

What have we learned, and what is yet to be learned about social media populism? A scoping review and meta-research

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Abstract

The rise of populist communication on social media has attracted increasing scholarly attention since the late 2010s. However, the global research landscape on this phenomenon has not yet been comprehensively mapped, and there is also an absence of meta-research in the field to identify the quantitative design challenges scholars face. This article fills those gaps and suggests that the field should refine research designs. The study employs a two-stage empirical strategy. First, it conducts a scoping review of 122 peer-reviewed quantitative studies to synthesize major findings on populist communication on social media platforms. Second, it examines methodological and contextual factors associated with confirming, partially supporting, or rejecting hypotheses in a subset of 62 studies with Quasi-Poisson regressions. The results suggest that none of the examined variables affect the number of supported or partially supported hypotheses per study. However, multicountry designs, the inclusion of noncampaign periods, and longer timeframes are associated with a higher likelihood of rejecting hypotheses. These patterns point to an asymmetry in the evidence base: research design features predict hypothesis rejection more consistently than they predict hypothesis support. Consequently, we outline recommendations that can address these issues in future research.

Keywords meta-research, populist communication, populist ideas, social media populism, scoping review

Analyzing populism on social media (SM) has become a pressing issue for social scientists because SM platforms have been critical in the rise of populist communication (Ernst et al., 2019a; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Moffitt, 2018). Since the mid-2010s, SM and populist communication have been intertwined to such an extent that researchers refer to this symbiosis as “social-media populism” (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018, p. 3). In this article, we consider “social-media populism” (SM populism) as a communication phenomenon encompassing three dimensions: (a) the communication of populist agents (actor-centered approach); (b) the type and extent of populist communication irrespective of whether it is used by mainstream or fringe political actors (communication-centered approach); and (c) the effects of populist messages on social media users (Cassell, 2023). SM populism has surged because political agents can have unmediated access to users by circumventing traditional gatekeepers; political communication is cheaper and more personalized on

these platforms than in the traditional media; and politicians can suggest closeness to the people via SM, where they can focus on their “like-minded” target groups (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Engesser et al., 2017; Gerbaudo, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Hopster, 2021; Moffitt, 2018; Postill, 2018). However, as populist communication can be fragmented not only populist but also mainstream political agents utilize its features (Engesser et al., 2017). As such, populism has become an essential feature of contemporary political communication.

Scholars began to scrutinize SM populism from quantitative perspectives almost a decade ago (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Since then, researchers have repeatedly concluded that analyzing SM populism is challenging due to its chameleonic nature, and they have advised colleagues to conduct complex research to synthesize findings (de Vreese et al., 2018; Hameleers, 2018). We aim to reflect the above advice by proposing an integrative research strategy that links the field’s substantive results

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via a scoping review to the conditions under which they do (and do not) hold via our meta-research. To reach this contribution, we first organize prior quantitative evidence along a communication process that moves from message content (the balance of people-centrism and anti-elitism), through issue- and style-based packaging (topics and visual self-presentation), to amplification dynamics (user engagement and emotional reactions). This process-oriented lens provides a structured way to connect otherwise fragmented findings and to translate them into a coherent set of theoretically grounded questions. Accordingly, our scoping review synthesizes prior quantitative evidence at each stage of the communicative chain—message content, issue and stylistic packaging, and amplification dynamics—thereby linking ideational theories of populism to platform-specific (stylistic) performances and audience responses.

Most scholars agree that populism juxtaposes the “corrupt elite” with the “good people” (Mudde, 2004). However, we know less about which of these elements dominate SM populism more in cross-country analyses. Therefore, we aim to reveal in the scoping review the extent of anti-elitism and people-centrism in SM populism across the globe (RQ 1a). Moreover, since we consider SM populism to be a communication phenomenon, we aim to summarize the topics associated with it (RQ 1b). Also, in the realm of SM platforms, visual communication has become a crucial part of contemporary politics (Farkas et al., 2022). Therefore, we aim to summarize scholarly knowledge on the visual characteristics of SM populism (RQ 1c). Besides that, scholars emphasize that SM populism’s connection to user engagement is a vital topic in communication studies and political science because the more user feedback SM posts generate, the more algorithms amplify their visibility (Bene et al., 2022). Thus, we aim to synthesize findings on the connections between SM populism and user engagement (RQ 1d). Scholars have explored that populist communication is fueled by emotionality and elicits users’ negative and positive emotions (Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Heiss & Matthes, 2020; Humprecht et al., 2024; Jacobs et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020). Therefore, we aim to compile the most important findings on the emotionality of SM populism (RQ 1e) and its impact on users’ emotions (RQ 1f). Finally, our scoping review aims to identify which countries and regions are analyzed in populism studies and which territories are most often scrutinized *together* within these studies (RQ 1g).

In the second step, we treat research design and context—such as cross-national scope, campaign versus routine periods, analyzed timeframes, and whether analyses center on individual politicians—as explicit boundary conditions that shape hypothesis-testing outcomes. By linking substantive patterns to empirically observable boundary conditions, our meta-research points to a striking asymmetry in the evidence base: research design features predict hypothesis rejection more consistently than they predict hypothesis support. This pattern calls for a reappraisal of how the field specifies scope conditions and conducts theory testing in large-scale quantitative research on social-media populism. Although our meta-research aims to reveal the research design challenges in studies analyzing SM populism, we do not regard it as meta-analysis in the statistical sense (Joathan & Lilleker, 2023). Specifically, it does not aim to measure effect sizes, as there are very few studies on SM populism that address the same questions using quantitative

methods. Still, our study highlights what challenges researchers might face during these analyses. Against this backdrop, we seek answers to the following question:

RQ 2: How does research design affect hypothesis testing on SM populism in quantitative studies?

