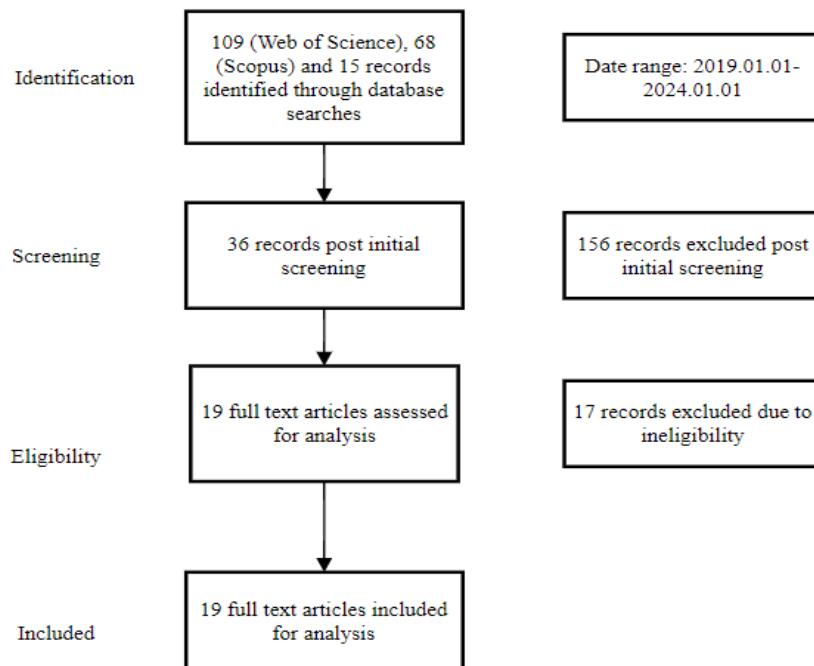
includes semi-structured interviews, content analysis of Facebook posts, and engagement data, Kalsnes finds that populist parties, such as the Sweden Democrats (SD) and the Progress Party (FrP), prioritize Facebook due to its broad reach and interactive capabilities. The SD focuses on spreading anti-immigration messages while criticizing elites, reflecting the essential populist communication logic. Additionally, both parties actively moderate their social media interactions to manage public perception and engagement, with the SD emphasizing shares to increase message dissemination. To investigate this topic further, in the following sections, we explain the approach used to collect, categorize, and analyze the recent literature about how populist content helps shape social media user engagement.

4. Methodical Approach

To conduct a systematic literature review on the relationship between populism and user engagement on social media, we followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework (Moher et al., 2009). An exhaustive search was carried out across three major databases: Sage Research, Web of Science, and Scopus. The search focused on articles and book chapters published between January 1, 2019, and January 1, 2024, using the keywords “populism,” OR “populist,” AND “user engagement,” OR “social media,” in the title, abstract, or keywords. This initial search yielded 192 results (15 from Sage Research, 109 from Web of Science, and 68 from Scopus).

Predetermined eligibility criteria were then applied for screening: (1) published in English, (2) peer-reviewed, (3) focused on the relationship between populism and social media user engagement, and (4) presented empirical findings or theoretical frameworks directly relevant to the research questions. After title/abstract screening and removing duplicates, 156 sources were excluded, leaving 36 for full-text review. 17 records were excluded due to ineligibility, leaving 19 full-text articles included for analysis.

Figure 1. Review process detailing inclusion/exclusion using the PRISMA Process



Source: Own elaboration.

During the full-text review, 17 additional articles were excluded primarily due to a lack of focus on populist social media engagement, analysis of unrelated platforms, or absence of engagement metrics.¹ The full-text review process resulted in 19 articles that met all inclusion criteria and were deemed highly relevant to the research questions. The selection of studies published between 2019 and 2024 was informed by the inconstant nature of social media platforms and their frequently changing role in political communication. Modifications in platform algorithms, moderation policies, and user behaviors have impacted how political messages, including populist discourse, spread online. For instance, Twitter (now X) revised its content ranking mechanisms and verification policies in 2023, affecting the visibility of political content (X, 2023), while Facebook's algorithm updates in 2021 deprioritized political posts in users' feeds (Stepanov, 2021)². Additionally, the increasing prominence of TikTok as a platform for political engagement has introduced new modes of populist communication that were largely absent from earlier studies. Given these transformations, restricting our review to recent publications ensures that our analysis reflects the current media environment and engagement dynamics.

