STORIES ABOUT "US" AND "THEM":
EXPERIMENTAL INQUIRY INTO THE RELATIVE APPEAL OF POPULIST NARRATIVES

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Abstract

Mediatization has increased the role of storytelling in political communication. Against this background, it is often argued that populist narratives are essentially more appealing than non-populist political narratives, yet empirical evidence to support this assumption was missing. A multi-message experiment was conducted among U.S. citizens ($N = 206$) to compare how populist versus non-populist political stories affect narrative transportation – a psychological state associated with narrative enjoyment and story-consistent attitudes. The results show that populist framing significantly increases the ability of political narratives to cause transportation, controlling for the political partisanship and populist predispositions of the participants. This effect is mediated by anger, anxiety, and identification with story characters. The study enhances our understanding of psychological responses to populist storytelling.

Keywords: populist storytelling, narrative transportation, emotions, identification, multi-message experiment

Stories about "Us" and "Them": An Experimental Inquiry

into the Relative Appeal of Populist Narratives

Populist parties and individual politicians have recently been gaining substantial

electoral support in diverse political and cultural contexts (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Often,

their growing success is ascribed to the sophisticated storytelling and an ability to craft

universally comprehensible and highly appealing political narratives (Casullo, 2020;

Ungureanu & Popartan, 2020; Freistein & Gadinger, 2020; Seargeant, 2020; Saurette, 2019).

Yet the fact that populists are not the only actors who turn to political storytelling raises two

questions: (1) are populist narratives essentially more appealing than non-populist political

narratives? (2) in case they indeed are, what makes them so?

Building upon recent experimental research that showed how recipients' emotions and

cognitions are affected by short populist messages, such as electoral posters (Wirz, 2018) or

news items (Hameleers et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2021), this study extends the discussion

through shifting attention to the influence of populist *narratives*. The need to incorporate

populist narratives into analysis is determined by the ongoing changes in political

communication culture characterized by mediatization and personalization of politics (Esser

& Strömbäck, 2014), the growing range of formats and sources of political communication,

and the reduced institutional gatekeeping (Nadler, 2019). These and other related processes

contribute to a political environment in which the competition of ideas often gives way to the

competition of stories making the questions posed in the previous paragraph especially

relevant.

Using a multi-message experiment, this study tests whether populist narratives are

essentially more appealing than non-populist political narratives. The narrative transportation

effect (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock 2000) is proposed as a proxy for accessing the relative

appeal of populist storytelling. It is assumed that political stories framed in a populist way

will elicit a higher degree of narrative transportation than the same stories without populist

framing. Narrative transportation, in turn, is expected to be positively associated with the

story-consistent attitudes of the participants. The article theorizes and tests causal

mechanisms behind the hypothesized effect of populism on narrative transportation. It also

discusses the obtained results in relation to the existing literature and suggests further

research directions.

A Populist Narrative

The scientific interest in populist storytelling reflects the growing attention to the role

of narratives in social sciences (Eder, 2020). However, unlike in the domains of policy

formation (Roe, 1994) or collective action (Polletta, 2006), where the adoption of a narrative

lens is no longer a new thing, narrative approaches are still to establish themselves in

populism studies. Through synthesizing past research on political narratives and populist

discourse, this section discusses the conceptual dimensions of a populist narrative and

integrates them into a framework which guided the creation of experimental stimuli.

To be considered a narrative, a piece of discourse needs to have a plot, character(s)

and meaning (Mayer, 2014). These three elements constitute what is called a minimum,

basic, or core narrative (Riessman, 1993). A plot is a sequence of events occurring naturally

one after another hence shaping a distinguishable beginning, middle, and end of a story

(Forster & Stallybrass, 2005). The driving force of any plot is its characters – human or non-

human actors 'who make things happen' or 'to whom things happen' (Mayer, 2014, p. 61).

Meaning of a narrative is its gist – the main lesson to learn from the story (Turner, 1980). In

the case of political narratives, their meaning should always, at least in a broad sense, relate

to the sphere of *political*. Thus, political narratives utilize plot and characters to produce

'statements' about the life and organization of the society. Defined this way, political

narratives are encountered in election campaign materials (Polletta, 2008), news media

(Nadler, 2019), social networking platforms (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), mass culture (Holbert et al., 2003), etc.