Materials and methods

We focus on research that quantitatively scrutinizes SM populism. We consider as “quantitative” those content analyses in which scholars have employed either (intercoder) reliability tests or computer-assisted methods, such as dictionary-based ones, to analyze SM populism (Aslanidis, 2018; Chen et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2020; Hameleers, 2021). Experiments and mixed-methods studies were also considered in our research.

We searched Scopus for English-language documents. We chose this platform because it has a larger database than Web of Science (Asubiaro et al., 2024; Marsicano et al., 2022), and it is stricter in indexing peer-reviewed academic publications than Google Scholar (Singh et al., 2022). We downloaded manuscripts from 2007, when Jagers and Walgrave (2007) published their ground-breaking article on the populist political communication style, to the end of 2024. We conducted searches using both general and specific search terms simultaneously (Table 1).¹ The PRISMA chart (Figure 1) outlines our data collection process.

After manual filtering, 119 papers remained in our database. Additionally, three book chapters were identified through the Scopus search, based on colleagues’ recommendations (Blassnig et al., 2020; Lilleker & Balaban, 2021; Lilleker et al., 2022). The data collection was based on manual quantitative content analysis. Following Lacy et al. (2015) and Neuendorf’s (2017) suggestions for this procedure, we randomly selected our subsample ($N = 50$, 41.3% of the original sample), and trained coders collected data on nominal- or ratio-level variables. Krippendorff’s Alpha intercoder reliability tests ranged from 0.78 to 1, yielding an acceptable level of reliability for each variable (Freelon, 2010; Krippendorff, 2018). We conducted a network analysis with Gephi to reveal how often countries are studied and which countries are analyzed *together* in the same research.

The meta-research scrutinized which independent variables can affect the number of supported, partially supported, and rejected hypotheses *per* paper. These papers are nested in the scoping review’s sample. Our dependent variables are the following (intercoder reliability coefficients are in parentheses):

- 1) Rejected: Number of hypotheses rejected per manuscript ($\alpha = 0.92$);
- 2) Partially Supported: Number of hypotheses receiving partial support per manuscript ($\alpha = 0.85$);
- 3) Supported: Number of hypotheses supported per manuscript ($\alpha = 0.97$).

¹ Table 1 outlines our search logic. The exact search strings and the (unfiltered, cleaned) data are available in the [Supplementary Material](#).

Table 1 Search descriptions of the scoping review.

Search No.	Search logic	Number of hits
1	Scopus-indexed papers or book chapters written in English where the terms “populism” or “populist” appear in the title, abstract, or keywords, and must include the term “content analysis” in the same fields. The studies were published between 2007 and 2024.	<i>N</i> = 400 (373 papers and 27 book chapters)
2	Scopus-indexed papers or book chapters written in English where “populist rhetoric,” “populist communication,” “populist appeal,” or “populist style” appear in the title, abstract, or keywords. The studies were published between 2007 and 2024.	<i>N</i> = 723 (567 papers and 156 book chapters)
3	Scopus-indexed papers or book chapters written in English where the title contains either “populism” or “populist,” and at least one of the following terms: “Facebook,” “TikTok,” “Twitter,” “X,” or “Instagram.” The studies were published between 2015 and 2024.	<i>N</i> = 142 (130 papers and 12 book chapters)
4	Scopus-indexed papers and book chapters written in English and published between 2007 and 2024. “Populism” or “populist” appears in the abstract with one or more of the following expressions: “Facebook,” “TikTok,” “Twitter,” “X,” or “Instagram.” The search excludes documents where these terms appear in the title.	<i>N</i> = 167 (150 papers and 17 book chapters)
5	Scopus-indexed papers and book chapters written in English and published from 2014 to 2024. Documents where the “social media,” along with either “populist” or “populism,” appears in the title.	<i>N</i> = 105 (82 papers and 23 book chapters)

Note. Papers and book chapters that analyze SM populism with quantitative methods were not found in Scopus before 2017.

We conducted the meta-research only on papers (*N* = 62) that included at least one hypothesis, and we coded subhypotheses as separate variables. We ran Quasi-Poisson regressions to analyze the relationship between the outcomes and predictors. The Stepwise algorithm identified many independent variables as redundant, leading to overfitting. Hence, the following independent variables were the basis of our models:

- 1) RWP: Right-wing populist actor analyzed ($\alpha = 0.78$);
- 2) NP: Nonpopulist actor analyzed ($\alpha = 0.88$);
- 3) Individual pol.: Individual political actor analyzed ($\alpha = 0.95$);
- 4) Noncampaign period: Noncampaign period analyzed ($\alpha = 0.81$);
- 5) Countries number: Number of countries included in the analysis ($\alpha = 1$);
- 6) Sample size: Total sample size of the study ($\alpha = 0.98$);
- 7) Days: Time range analyzed in the study ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Among the predictors, variables 1–4 are dummy variables, while the remaining variables are measured at the ratio level. The offset variable, serving as a control, was the number of tested hypotheses per manuscript ($\alpha = 1$).

Results of the scoping review

Our results reveal that scholars began paying more attention to SM populism after 2016 (Table 2). This is not surprising since Narendra Modi’s first electoral victory in India in 2014, the anti-refugee campaigns from 2015 in Europe, the Brexit referendum’s outcome, and Donald Trump’s presidential victory in 2016 demonstrated that (right-wing) populism was thriving. We found that approximately 90% of the studies examined right-wing populism, while only half examined left-wing populism. Platform-wise, Facebook was analyzed the most (*N* = 63, 45.7%), followed

by Twitter (*N* = 57, 41.3%), and Instagram (*N* = 11, 8.0%). Most studies were single-platform research (*N* = 99, 86.1%), followed by dual comparisons (*N* = 12, 10.4%), and papers that included three platforms together (*N* = 4, 3.5%).