As pointed out by Petticrew and Roberts (2006), in addition to considering study design when assessing papers for an SLR, inclusion criteria should evaluate study outcomes that are relevant to the review (p. 71). Therefore, while this temporal focus strengthens the relevance of our findings, it necessarily limits the inclusion of earlier studies that might have offered historical context. Research from the early 2010s, for example, focused heavily on Facebook's role in mobilizing populist support, whereas contemporary studies examine newer platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp, which have become central to alternative media ecosystems (Boulianne et al., 2024). Moreover, previous SLRs have already addressed other aspects of political communication on social media in the first decades of the century (Jungherr, 2016; Abid et al., 2023). Additionally, shifts from organic reach to paid political advertising have altered how populist actors engage with audiences. By applying strict eligibility criteria, our review prioritizes studies that directly examine the relationship between populism and user engagement on contemporary social media platforms. However, future research could expand this scope to incorporate longitudinal perspectives, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how populist communication strategies and engagement patterns have evolved.

Our selection of articles in English is based on the fact that it remains the dominant language in political communication research. This approach inevitably excludes contributions in other languages, such as Spanish-language journals in Latin America and Europe, where populist communication has deep historical roots. Thus, we acknowledge that restricting our review to English-language publications represents a limitation worth addressing. However, focusing on a single language also ensured consistency in comparing findings across studies. Furthermore, due to the lack of proficiency in other languages, translations could have introduced interpretation errors, potentially undermining analytical

¹ The exclusion reasons of 17 articles are as following: focusing on general populist social media use without analyzing engagement impact (n=5); studying emotions without engagement connections (n=1); discussing public attitudes unrelated to social media (n=1); examining web platforms rather than social media (n=1); analyzing populist social media activity without engagement metrics (n=3); studying party/media-specific phenomena without broader engagement insights (n=3); examining non-populist online engagement (n=2); and analyzing populist messaging without social media engagement focus (n=2).

² More details about these changes were registered on the X Help Center page and on the Facebook About page when the policies were implemented, which are referenced at the end of this paper.

rigor. Hence, future research should adopt multilingual approaches with appropriate linguistic expertise to provide a more comprehensive global perspective.

Table 1. Commonly used methods in the selected literature.

Method	Number of studies
Comparative Content Analysis	1
Content Analysis	6
Longitudinal Manual Content Analysis	1
Manual Content Analysis	2
Negative Binomial Hierarchical Models	1
Online Survey Experiment	1
Quantitative Analysis with OLS Regression	2
Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis	1
Quantitative Content Analysis	3
Supervised Machine Learning	1
Total	19

Source: Own elaboration.

In terms of the methods, the analysis of the final dataset indicates that a total of 14 studies utilized quantitative content analysis, which was the most prevalent method (See Table 1). These studies typically examined social media posts, tweets, and other messaging from political parties and candidates, analyzing features such as populist rhetoric, emotional appeals, and their relationship with user engagement metrics like likes, shares, and comments. Furthermore, six studies adopted quantitative analysis techniques, primarily regression models OLS (Ordinary Least Squares) and negative binomial, to investigate the effects of different message features and framing elements on online engagement. Experimental designs, specifically online survey experiments, were employed in 2 studies to examine the causal effects of populist communication in a controlled setting.

Supervised machine learning methods were utilized in one study to automate the detection of language patterns, such as nostalgia and populist rhetoric, in social media posts. Additionally, two studies employed longitudinal content analysis, manually coding messages and posts over an extended period to examine the evolution of communication strategies and tactics. Finally, comparative content analysis was another approach adopted by two studies, which involved analyzing communication across different platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) or between different political actors and countries.