If political narratives are stories about society, populist narratives are stories about society told in a populist way. This means that all populist stories must reflect a minimum set of elements peculiar to populist discourse. Most researchers agree that such a set includes people-centrism, anti-elitism, and the perception of 'the people' and elites as homogeneous social entities (Mudde, 2004; Aslanidis, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Many scholars also point to crisis rhetoric as another essential feature of populism – sometimes, viewing it as a content element (Rooduijn, 2014) and sometimes, as a characteristic of a populist communication style (Ernst et al., 2019). Table 1 shows how people-centrism, anti-elitism, homogeneity, and crisis rhetoric – all four with some narrative-dictated adjustments – form the conceptual basis of populist narratives, as defined in this study. The table is followed by the justifications of the specific operationalization decisions.

[Table 1 about here]

It can be seen in Table 1 that some populism-specific labels were decontextualized and expressed in broader terms (e.g., "in-group characters" instead of "the people," "out-group characters" instead of "elites"). This step upwards on the ladder of abstraction is needed to account for the infinite variety of political narratives and their ability to make political statements metaphorically, i.e., without explicitly naming things and actors they refer to (consider George Orwell`s *Animal Farm*). Thus, to be framed in a populist manner, a narrative does not have to mention specific concepts, such as 'popular sovereignty,' or raise issues scoring high in the populist political agenda, for instance, corruption, but rather reproduce a general structure of a populist discourse, that is depict an acute conflict between a sinister privileged group and a virtuous yet disadvantaged group. Following this approach, Table 1 describes integroup relations as antagonistic *and* hierarchical with the out-group

being somehow more privileged than the in-group. This reflects power imbalance between

'the people' and elites peculiar to populist discourse but again, without using specific

terminology. Finally, while homogeneity is presented as a separate dimension in Table 1,

empirically, it is not independent and can only manifest itself as an in/out-group`s

characteristic. Therefore, the four theoretical categories outlined here will result in three

stimuli manipulations described later in the *Method* section.

To sum up, populist narratives have to possess all four populism-associated elements

operationalized in the right column of Table 1. When that is the case, it can be argued that a

particular political message is being framed following a populist narrative structure (Saurette,

2019). As far as non-populist narratives are concerned, for the sake of internal validity, they

are defined here as not having the discussed populism-associated elements. Particularly, in

non-populist narratives, in-group characters have both positive and negative characteristics,

there is no homogeneous out-group, and crisis rhetoric is not present explicitly, yet it can still

be implied by the storyline.

Narrative Transportation Effect

Narrative transportation theory (Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000) suggests that

readers, listeners, and viewers often find themselves in a state of deep immersion into a

narrative world in which their thoughts and attention are fully focused on the story events.

Transportation can be thought of as a special instance of a flow – a state of a person's

absorption into a certain activity, in this case, decoding and imagining a narrative (Tal-Or &

Cohen, 2010). Highly transported individuals tend to lose access to their immediate

surroundings and show slower reactions to the real-world stimuli (Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017).

Researchers distinguish several dimensions of narrative transportation: 'emotional

involvement in the story, cognitive attention to the story, feelings of suspense, lack of

awareness of surroundings, and mental imagery' (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 703). While there

are numerous factors influencing the degree of narrative transportation in every specific case, it is considered to be a universal psychological phenomenon (van Laer et al., 2014).

Narrative transportation is a useful indicator in the context of political storytelling as it significantly predicts story-consistent beliefs, attitudes, and narrative enjoyment (Green & Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2004). Studies also showed that narrative transportation is associated with increased perception of a story`s realism (Green, 2004) and reduced resistance to persuasion (Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010). Unlike arguments, stories do not require a recipient's thoughtful consideration of the information to have an impact (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Instead, narrative persuasion results from a recipient's engagement with plot and characters of a story and the subsequent reflection on the transportation experience (Hamby et al., 2018).

By definition, narrative transportation effect can be caused by any political narrative. Yet there are theoretical reasons to expect that political stories following a populist narrative structure are particularly effective in evoking transportation. This is because populist elements discussed and operationalized in the previous section elicit psychological responses that are, in turn, closely related to narrative transportation and could pottentially trigger it. For instance, a populist message describing 'the people' as pure, moral, and worthy (in-group favoritism) activates priming of an in-group identity in a recipient (Hameleers et al., 2019) and facilitates their identification both with the constructed in-group ('the people') and with a politician communicating the message (Panizza, 2017). Similarly, when a positive depiction of in-group characters takes place in the narrative setting, this leads to a recipient's increased identification with these characters and, therefore, increased narrative transportation (van Laer, 2014). Combining these pieces of evidence allows us to assume that populist narratives will result in a higher degree of transportation than non-populist narratives due to the intermediate effect of identification.