People-centrism versus anti-elitism (RQ 1a)

Although the theory suggests that the “good people” form the most important element of populism (Mudde, 2017), researchers revealed that anti-elitism was more common than people-centrism in SM populism when they analyzed the SM communication of Matteo Salvini and the Lega Nord (Bobbà, 2019), German parties and politicians (Schürmann & Gründl, 2022), Dutch and Austrian leading candidates (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), hard and soft populist parties in France and Italy (Bobbà & Seddone, 2022), Narendra Modi in India (Sharma, 2023), and the far-left Red Party in Norway (Magin et al., 2024). Additionally, several comparative studies found that anti-elitism outperformed people-centrism in the SM communication of political agents from Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Italy, and Spain (Cassell, 2021b), in the statements of political agents from six Western countries (Ernst et al., 2017), in 142 Facebook campaigns by anti-establishment parties between 2010 and 2019 (Pytlas, 2023), and the Facebook posts of parties from twelve European countries during the 2019 EP elections (Lilleker et al., 2022).

In turn, some studies suggest that people-centrism is more frequent in SM populism than anti-elitism, mostly in the communication of mainstream political agents in Australia (McTernan, 2024), Taiwan (Lin et al., 2023), Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain (Jost et al., 2020; Pytlas, 2023). Political agents from Latin America and Spain, predominantly from the left, employed people-centrism more frequently than their Western European counterparts (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017; Fenoll, 2022; Zuilianello et al., 2018).

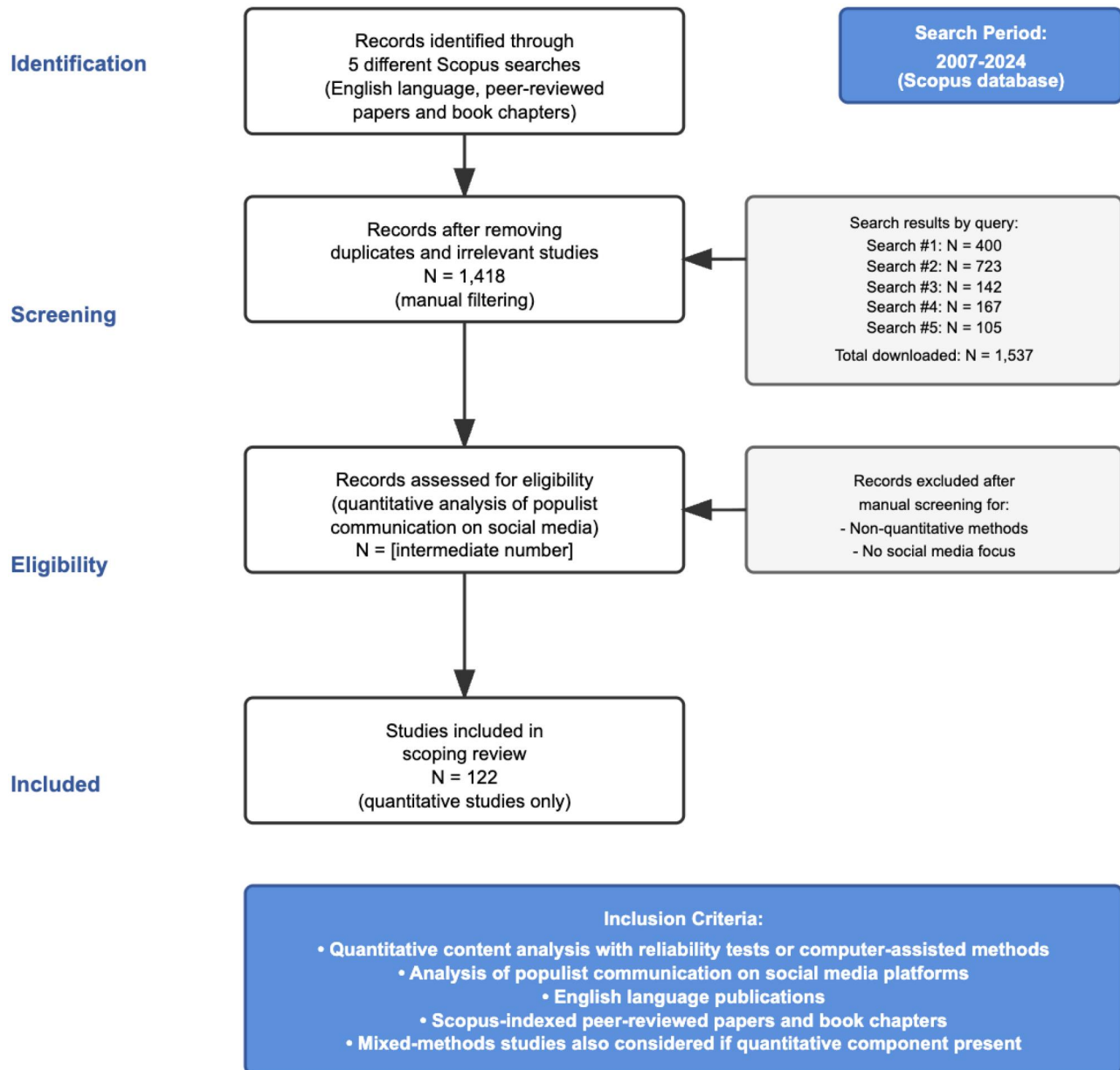


Figure 1 Data collection process of the scoping review.