Table 2. Geographical distribution of the included research.³

Country	Number of Studies
Germany	5
Italy	5
Multiple European Countries	4
Switzerland	3
Netherlands	3
Spain	3
Austria	2
UK	2
France	2
US	2
Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland	1
Brazil, Mexico, Colombia	1

Source: Own elaboration.

In terms of geographical focus, the research exhibited a strong European orientation (See Table 2). A total of 10 studies concentrated solely on European countries, while 14 studies included data from at least one European nation. Germany and Italy were the most frequently studied individual countries, with five studies each. The United States was also represented in 2 studies, while 1 study analyzed data from multiple Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland). Another study examined data from Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. Apart from these, only a handful of studies considered regions beyond Europe and the United States, such as Argentina, Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, and Turkey.

5. Findings and Discussion

Upon examination of the papers in the dataset, we found that scholarly attention is primarily given to the two aspects of populist communication on social media: the features of populist content that stimulate user engagement and the relationship between populism and user engagement. While alternative categorization methods exist, using this two-part framework allows us to combine findings from multiple disciplines, highlight commonalities and differences among studies, and provide a thorough understanding by linking various research domains into a unified analysis.

5.1. *What is the relationship between populism and user engagement?*

Regarding the main question of this study, research consistently showed that populist communication styles and message features are highly effective in increasing user engagement (Bobba, 2019; Bracciale, Andretta & Martella, 2021; Jost, Maurer & Hassler, 2020; Jost & Dogruel, 2023; Klinger, Koc-Michalska & Russmann, 2023; Martella & Bracciale, 2022). The literature highlights a pattern of main features in populist content that drive engagement on social media

³ Some studies analyze multiple countries simultaneously, which explains why the geographical distribution (Table 2) contains more entries than the total number of studies (19) listed in Table 1.

platforms, namely anti-elitism, people-centrism, and emotional appeals such as negativity, anger, and nostalgia. For instance, Cassell (2021a, 2021b) observed in several countries (Italy, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Spain) that populist messages generate more online engagement than pluralist, technocratic, or neutral messages, with populist frame elements, especially those that are anti-elite, being more effective in engaging audiences.

Similarly, Hameleers et al. (2021) found that styles conducive to populism, such as emotionality and first-person references, trigger more online behavior than the content of populist communication itself in the context of Austria and the Netherlands. It should be noted that there are certain nuances to the relationship between populist content and engagement on social media platforms, including the level of polarization, party actors, platform differences, and the specific issues being addressed in the message (e.g., migration, economy). These factors will be discussed in more detail later in this review.

5.2. Populist Actors and Leaders

Several studies suggest that populist actors and leaders themselves are effective in driving user engagement, regardless of the specific content they communicate. Blassnig and Wirz (2019) demonstrated that populist actors increase the perception of populism among recipients, even when some of their specific messages do not contain populist content. Moreover, populist messages drive user reactions significantly, influenced by the recipients' existing populist beliefs.

In their analysis of 18 Western democracies, Ceccobelli, Quaranta and Valeriani (2020) found that posts by populist leaders, irrespective of their content, increase likes and shares, although they do not generate more comments than non-populist leaders. The study observed that popularization elements in leaders' posts correlated with an increase in user acknowledgment (the number of likes) but led to a decrease in redistribution (the number of shares). However, these elements did not influence discursive interactions, as represented by the number of comments. The study further revealed that messages disseminated by populist leaders were more effective in increasing both the number of likes and the number of shares. At the same time, they did not elicit more comments compared to those shared by non-populist leaders.

The literature also suggests that there may be a positive correlation between the potential visibility on social media and populist content. For example, Blassnig et al. (2020) reported that the more populist content a politician uses, the more visibility and reach they gain on both Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, Ernst et al. (2019) discovered that populist messages and styles are more frequently used on social media platforms compared to traditional media outlets, particularly by new, extreme, and challenger parties. Hence, it indicates a strategic utilization of social media by populist actors to circumvent traditional media and directly engage with their target audiences.

5.3. Platform Differences and User Reactions

Facebook is the most frequently studied social media platform in relation to populism and user engagement (n=11). Two articles examined both Facebook and Twitter, while one article looked at Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. One article analyzed Facebook, Twitter, and televised talk shows, and one article focused on Telegram. Twitter was the sole focus of three articles.