Likewise, anti-elitism and crisis rhetoric should also have consequences for the perception of populist narratives. Through construction and negative depiction of a more privileged out-group, anti-elitism evokes anger (Rico et al., 2017) and makes a recipient root for the "good guys" of a story even more (Gerrig, 1993, p. 69). In turn, crisis rhetoric elicits anxiety (Homolar & Scholz, 2019) adding to the ability of populist narratives to generate suspense (Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017). Both preferences towards a story outcome and the feeling of suspense are considered to be important predictors of narrative transportation (Gerrig, 1993). Thus, the above discussed effects of populist storytelling – anger, anxiety, and identification with story characters – are what makes populist story a good story, from the perspective of political persuasion and general narratology.

Hypotheses

The conducted literature review allows us to formulate three hypotheses. The first hypothesis assumes the positive effect of populist framing on the relative appeal of political narratives, measured with the degree of narrative transportation.

H1: The participants exposed to populist stories will report a significantly higher degree of narrative transportation than the participants exposed to non-populist stories, controlling for populist attitudes and political partisanship.

Including populist attitudes and political partisanship as covariates allows testing if the hypothesized effect of populism on narrative transportation is universal across groups with different political and psychological predispositions (Wettstein et al., 2019).

The second hypothesis suggests a causal mechanism behind the impact of populism on narrative transportation. It assumes that if we control for the relevant emotions and identification, as discussed in the previous section, the degree of narrative transportation will not differ between the participants exposed to populist and non-populist political stories.

Thus, the effect of non-populist versus populist stories on the degree of narrative transportation will be mediated by anger (**H2a**), anxiety (**H2b**), and identification with the story protagonist (**H2c**).

The third hypothesis suggests a positive effect of populist framing on the participants` story-related attitudes. It also assumes that if present, the effect will be mediated by the narrative transportation effect.

H3a: The participants exposed to populist stories will report a significantly higher degree of the story-consistent attitudes than the participants exposed to non-populist stories, controlling for populist attitudes and political partisanship.

H3b: The effect of non-populist versus populist stories on the story-consistent attitudes will be mediated by the participants` degree of narrative transportation.

Method

Stimuli

To ensure the external validity of the experiment, actual journalistic features were used as stimuli. Feature journalism represents an important source of political communication and has a better potential to elicit narrative transportation than most other genres (consider, for example, hard news). To make sure that the stimuli read believable and had a sufficient literary quality to cause transportation, the search for specific stories was conducted through the digital archive of *The Pulitzer Prizes*. Since 1972, the Pulitzer Prize Board has been giving awards in the category *Feature Writing*. It was assumed that any of the stories that won the prize or were nominated in this category should be suitable for the experiment providing it matched our working definition of a political narrative.

Three stories were included in the final sample: 'Dreams Die in Drought' about farmworking communities of California affected by the state's drought (Marcum, 2014); 'Before the Law' about a young man imprisoned for three years after he was accused of

stealing a backpack (Gonnerman, 2014); and 'A Survivor`s Life'about a family recovering

from the mass shooting consequences (Saslow, 2015). These features were selected as in

terms of the storylines, they did not rely on populist narrative elements excessively. This

allowed to use them in a treatment (non-populist) condition without the risk of deteriorating

the literary quality through major alterations.

In terms of political leaning, all three narratives were rather liberal than conservative.

They appeared in *Los Angeles Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Washington Post* – the media

outlets with the primary audience among voters of the Democratic Party (Jurkowitz et al.,

2020). The political leaning of the stories was held constant to enable controlling for political

partisanship during analysis. The protagonists of the selected stories can be classified as

'victim characters' (see Mayer 2014, pp. 61–63). This characteristic reflects the general trend

in the award-winning feature journalism, that is a large share of problem-centric human-

interest stories aimed at making societal change (Wheeler, 2009). Such stories often describe

human suffering and focus on things that do not function properly. This configuration of

content and character type creates a good opening for people-centrism, anti-elitism, and crisis

rhetoric, especially when a story has a salient political dimension.

Manipulation of Independent Variables

Each of the selected stories was shortened to about 1,500 words which is

approximately a six-minute read based on a comfortable reading speed of 250 wpm. Then the

stories were rewritten in two versions representing non-populist and populist experimental

conditions. This resulted in six stories in total – three at each level of the independent

variable. Modification of the stories included two steps. First, the original stories were coded

to check if any populist narrative elements were already present. The elements identified at

that stage were removed, and the resulting stories constituted stimuli for a non-populist

(control) condition. Second, text chunks representing conceptual elements of a populist

narrative were created and added to each of the control stories to create a treatment (populist)

condition. The size of the chunks was kept approximately equal across three stories so that

the manipulations were of comparable strength.