Table 2 Frequencies of studies each year from 2017 to 2024.

Publication year	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
2017	5	4.098	4.098	4.098
2018	12	9.836	9.836	13.934
2019	6	4.918	4.918	18.852
2020	16	13.115	13.115	31.967
2021	15	12.295	12.295	44.262
2022	21	17.213	17.213	61.475
2023	27	22.131	22.131	83.607
2024	20	16.393	16.393	100.000
Total	122	100.000		

Topics intertwined with SM populism (RQ 1b)

Scholars argue that immigration, integration, economic hardship, crime, and corruption are issues that populists cover. These topics are associated with SM populism in the communication of German, Swiss, Italian, French, American, and British politicians, and in the 2019 EP elections (Ernst et al., 2019b; Lilleker & Balaban, 2021). Another comprehensive study corroborated these results but with nuanced distinctions: while European right-wing populists focus mainly on immigration, Donald Trump and the Republican Party blame their political enemies first (Humprecht et al., 2024). Additionally, researchers argue that radical right-wing parties primarily utilized economic

claims in their tweets when addressing the issue of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (Miró et al., 2024). In other contexts, left-wing political agents also touched on the issue of the economy: Bernie Sanders criticized the corporate elite most in his tweets during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign (Maurer & Diehl, 2020), and the Spanish Podemos's crisis narrative relied on the subject of the economy on Twitter during the 2016 general elections in Spain (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017).

SM populism and visual communication (RQ 1c)

The findings on the visual communication of populist parties and politicians mostly show a coherent pattern: populists tend not to depict themselves as political outsiders, but rather as capable professionals (Bast, 2024; Bast et al., 2022; Farkas et al., 2022; Steffan, 2020). Researchers argue that populists have adjusted their self-representation to conventional politics, portraying themselves as rather "ideal" than "populist" candidates to gain their audience's trust (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Scholars have also analyzed how populists represent the people in their visual communication in the United States (Moffitt, 2024) and Turkey (Zararsiz & Ayaşlıoğlu, 2024). The findings suggest that left-wing populists, namely Bernie Sanders and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, provided more feminine than masculine posts on Instagram. Additionally, Sanders and Kılıçdaroğlu outperformed Trump and Erdoğan in terms of posting pictures in which they appear alongside young people. Conversely, Trump and Erdoğan mostly posted images with mature adults.

However, some nuanced but remarkable distinctions appear between visual communication from populists and their mainstream rivals. One was that national symbols were overrepresented in populists' visual SM communication to create a feeling of statesmanship (Bast, 2024; Farkas et al., 2022; Muñoz & Towner, 2017). Additionally, female right-wing populists were depicted as being closer to citizens than their male counterparts, and they emphasized their competence visually more than men (Bast et al., 2022).

How populist communication affects likes, shares, and comments on SM (RQ 1d)

In this subsection, we review the literature on how anti-elitism and people-centrism influence specific types of user engagement: likes, shares, and comments. We include these user engagement metrics in our scope because they are commonly available on most platforms. We do not introduce findings on user reactions such as "love" and "angry" here because we discuss them further in the following subchapter.

Researchers suggest that anti-elitist content affects user engagement in Germany: it elicited likes in Facebook posts by the German parties and their candidates during the 2017 federal election campaign, and it boosted the dissemination of messages from extremist and radical right actors on Telegram channels during the Covid-19 pandemic (Jost & Dogruel, 2023; Jost et al., 2020). A comprehensive study found that anti-elitist and people-centrist communication by Brazilian, Mexican,

Colombian, Italian, and Spanish political agents elicited likes and retweets: the former had a stronger effect on user feedback than the latter (Cassell, 2021b). Other large-scale research found that populist party leaders gained more likes and shares on Facebook than their mainstream rivals during national election campaigns between 2013 and 2017 across 18 Western countries (Ceccobelli et al., 2020). Populist communication also triggered likes and shares on Facebook and Twitter in six Western countries in a noncampaign period in 2015 (Blassnig et al., 2020). Bene et al. (2022) found that people-centrism triggered every user engagement type in parties' Facebook posts during the 2019 EP elections. Moreover, this study highlighted the role of the political context in the effect of populist appeals on user mobilization: "...the more polarized a particular country is, the more effective anti-elitist communication is" (Bene et al., 2022, p. 442) in triggering user engagement. Finally, scholars found that tweets expressing people-centrism elicited shares and comments among Turkish political agents during the 2023 general elections (Bozdağ et al., 2024).

Emotions and SM populism (RQ 1e and f)

The emotionality of populist communication often resonates with citizens' dissatisfaction with the political elite (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Hameleers, 2019; Lantos & Forgas, 2021). First, we synthesize findings on the effects of emotional SM populism. Second, we summarize prior research on the interconnection between SM populism and users' emotional responses.

Considering RQ 1e, extensive research found that anger frames triggered likes for Matteo Salvini's and Lega Nord's Facebook posts (Bobba, 2019), negative tone and negative emotions boosted more comments, shares, and reactions for Austrian and Dutch candidates on Facebook and Twitter (Hameleers et al., 2021; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), and negative messages triggered reactions, shares, and comments for parties in the 2019 EP elections on Facebook (Bene et al., 2022). Moreover, emotional populist frame elements elicited likes and retweets among Brazilian, Mexican, and Colombian candidates, as well as in SM communication by Spanish and Italian parties (Cassell, 2021b). However, Peters and Schlußmeier (2024) found that the Identity and Democracy and the European Conservatives and Reformists party groups, both closely aligned with the populist worldview, posted mostly neutral messages on Facebook. Additionally, the above sentiment analysis showed that these parties used more positive than negative words. Finally, an analysis of 53 parties from 10 countries in the 2019 EP elections found that neither populist nor mainstream parties spent more money or sponsored Facebook posts or ads containing negative messages (Kruschinski et al., 2024).