While the overall findings suggest a consistent positive relationship between populism and user engagement, some studies report that this relationship may vary across different platforms. To illustrate, Bracciale, Andretta and Martella (2021) observed that the effectiveness of populist communication varied significantly depending on the social media used, with style elements being

more impactful than ideological content on some platforms. Political actors viewed Facebook as a more personal space and accordingly shared more positive and tailored posts, while Twitter was associated with negative campaigning by both senders and receivers of messages, who shared more tweets with hostile behavior and negative emotions (Ernst et al., 2019, apud Bracciale, Andretta & Martella, 2021). Thus, the prevalence of populism on social media can be attributed to a range of factors, such as “political positioning, platform features (demographics and uses), and communication tactics (employed to convey populist ideology)” (Bracciale, Andretta & Martella, 2021, p. 1489).

Another study also confirms the above-mentioned trends and demonstrates that Facebook was the most effective platform for populist parties across Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland (Schwartz, Nelimarkka & Larsson, 2023). Twitter’s performance was only marginally above average, which could be attributed to lower levels of activity in all four countries. Meanwhile, Instagram yielded mixed outcomes, with populist parties either significantly outperforming (in Swedish) or slightly underperforming (in Denmark and Norway) other parties. Similarly, Cassel (2021a) also posits that the fundamental populist narrative, which sets the populace in opposition to the elites, is notably captivating at higher engagement levels. However, merely critiquing the elites is enough to stimulate interaction on Twitter as well.

Moreover, Blassnig et al. (2019) found that while populist messages on Facebook received more likes and shares, populist tweets were less favorited or retweeted than non-populist tweets. This suggests that the use of populist content by a politician can increase their visibility on both social media platforms, but it appears to be particularly effective on Facebook. Finally, the literature also suggests that more niche social media platforms, such as Telegram, may be conducive to populist features. For instance, Jost and Dogruel’s (2023) research on the use of German Telegram channels by radical and populist actors for mobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic found that both direct and indirect appeals of messages, particularly populist blame games, significantly increased message retransmission.

5.4. Engagement Patterns and Contextual Factors

While the majority of studies support a positive association between populist content and visibility on social media, there are some conflicting findings (**See Table 3**). Some research suggests that the success of populist actors on social media may be more dependent on the populist attitudes of their followers than on the content itself. For instance, Fenoll (2022) found no significant difference in the frequency of shares between posts with and without populist content, implying that the success of populist parties on social media may be driven more by their followers’ populist attitudes. Similarly, Blassnig and Wirz (2019) noted that the effect of populist communication on user reactions is moderated by the recipients’ populist attitudes, with users who hold strong populist attitudes being more likely to share populist messages.

The study by Bene et al. (2022) also highlights the impact of contextual factors on the relationship between populist content and engagement levels. The findings suggest that users are more likely to engage with posts related to immigration, domestic issues, populism, and negativity, while posts dealing with environmental or economic issues receive less engagement. Additionally, some populist appeals are more effective in countries that are more polarized, indicating that the country’s political climate may play a role in the success of populist content on social media. While issue ownership does not appear to significantly affect user engagement, the country context does play a minor role. Therefore, the effectiveness of populist content in driving user engagement may depend on various contextual factors, including the political climate and level of polarization in a given country.

Table 3. Summary of the results based on topics.

Topic	Main Findings
1. Relationship between Populism and User Engagement	Populist communication style significantly increases user engagement on social media. Engagement varies based on polarization, party actors, platform differences, and specific issues addressed (e.g., migration, economy).
2. Platform Differences	Facebook is the most studied platform for populism and user engagement. The effectiveness of populist communication varies across platforms: Facebook sees more positive and tailored posts, Twitter more negative campaigning. Populist parties perform best on Facebook, mixed on Instagram, and less effectively on Twitter. Telegram is conducive to populist features, especially during events like the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Contextual Factors	Recipients' populist attitudes moderate populist communication. Engagement is higher for posts related to immigration, domestic issues, and negativity. Environmental or economic posts receive less engagement. The effectiveness of populist content depends on the political climate and polarization of the country.
4. Geography	In terms of geographical focus, the research exhibited a strong European orientation. A total of 10 studies concentrated solely on European countries, while 14 studies included data from at least one European nation. Hence, we are unable to claim whether the relationship between populism and user engagement has a similar tendency in other regions.