The add-ons for each of the treatment stories included the chunks negatively depicting

a homogeneous priviledged out-group of about 300 words in total *(e.g., "The 'big shot' is out*

of touch with the problems of the community […] They simply don't care," Are said); crisis

rhetoric chunks of about 300 words in total *(e.g., Even now, when recalling that scary day,*

his mother asks for a break. "…Such a story may happen to any kid in this country. No one is

immune"); the chunks positively depicting protagonists of the stories and emphasizing their

belonging to a homogeneous in-group of about 150 words in total *(e.g., She was a loving*

daughter, a helpful sister, a role model for other young girls in the neighborhood); the

chunks negatively depicting protagonists of the stories of about 150 words in total were

added to the control versions of the stories *(e.g., When he did not have money, Akin admitted*

he would also engage in pilfering now and then).

As seen, the protagonist-related manipulations were split in two, with 'negative' part

introduced in the control condition and 'positive' part introduced in the treatment condition.

First, it ensured that, from a reader`s perspective, in-groups built around the stories`

protagonists were normatively heterogenuous in a control condition (both positive and

negative information present) and homogenuous in a treatment condition (only positive

information present). Second, that step helped to reach a sufficient level of contrast between

two versions of the stories (for the similar approach to maximizing comparisons through

experimental manipulations see Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010, p. 409).

The populist chunks were inserted in those places in the stories where they fit

logically. All of them differed in content but were the same on a general level covering one of

the three theoretically-relevant categories, namely, in-group characters, out-group characters,

and crisis rhetoric. All other story elements were kept identical between the two conditions.

For ethical reasons, the names of the characters and authors of the stories, as well as the

names of the media outlets where the stories were published, were replaced with the fake

ones. All stimuli were checked by the professional proofreading company to make sure that

potential mistakes and style inconsistencies will not confound the results of the experiment.

Full texts of the stimuli materials are available in Supplementary Information file.

Measurement and Procedure

The experiment was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, so to ensure safety

measures it was administered online. The participation in the study was fully anonymous.

After giving informed consent, the participants answered questions about their age, sex, and

political partisanship. Then the participants' populist attitudes were measured using nine

items from the populist attitudes inventory by Schulz et al., 2018 (see the full questionnaire in

Supplementary Information file). All items were measured on a scale ranging from 1

(*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) (also for other multi-item measures). The order

of the scale questions was randomized for each participant (also for other multi-item

measures). The populist attitudes index was reliable at Cronbach's α = .756.

After answering questions on populist attitudes, the participants were randomly

assigned to either a populist or non-populist version of one of the three stories. Directly after

the treatment, the emotions of the participants, as well as the degree of their identification

with the stories' protagonists were measured. Items from the *Discrete Emotions*

Questionnaire (Harmon-Jones et al., 2016) were used for the measurement of anger

(Cronbach's α = .940) and anxiety (Cronbach's α = .869). The identification scale was

adopted from Tal-Or and Cohen (2010). This scale was chosen among others because it had

been designed to distinguish between identification and narrative transportation when both

concepts are measured within the same study. The five identification items reflected the

dimensions of emotional and cognitive perspective-taking and produced a reliable index

(Cronbach's α = .831).

After reporting emotions and identification, the participants proceeded to the narrative

transportation scale adopted from Green and Brock (2000, p. 704). The scale included eleven

items, for example, '*While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture the events in it*

taking place' or '*After finishing the narrative, I found it easy to put it out of my mind*'

(reverse coded). The character-related items present in the original scale were not included in

this study to delimit narrative transportation and identification with characters. The resulting

index of narrative transportation was reliable at Cronbach's α = .759.

Next, the participants answered a block of the screening questions. The first item

inquired if the participants had any prior knowledge about the story they were exposed to.

Prior knowledge is problematic as it may have a confounding effect in the context of

narrative transportation (Green, 2004). Then, the participants answered three multiple-choice

questions about the content of the story they read. It was decided to use data only from those

participants who correctly answered all three content-related questions to make sure that the

respondents were actually exposed to the stimuli and their responses were reliable.

The survey was concluded by three items measuring story-consistent attitudes. The

questions were identical for three stories with the only difference in the issues they were

focused on. For instance, the readers of 'A Survivor`s Life' were asked to indicate the degree

of agreement with such statements as '*Victims of mass shootings should be immediately*

eligible for any possible help' or '*Cases of mass shootings represent the prime public interest*

and must be covered by the media more extensively.' Extreme adjectives and adverbs such as

'*prime*', '*immediately*', and '*extremely*' were used to mitigate a potential ceiling effect. It was

also taken care that the questions are general enough not to be influenced by the content of

experimental manipulations. The index of story-consistent attitudes was reliable at

Cronbach's α = .774.