We shift our focus to the effects of SM populism on emotions to address RQ 1f. Several extensive research inquiries revealed that being a populist political agent, mostly from the right-wing, is a predictor of triggering angry reactions on SM in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Heiss & Matthes, 2020; Humprecht et al., 2024; Jacobs et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020). Regarding positive emotions, Dumitrescu and Ross (2021) found that Republican respondents reported more positive feelings toward Donald Trump when his tweet was embedded in a news article. Additionally, Jost et al. (2020) found that

references to people increased love and reduced angry reactions, and leading Italian politicians triggered love reactions from users on Facebook when they included positive emotions in their posts (Martella & Bracciale, 2021).

The geographical scope of SM populism studies (RQ 1g)

First, we examine the extent to which individual countries are analyzed in studies of SM populism. Second, we identify which countries are studied in combination to reveal the comparative patterns commonly employed by scholars. The networks reveal a highly interconnected system of countries, and both graphs show dense connections, indicating a strong comparative

approach rather than a focus on single-country cases (Figures 2 and 3). Our findings show that European countries dominate, with Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Austria, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom serving as central hubs.

The United States also plays a key role, but research remains concentrated in some Western European democracies. Smaller but notable nodes include Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, and Hungary, often examined in connection with major hubs. In contrast, despite their significance in world politics, countries such as Taiwan, Turkey, China, Brazil, and India appear peripheral, reflecting their limited representation in studies.

The strongest country pairings (Germany–Italy, France–Germany, Austria–Germany, Spain–Italy, and the United Kingdom–United States) emphasize the nature of comparative research, namely a focus on Western countries, with limited integration of Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia.

Meta-research (RQ 2)

This section presents our results addressing RQ 2, beginning with descriptive statistics and proceeding to the Quasi-Poisson regression models. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics on the number of supported, partially supported, and rejected hypotheses per manuscript.

The number of rejected hypotheses per manuscript has a mean of 1.274, ranging from 0 to 14, and exhibits a right-skewed distribution. The number of partially supported hypotheses demonstrates a more restricted range (0–4) with a mean of 0.694, suggesting similarly right-skewed data. In contrast, the number of supported hypotheses has a higher mean of 2.645, with values ranging from 0 to 7.

Models

Below, we present the results of our models. To answer RQ 2, we report three models that share the same offset (e.g., a control variable). By offset, we refer to the number of hypotheses in a

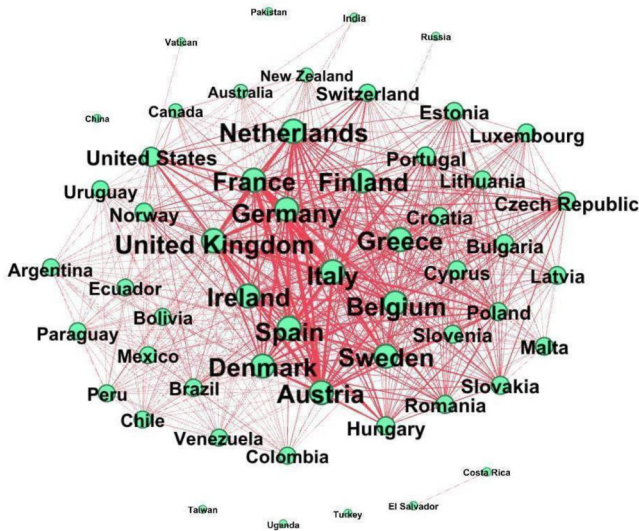


Figure 2 Network analysis including both single-country and multicountry studies analyzing SM populism.

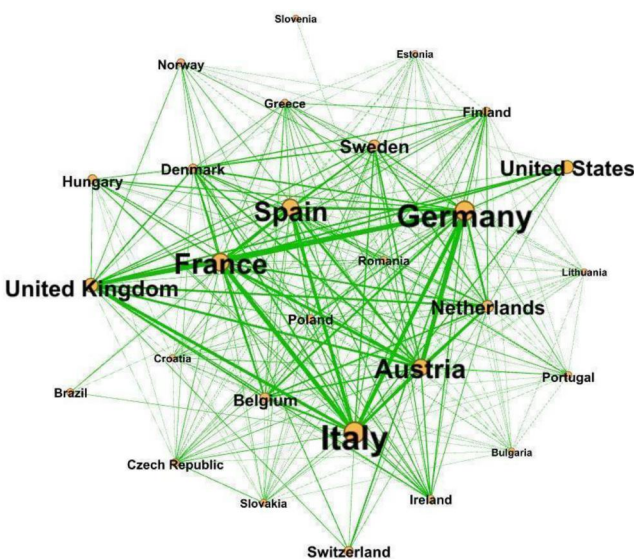


Figure 3 Network analysis excluding nodes with no edges (i.e., single-country studies) and those appearing fewer than three times in multicountry studies.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of the dependent variables.