Source: Own elaboration.

6. Conclusion

The literature suggests a strong relationship between populism and user engagement on social media platforms. Populist communication styles, message features, and populist actors tend to drive higher levels of user interactions, particularly likes and shares. However, this relationship is nuanced and influenced by factors such as the specific platform, user attitudes, and contextual elements, including polarization and issue salience. While populist content and actors are generally successful in generating engagement, the underlying mechanisms may involve a complex relation between populist rhetoric, emotional appeals, and user predispositions.

Our interpretation of this trend, along with the increasing focus on populism in research, suggests that a key feature of populist communication is its ability to generate substantial “noise” in the media landscape. This phenomenon is notable globally, with figures like Nigel Farage (UK), Donald Trump (US), Marine Le Pen (France), Matteo Salvini (Italy), Geert Wilders (Netherlands), and Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines) receiving extensive coverage. The resulting feedback loop amplifies populist messages, potentially increasing their reach and impact. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle where initial “noise” generates media attention, further amplifying the populist narrative and influencing public discourse, sometimes at the expense of other important political issues or voices.

Moreover, we argue that the success of populist communication styles in garnering attention and engagement has led to an adaptation effect among non-populist actors. Mainstream politicians and public figures often find themselves adopting elements of populist communication to maintain visibility and relevance in a crowded media environment. This adaptation can blur the lines between

populist and non-populist communication, potentially normalizing certain aspects of populist rhetoric.

It is crucial to exercise caution when interpreting the findings due to the sample's statistical limitations. The results do not support the notion of a perfect match between populism and popularization on social media in terms of user engagement. Attributing the popularity of many populist leaders on social media solely to the presence of strong popularization traits in their communication may be an oversimplification (Ceccobelli, Quaranta & Valeriani, 2020). Jacobs and Spierings (2019) suggest that further research should explore whether populists act differently in other systems.

Finally, the practical applicability of our research lies in providing a deep and broad understanding of how populist communication styles and messages on social media can increase user engagement. This knowledge may guide practitioners, such as political campaign managers and social media strategists, to enhance their communication tactics, ensuring their content resonates more with their target audiences but without fomenting polarization. Additionally, policymakers and platform regulators might use these findings to devise strategies to mitigate the potentially polarizing effects of populist posts by promoting more balanced and informative discourse on social media platforms.

7. Further Research

Despite extensive research on the topic, the question of what drives engagement with populist posts on social media platforms still requires further empirical investigation. Whether the message content, the style of political actors, or other factors contribute to the success of populist posts in generating user interactions. Studies have highlighted various factors, but a generalizable answer is not viable with the current data.

Given these uncertainties, we propose a research agenda to address what we believe to be key gaps. First, there is a need to diversify research methods. While content analysis has been the dominant approach, future studies should incorporate a wider range of methodologies. This could include experimental designs, network analysis, and mixed-methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of populist communication dynamics.

Another important area for improvement is the expansion of geographical focus. Current research is heavily Europe-oriented, with limited studies on other regions, including the United States. Future research should prioritize expanding the geographical scope, particularly focusing on the Global South. Other regions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America deserve more attention to provide a truly global perspective on populist communication.

Visual communication in populist messaging is another understudied area, as the role of visual elements in populist communication on social media has been largely overlooked. This phenomenon is evident from the fact that the literature leans heavily on text analysis and ignores platforms with more visual emphasis. Future studies should examine how images, memes, videos, and other visual content contribute to engagement with populist posts. This visual aspect of communication could provide valuable insights into the appeal and spread of populist messages.

Finally, longitudinal studies tracking changes in engagement patterns and their broader societal impacts over time would contribute to our understanding of the long-term effects of populist communication on social media.

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