At the end of the experiment, participants were debriefed. The debriefing form

included information about the real objectives and hypotheses of the study, a description of

all changes made to the stories, as well as active hyperlinks to the online versions of the

original stories.

Participants

The experiment was administered to adult U.S. citizens (N = 341) in February 2021.

The participants were recruited and paid through Amazon's MTurk, a crowdsourcing platform

widely used in experimental research. To mitigate potential bias that might be introduced by

ultra experienced survey-takers (see Buhrmester et al., 2018), only those who had done no

more than 500 MTurk assignments in total (not necessarily scientific ones) were eligible for

participating. Additionally, measures were taken to exclude any possibility of hypothesis-

guessing. Responses from 131 participants were excluded from the dataset because they had

given incorrect answers to some or, rarely, all of the screening questions. This step was

needed to ensure that only high-quality data are included in the analysis, which is of prime

concern for an *online* experiment. Another four responses were removed because the

participants indicated that they had already read 'their' story or heard about it in the media.

The final dataset was comprised of responses from 206 participants with no missing data. A

sensitivity power analysis conducted in G*Power (α = .05, power = .80) showed that such a

sample would be sufficient to detect an effect of a medium size in a multiple regression

model with six predicting variables, which was the most power-demanding procedure in the

analysis. Men accounted for 53.4% of the participants, 46.6% were women. As far as the age

distribution is concerned, 1.9% of the participants were between 18 and 24 years old, 32.5%

were between 25 and 34, 31.6% were between 35 and 44, 15,5% were between 45 and 54,

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13.1% were between 55 and 64, and 5.3% were 65 or older. 65.0% of the participants

identified themselves as 'rather Democrats' and 35.0% as 'rather Republicans.' Even though

such demographics differ from those of the general U.S. population, narrative transportation

is regarded to be a universal psychological phenomenon (van Laer et al., 2014).

Manipulation Check

Manipulation check took place within the actual study. As recommended by Coleman,

it was conducted not on the "structural features of the stimuli but on the psychological states

that these features arouse" (2019, p. 266). Thus, a multivariate analyses of variance was run

to test whether a populist condition containing positively depicted in-group characters,

negatively depicted out-group characters and crisis rhetoric evoke respectively more

identification, anger, and anxiety than a control condition not having those elements of a

populist narrative. Two dummy variables representing three different stories used in the

experiment were included in the model as covariates. Using Pillai's trace, there was a

significant positive effect of populist narrative elements on the examined psychological

states, $V = .11$, $F(3, 200) = 7.97$, $p < .001$. Tests of between-subjects effects showed that all

three dependent variables scored signigicantly higher in the treatment condition suggesting

that the manipulations were perceived as expected: identification, $F(3, 202) = 6.39$, $p < .001$;

anger, $F(3, 202) = 13.29$, $p < .001$; anxiety, $F(3, 202) = 4.02$, $p < .01$. The variables were

further included in the mediation analysis.

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Results

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The first hypothesis of the study postulated that the participants exposed to populist

stories would report a significantly higher degree of narrative transportation than those

exposed to non-populist stories. This was tested using a one-way ANCOVA with two

experimental conditions as an independent variable, reported degrees of narrative

transportation as a dependent variable, and populist attitudes and political partisanship as

covariates. Three subgroups representing different feature stories were pooled together as there was no significant interaction between the stories and experimental conditions.

Populist attitudes were significantly related to the participants` degree of narrative transportation, $F(1, 202) = 26.63$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .116$. Particularly, a one unit increase in populist attitudes was associated with more than a third-unit increase in narrative transportation, $b = .335$, $SE = .065$, $t(202) = 5.16$, $p = < .001$. Political partisanship was also significantly related to the degree of narrative transportation, $F(1, 202) = 8.45$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2_p = .040$. Having been exposed to the narratives from the liberal media, the participants who identified as Republicans experienced lower narrative transportation than those who identified as Democrats, $b = -.323$, $SE = .111$, $t(202) = -2.91$, $p = .004$. When controlling for the influence of populist attitudes and political partisanship, the degree of narrative transportation was significantly higher for the treatment group ($M_{adjusted} = 5.20$, $SE = .073$) than for the control group ($M_{adjusted} = 4.94$, $SE = .076$), $F(1, 202) = 5.90$, p $= .016$, $\eta^2_p = .028$. This provides evidence to support H1. An increase in the degree of narrative transportation in the treatment condition was observed for each of three stories used in the experiment (see non-adjusted means in Table 2). There was no significant interaction between the main effect and populist attitudes, as well as the main effect and political partisanship.