	Rejected	Partially supported	Supported
Valid	62	62	62
Median	0	0	2
Mean	1.274	0.694	2.645
Standard deviation	2.530	1.018	1.709
IQR	2.000	1.000	3.000
Variance	6.399	1.036	2.921
Skewness	3.228	1.621	0.680
Standard error of skewness	0.304	0.304	0.304
Kurtosis	12.131	2.319	-0.230
Standard error of Kurtosis	0.599	0.599	0.599
Shapiro–Wilk	0.561	0.710	0.918
<i>p</i> -value of Shapiro–Wilk	<.001	<.001	<.001
Range	14	4	7
Minimum	0	0	0
Maximum	14	4	7
Total	79	43	164

Table 4 Model fit of Quasi-Poisson regressions.

	Dispersion	Nagelkerke's R^2	RMSE	Sigma	Score log	Score spherical
Rejected	0.95	0.588	1.078	0.975	-1.006	0.111
Partially supported	1.96	0.268	0.885	1.402	1.032	0.110
Supported	0.52	0.339	1.098	0.723	-1.586	0.120

Table 5 Results of Quasi-Poisson regressions.

Model	Predictor	IRR	CI	p
Rejected	(Intercept)	0.09	0.02–0.27	<.001
	RWP [1]	1.85	0.57–7.98	.345
	NP [1]	1.70	0.92–3.36	.105
	Individual pol [1]	0.44	0.25–0.79	.005
	Noncampaign period [1]	2.05	1.19–3.64	.011
	Countries number	1.04	1.00–1.07	.022
	Sample size	1.00	NA–1.00	.448
	Days	1.00	1.00–1.00	.012
Partially supported	(Intercept)	0.03	0.00–0.54	.106
	RWP [1]	6.17	0.27–3,422.70	.411
	NP [1]	1.16	0.47–3.27	.757
	Individual pol [1]	1.10	0.37–4.24	.879
	Noncampaign period [1]	0.74	0.28–1.82	.520
	Countries number	0.94	0.83–1.04	.291
	Sample size	1.00	1.00–1.00	.287
	Days	1.00	1.00–1.00	.814
Supported	(Intercept)	0.90	0.58–1.35	.627
	RWP [1]	0.63	0.37–1.08	.091
	NP [1]	0.85	0.66–1.10	.219
	Individual pol [1]	1.38	0.99–1.97	.062
	Noncampaign period [1]	0.90	0.71–1.14	.370
	Countries number	0.98	0.95–1.00	.089
	Sample size	1.00	1.00–1.00	.937
	Days	1.00	1.00–1.00	.207

given study. Model selection via the stepwise algorithms eliminated redundant predictors. Table 4 presents the key information on model fit, while Table 5 provides a detailed summary of our models.

Given the count nature of the dependent variables and the presence of over dispersion in some cases, Quasi-Poisson regression models were estimated. For the rejected hypotheses model, Nagelkerke's R^2 was 0.588, indicating a relatively strong explanatory power, and the dispersion parameter was 0.95, suggesting no substantial over dispersion and a good fit to the data. The supported hypotheses model showed moderate fit, with an R^2 of 0.339 and a dispersion parameter of 0.52, indicating slight under dispersion. In contrast, the partially supported hypotheses model yielded an R^2 of 0.268 and a dispersion of 1.96, indicating moderate over dispersion and relatively lower model performance. These diagnostics collectively demonstrate that although some variation in fit exists across the outcome models, the Quasi-Poisson specification accommodates the data's dispersion structure. Including multiple model fit indices helps us approximate goodness-of-fit in the absence of conventional likelihood-based metrics. We ran a simulation-based

power analysis for the Rejected model. Using the fitted Quasi-Poisson model as the data-generating process with a log offset and approximating over dispersion with a negative binomial distribution, we generated 10,000 datasets (two-sided $\alpha = 0.05$; seed = 123) and refit the Quasi-Poisson model at each iteration. Empirical power was the proportion with $p < .05$; 95% Monte Carlo CIs are exact binomial. Power was moderate for the non-campaign period (0.68, 95% MC CI [0.668, 0.686]) and Days (0.67, [0.663, 0.682]), moderate for Countries number (0.58, [0.570, 0.589]), and moderate-to-high for Individual politicians (0.77, [0.766, 0.782]). In short, including individual politicians in the research has the most reliably detectable effect (~77% power); including noncampaign periods and time ranges is detectable with approximately 67% probability, while the number of countries is moderately detectable (~58%).

Our analysis identified consistent predictors of rejection rates (Table 5): the number of countries analyzed, including noncampaign periods, and the number of days the study focuses on. Specifically, an increased number of countries examined in a study was associated with a heightened risk of rejection, and this association remained significant even after controlling for the

number of hypotheses per study (IRR = 1.04, 95% CI: 1.02 – 1.07, $p = .022$). Furthermore, when scholars included routine periods in their research, the probability of having rejected hypotheses doubled (IRR = 2.05, 95% CI: 1.19 – 3.64, $p = .011$). The number of days a study included also exhibited statistical significance in the Rejected model (IRR = 1.00, 95% CI: 1.00 – 1.00, $p = .012$). Finally, when scholars analyzed individual politicians' SM populism, the likelihood of rejecting the hypotheses decreased significantly (IRR = 0.44, 95% CI: 0.25 – 0.79, $p = .005$).

In contrast, the analysis yielded different results in examining supported and partially supported outcomes. None of the variables under investigation demonstrated a robust or consistent association with studies that achieved full or partial support of the hypotheses.

Discussion

Scholars began analyzing SM populism from quantitative perspectives almost a decade ago, providing ample material that often corroborates or challenges prior knowledge. Theory-wise, people-centrism is the essential element of populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2017). An overwhelming part of the results refutes, while a smaller segment of prior findings supports this argument: Western right-wing populist leaders' SM communications do not rely primarily on people-centrism, but Latin American populists and mainstream political agents address the people more than they utilize antagonism (Pytlas, 2023; Zulianello et al., 2018). An explanation for this outcome could be that many right-wing politicians—some conservatives and most radicals—continue to argue that they are not part of the mainstream national or supranational political elites responsible for the decline of the people (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Pytlas, 2023). Moreover, right-wing populists present themselves as an *anti-systemic force* that embodies the people's disillusionment with old-fashioned politics, while Latin American left-wing populists utilize the inclusive nature of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Considering populist agendas, we observed that the economy and immigration are essential topics in SM populism: while the former cuts across ideological differences between populists and their supporters, the latter is an issue that is owned by some conservatives and most of the radical right-wing political agents (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Both topics can be framed as threats or causes of people's suffering. This is an important aspect of the populist logic: populists argue that the glorious days of the *volk* are gone, while cost-of-living crises and cultural changes pave the way for uncertainty, loss of identity, and the lack of external recognition for in-groups (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Lantos & Forgas, 2021).

Visual communication is becoming increasingly important for SM populism studies, and the related findings point in a mostly systematic direction. Even though populists communicate in an amateurish way, scholars found that they depict themselves as professionals—and not as political outsiders—in their visual communication on SM (Bast, 2024; Farkas et al., 2022). Populists likely want to emphasize through their visual messages that they should be taken seriously and that they also take their jobs seriously. We can interpret these results as follows: visually,

populists suggest that they are capable of doing the tiresome, hard work of politics, but they radically differentiate themselves from their traditional colleagues through their discourses (Laclau, 2005).

Analyzing user engagement is crucial for the field because it can help scholars interpret the mobilizational and emotional effects of SM populism. Moreover, the field focuses on user engagement because the more feedback a post attracts, the more people can be affected by that message (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). Among populist ideas, anti-elitism most frequently triggers user engagement across many parts of Western Europe and Latin America (Cassell, 2021b; Jost & Dogruel, 2023; Jost et al., 2020). Blaming the elite mobilizes many users, possibly because the posts are critical. People-centrism elicits user reactions, albeit to a lesser extent than anti-elitism (Cassell, 2021b). This may be because references to “the common people” are less likely to evoke anxiety and anger, two key emotions that drive user engagement on social media (Heiss & Matthes, 2020). Concerning emotions, negative messages, mostly from right-wing populists, trigger anger among users, especially if they revolve around immigration (Heiss & Matthes, 2020). This is a recurring pattern in the literature: negativity combined with nativism elicits user reactions (Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Heiss & Matthes, 2020; Humprecht et al., 2024; Jost et al., 2020). Our findings suggest that while populists claim to represent the will of the people, they—particularly those on the right—also position themselves as the *voice of public anger and frustration*.

Territory-wise, researchers have been analyzing SM populism mainly in Western Europe and the United States. Countries such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and France are analyzed the most frequently, and some combinations of these territories dominate the comparative studies. However, it is striking that non-Western countries, such as Brazil, Turkey, the Philippines, and India, are rarely analyzed quantitatively in English-language papers. Moreover, except for Uganda, none of the African countries were included in these analyses (Lacatus, 2023). This is surprising, as the Arab Spring, for instance, aligns with populist logic in many respects (Aslanidis, 2016).

Against the backdrop of our scoping review, we can outline future research directions. Our scoping review revealed that entire continents, such as Africa, and specific regions of Asia, are underrepresented in English-language studies of SM populism. Analyzing countries in these regions, particularly using multilevel analyses, would undoubtedly enrich the international English-language literature. Moreover, our results show that researchers have mostly focused on Facebook and Twitter (X) when they analyzed SM populism. Including other SM platforms would be helpful in learning more about this phenomenon. Additionally, there is a field-wide trend toward scrutinizing the associations between SM populism and users' surface metrics (likes, shares) without sufficient longitudinal or experimental support. Longitudinal analyses or experiments are timely now to analyze SM populism's effects on user engagement.

The second part of our study relies on our meta-research: its findings support at least two interconnected arguments. First, that populism is a chameleonic phenomenon; and second, that political, economic, and cultural contexts (along with nuanced methodological strategies) should be considered in developing

future analyses (Cassell, 2021a; De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021; Humprecht et al., 2024; Jacobs, 2024). This argument leans on our Quasi-Poisson regression models, in which none of the independent variables enhanced the number of supported or partially supported hypotheses per manuscript. These results suggest that measuring SM populism comparatively is extremely difficult. Additionally, our outcomes indicate that the more countries researchers analyzed, the higher the likelihood that hypotheses were rejected. This is important because different countries, even those in the same geographical region or with similar political and media systems, may face distinct challenges across politics, culture, and the economy. We also found that including noncampaign periods and increasing the number of days can predict rejected hypotheses. As Zulianello et al. (2018) argued in their extensive study, politicians tend *not* to use the elements of populist communication more intensively during campaigns than in noncampaign periods. Our results on the temporal aspects support this conclusion. Including routine periods in the analyses, for instance, could have misled researchers who hypothesized that SM populism is more dynamic during campaign periods. Therefore, populism may be a relevant element of the constant use of communication strategies, namely *permanent campaigning* (Joathan & Lilleker, 2023).