[Table 2 about here]

As a second step, mediation analysis was conducted in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) to test if the effect of populist elements on narrative transportation was due to the theorized intervening variables. The parallel multiple mediator model assessed whether the independent variable X (non-populist versus populist stories) was influencing the dependent variable Y (narrative transportation) directly and indirectly through M_1 (anger) (H2a), M_2 (anxiety) (H2b), and M_3 (identification) (H2c) (see Figure 1). Populist attitudes and political partisanship were included as covariates.

The first part of the mediation analysis reconfirmed the results of the manipulation

check with the populist stories evoking more anger ($b = .873$, $SE = .241$, $p < .001$), anxiety

($b = .698$, $SE = .204$, $p < .001$), and identification ($b = .593$, $SE = .135$, $p < .001$) than non-

populist stories. Populist attitudes of the participants had no significant effect on anger or

anxiety yet did influence identification ($b = .452$, $SE = .083$, $p < .001$). As for the political

partisanship, the participants who identified as Republicans reported less anger ($b = -.533$, SE

$= .253$, $p = .037$) and less anxiety ($b = -.480$, $SE = .215$, $p = .027$) than those who identified

as Democrats (consider the usage of narratives from the liberal media). Unlike populist

attitudes, political partisanship had no significant effect on identification.

Narrative transportation of the participants was significantly affected by anger ($b =$

$.121$, $SE = .029$, $p < .001$), anxiety ($b = .092$, $SE = .035$, $p = .011$), and identification ($b =$

$.301$, $SE = .045$, $p < .001$). No high multicollinearity was observed across the mediators (see

correlation matrix in the Supplementary Information file). Pairwise contrasts showed no

significant difference between specific indirect effects. In the presence of three mediators, the

effect of experimental condition on the degree of narrative transportation disappeared

suggesting that populist elements influenced narrative transportation indirectly through anger,

anxiety, and identification. Thus, hypotheses H2a-H2c are supported. The final model

including experimental condition, three mediators, populist attitudes and political

partisanship could explain almost half of the variation in narrative transportation, $R^2 = .494$,

$SE = .346$, $F(6, 199) = 32.39$, $p < .001$.

[Figure 1 about here]

The third hypothesis of the study postulated that the participants exposed to populist

stories would report a significantly higher degree of story-consistent attitudes than those

exposed to non-populist stories (H3a), and that the effect would be mediated by narrative

transportation (H3b). To check this, experimental condition, populist attitudes, political

partisanship, and two dummy variables representing three different stories were regressed on story-consistent attitudes. HC3 correction was used to obtain heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors (Hayes & Cai, 2007). In line with H3a, populist framing of the narratives was positively associated with story-consistent attitudes, $b = .283$, $SE(HC) = .123$, $t(206) = 2.30$, $p < .005$. Political partisanship ($b = -.752$, $SE(HC) = .146$, $t(206) = -5.16$, $p < .001$) and populist attitudes ($b = .416$, $SE(HC) = .075$, $t(206) = 5.57$, $p < .001$) were also significantly associated with story-consistent attitudes (note that political narratives from the liberal media were used as experimental stimuli). To test H3b, the same regression model was run again but with the addition of narrative transportation as one more predicting variable. Narrative transportation was a significant predictor of story-consistent attitudes, $b = .412$, $SE(HC) = .077$, $t(206) = 5.38$, $p < .001$, and in its presence, the effect of the experimental condition became non-significant. Combining this finding with the established positive effect of the experimental condition on the degree of narrative transportation (H1) allows us to conclude that populist framing of political narratives influences story-related attitudes of the participants through the intermediate effect of transportation. Thus, H3b is supported. The final regression model could explain more than a third of the variation in story-consistent attitudes of the participants: $R^2 = .344$, $F(6, 199) = 12.74$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The main goal of the study was to examine whether political narratives framed in a populist way are essentially more appealing than non-populist political narratives. While there was already some anecdotal evidence to support this assumption, the present study aimed to test it experimentally. Based on the previous research, the article conceptualized a populist narrative and proposed transportation effect as a measure of its relative appeal. It was theorized that since populist communication causes psychological effects which could potentially trigger narrative transportation, the stories containing populist elements should be

perceived as especially immersive and engaging. This assumption was supported in a multi-message experiment: whereas the three stories used as stimuli were not equally immersive, all of them significantly improved the ability to cause transportation after the introduction of populist elements (H1). Therefore, other things being equal, populist narratives tend to be more appealing than non-populist political narratives.