Individual politicians are essential to the study of populism (Weyland, 2001, 2017). Our findings, with the highest statistical power, suggest that their inclusion in SM populism reduced the likelihood of rejecting hypotheses. Therefore, individual agents can be analyzed in a “safer” way when scholars scrutinize SM populism, because politics has become personalized, with politicians communicating more informally and emotionally than parties. Additionally, politicians use their SM communication to persuade people that they are close to them—all of these aspects are part of the populist style (Ernst et al., 2017). Although a charismatic leader is not *an* essential condition of SM populism (Aslanidis, 2016), our findings suggest that scholarly assumptions are better suited to analyses that include individual politicians. This may be because the theory of populism fits better with leaders among those politicians (Balmas et al., 2014; Pedersen & Rahat, 2021; Weyland, 2017).

Recommendations and conclusions

Taken together, our meta-research invites the field to reconsider how future studies should be designed. There is no doubt that scholars have provided tremendous knowledge about SM populism. In light of our meta-research’s results, however, the field should continue to develop its analytical approaches. Although large-scale, multicountry studies on SM populism have become increasingly attractive and are often cited, our findings suggest that it is equally important to analyze SM populism at the single-country level, particularly in countries that have received comparatively little scholarly attention. Case studies offer the possibility of examining populist communication within its specific political and cultural context. This is crucial to shed light on underlying mechanisms as well as dynamics that may remain undetected in large-N designs. Also, case studies can help us better understand the overlap and differences in results across territories. Additionally, more nuanced research designs might

help us refine the theory and the methods. For instance, mixed-methods papers that begin with interviews or focus group discussions with social media users, experts, politicians, and influencers can pave the way for hypothesis testing on large-scale data in the quantitative part of the study (Hameleers, 2018). Put differently, triangulation might contribute to developing hypotheses—an approach that has mostly been missing from the works analyzed so far. Moreover, as our results suggest, scrutinizing individual politicians reduces the proportion of rejected hypotheses. Relying on the above outcome and the personalization of politics, large-scale, holistic grading of (populist) politicians’ social media communication could help us explore the underlying (or implicit) communicative and psychological constructs of their agenda (Bozdağ et al., 2024). For instance, exploratory factor analyses could reveal to what extent traits such as group-based relative deprivation, alienation, religious conservatism, collective narcissism, and others are associated with personalized SM populism beyond people-centrism and antagonism (Lantos & Forgas, 2021). To open new avenues for populism studies, we suggest inductive (preliminary) work to refine the theory before scholars test it. Moreover, the routine and campaign periods are suggested for analysis together because examining longer time ranges will yield extensive longitudinal data that might help us learn more about SM populism. In particular, SM populism research should study temporal developments, rather than static rhetoric (Tolz et al., 2025). Finally, we argue that historical perspectives should be taken into account to interpret findings on SM populism (Ryfe, 2001) because it would “... help provide necessary context, highlight meaningful events and transitions, and show us that everything is not always new, and the cycles of history can help us see more clearly where we are, and where we might be headed” (Epstein, 2020, p. 122).

We conclude that, at present, the field’s core challenge is not a lack of supportive findings *per se*, but an asymmetry in how reliably outcomes map onto design choices—so progress depends on specifying when our theories can travel and when they cannot. To address this problem, researchers from across the Global North and the Global South should collaborate to share and interpret the results from specific territories they are familiar with. In a nutshell, collaboration across regions should be paired with an explicit commitment to reducing epistemic blind spots. This includes extending data collection beyond the most accessible platforms and beyond English-language corpora, as well as establishing shared repositories of coding rules, measurement choices, and analytic scripts to lower barriers to entry for researchers from marginalized scholarly ecosystems (Demeter, 2020). Such collaborations can help scholars train large language models by which they can analyze SM populism to an unprecedented extent, that is, globally. Taken together, these steps would allow the field to treat hypothesis rejection as informative evidence about scope conditions and mechanisms, rather than as a reason to abandon theory testing altogether. Under this approach, the study of SM populism can move toward a research program that produces more transportable claims—and clearer explanations for when such claims should or cannot be expected to travel.

Considering our results, we argue that the field will advance most when it treats generalizability as an empirical *outcome* rather than an assumption in quantitative studies of SM populism. This requires theorizing SM populism not as a single

portable phenomenon, but as a set of mechanisms whose operation is contingent on political and media contexts, audiences, platforms, and broader historical-economic conditions. Theoretical progress, therefore, depends on specifying why and when particular contexts should activate (or attenuate) populist appeals, and on articulating explicit travel statements that delimit the platforms, periods, and settings in which expectations should hold. In this view, comparative and long-horizon designs should be treated not primarily as default demonstrations of “generality,” but as deliberate boundary-condition tests that reveal when mechanisms intensify, mutate, or fail. If the field embraces this shift and normalizes *transparent reporting* of hypothesis rejections, it can move from an impressive but uneven accumulation toward a genuinely cumulative theory of SM populism that clarifies which mechanisms travel, which do not, and along which pathways.

Limitations

We acknowledge that papers written in languages other than English might have significant scholarly contributions to the field. Due to language barriers, we were unable to include these works in this research. We also acknowledge that the apparent underrepresentation of Africa- and Asia-focused (and non-English) scholarship likely reflects visibility and indexing constraints—particularly the Scopus- and English-language filters of our search strategy—rather than a genuine absence of research. Additionally, some relevant papers, such as [Bene et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Davidson and Enos \(2025\)](#), are not included in our data because, according to the Scopus list, they were published in 2025, and we considered entire years in our paper, which we developed up to September 2025. Finally, publication bias could have affected our outcomes: it is possible that rejected hypotheses were not reported in some studies, or that papers were not written up at all because the scholars’ presumptions were not confirmed.

Notes

Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *Annals of the International Communication Association* online.

Data availability

Authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within its [Supplementary Materials](#).

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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