The impact of populism on narrative transportation was unaffected by populist attitudes and political partisanship of the experiment participants, yet their transportation scores did vary. For instance, the participants who identified as Republicans on average experienced a lower degree of narrative transportation – and also anger and anxiety – than those who identified as Democrats. This is likely because the issues and characters depicted in the stories from the liberal media resonate better among Democrats making them worry and resent more and, as a result, delve deeper into the narrative. However, while the participants with different political views had different starting points in terms of narrative transportation, they showed an increase of about the same size when being stimulated by populism.

The consistent growth in the degree of narrative transportation between the groups with different political views can be explained by the ability of stories to overcome resistance to persuasion. In non-narrative settings, an attempt to bring in better arguments and thus push through a message contradicting a recipient's views often backfires, because a persuasive intent is apparent for a recipient (Bilandzic, 2012). On the contrary, the 'improvement' of narratives containing potentially problematic messages by equipping them with populist elements does have a positive effect on their perception, even by the originally critical audience. This is likely to happen because the persuasive potential of a story 'gets under the radar of [people's] efforts to protect [their] attitudes', and a narrative does not get rejected (Dal Cin et al., 2004, p. 178). While this finding is in line with what we know about narrative

persuasion, it contradicts the recent research on how populist communication and populist

attitudes interact. In the experiment using electoral posters as stimuli, it was shown that

populist communication has a greater impact on the people with high populist attitudes and a

smaller impact on those with low populist attitudes (Wirz, 2018). In the present study, there

was no significant interaction effect between populist attitudes and experimental conditions.

One of the possible reasons is that when contained in the stories in the form of frames,

populist elements are not recognized as such by the recipients, which does not, however,

eliminate their psychological influence. This once again emphasizes the specialty of

narratives compared to more conventional forms of political communication.

The effect of populism on narrative transportation was fully mediated by anger (H2a),

anxiety (H2b), and identification (H2c), with none of these variables being significantly more

important than the other. Yet the examined causal model reflects only a part of a more

complex process and will merit further investigation. Particularly, it should be considered that

emotions and identification are antecedents *and* consequences of narrative transportation at

the same time. Thus, identification with the story characters is not only a condition of

transportation (Van Laer et al., 2014, p. 802) but also its outcome (Green et al., 2004,

pp. 318–319). The same is true for emotions: anxiety, for instance, makes a recipient narrow

attention to the story and hence get transported (Bae et al., 2014, p. 314), but that, in turn,

leads to even greater anxiety and suspense (Gerrig, 1993). Understanding the cyclic nature of

the narrative impact is especially important in the context of political communication, with

people being regularly exposed to particular political figures and their narratives. From the

perspective of narratology, such a systematic exposure is akin to watching a series and

characterized by the gradual augmentation of recipients' interest to the discussed actors,

issues, and events. This process can be captured in longitudinal studies. The further

development of the topic will also benefit from employing factorial designs. Now, when the

overall impact of populism on narrative transportation is established, it would be useful to

examine whether any of the relevant mediators interact (anger x anxiety, identification x

anxiety, etc.) This would allow to finetune the causal model and predict the outcomes of

populist storytelling with better precision.

Finally, the study showed that the participants exposed to stories framed in a populist

way reported a higher degree of story-consistent political attitudes than those exposed to non-

populist stories (H3a). The effect was fully mediated by narrative transportation (H3b). This

finding is particularly interesting considering the usage of themes that are normally not a part

of the populist political agenda, e.g., climate change. Such results are in line with the scholars

arguing that, as a general discursive frame, populism can be successfully applied to

communicate various ideological messages, not necessarily the mainstream populist ones

(Saurette, 2019; Ungureanu & Popartan, 2020). At the same time, compared to narrative

transportation, political attitudes constitute a more complex and constant construct. When

answering questions on attitudes, participants no longer report their perception of a specific

story but rather extrapolate the story's meaning to the real world and assess its correctness or

wrongness in general. This could be the reason for a relatively modest magnitude of the effect

of populist framing on the story-consistent attitudes, so this aspect will merit further

investigation.

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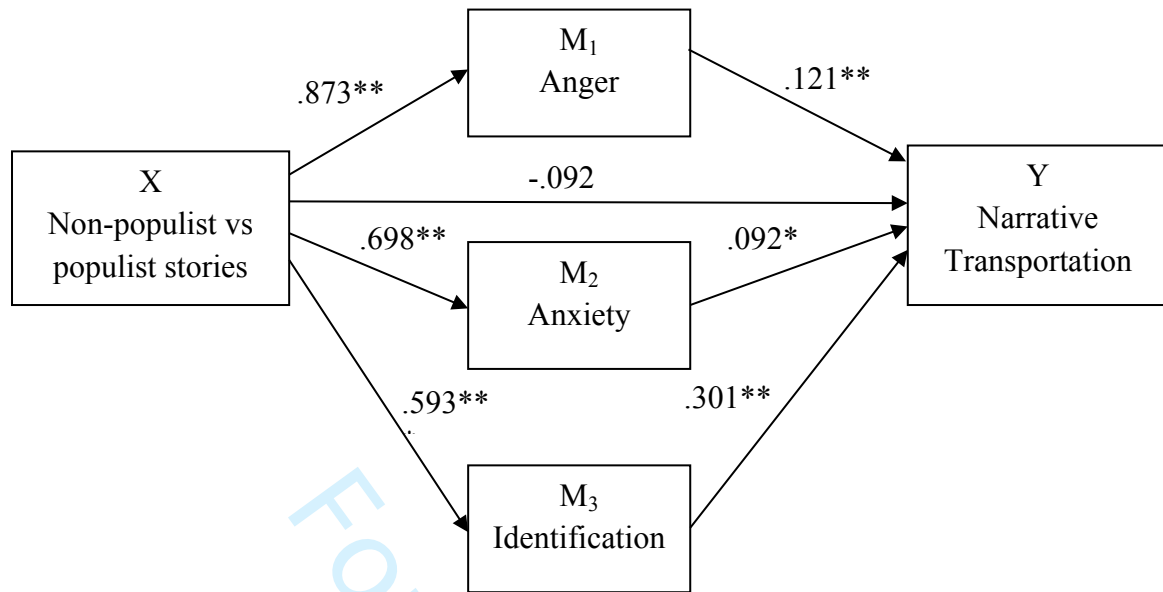
Table 1: *Operationalization of populism elements in the context of political storytelling*

Populism Element	Underlying Message	Manifestation in Narratives
People-centrism (Ernst et al., 2017; Schulz et al. 2020)	The ordinary people are virtuous. Their traits and actions are to be praised.	In-group characters are depicted positively and described as typical representatives of their group.
Anti-elitism (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Reinemann et al., 2019)	Elites are corrupt, selfish, and generally harmful for the ordinary people. Elites do not represent the people.	Out-group characters are depicted negatively. They stand higher in the hierarchy than the in-group characters. The intergroup relations are antagonistic.
Homogeneity (Rico et al., 2017)	The people and elites represent homogeneous social entities. Inside those entities, members are similar to each other.	All story characters are depicted in a black-and-white manner so that they belong to either a positive in-group or a negative out-group.
Crisis rhetoric (Wirz et al. 2019; Homolar & Scholz, 2019)	An actual or forthcoming crisis poses a serious threat to the ordinary people.	Crisis rhetoric determines the emotional pathos of a story. It is expressed through respective emotionally colored language.

Table 2: *Narrative transportation, anger, anxiety, identification, and story-consistent attitudes as a function of non-populist versus populist political narratives*

		Non-populist ($n = 98$)		Populist ($n = 108$)	
		M	SD	M	SD
Narrative	Dreams Die in Drought	4.80	0.75	5.13	0.77
Transportation	Before the Law	5.05	0.92	5.25	0.91
	A Survivor`s Life	4.97	0.69	5.17	0.82
	Total	4.96	0.79	5.18	0.83
Anger	Dreams Die in Drought	3.32	1.67	4.53	1.61
	Before the Law	5.10	1.66	5.71	1.29
	A Survivor`s Life	3.95	1.83	4.90	1.74
	Total	4.21	1.86	5.04	1.63
Anxiety	Dreams Die in Drought	4.23	1.41	4.78	1.46
	Before the Law	4.35	1.59	5.29	1.36
	A Survivor`s Life	4.59	1.59	5.09	1.45
	Total	4.41	1.54	5.06	1.43
Identification	Dreams Die in Drought	4.90	0.87	5.55	0.89
	Before the Law	4.78	0.97	5.57	1.03
	A Survivor`s Life	4.78	1.23	5.06	1.07
	Total	4.81	1.04	5.37	1.02
Attitudes	Dreams Die in Drought	5.93	1.15	5.98	1.09
	Before the Law	5.81	1.17	6.26	0.79
	A Survivor`s Life	5.96	0.85	6.08	0.91
	Total	5.90	1.01	6.10	0.93

Figure 1: *The examined model of parallel mediation with unstandardized beta coefficients*

The effects of populist attitudes and political partisanship are held constant.
* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.