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An Unholy Alliance? The Influence of Negative Emotions Elicited by Media Reports on the Persuasiveness of Populist Communication

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ABSTRACT

Emotions play a crucial role in the success of populist actors and movements. The present study investigates whether populist actors can profit from emotions elicited by media content. We assume that populist claims are more persuasive than non-populist claims when experiencing negative emotions toward an issue and that citizens with strong populist attitudes are particularly susceptible to this persuasive process. In a 2×2 experiment ($N = 475$), we tested whether emotionalized (vs. neutral) media reports foster the persuasiveness of populist (vs. non-populist) communication and whether populist attitudes moderate this effect. The results indicate that citizens with medium to strong populist attitudes experience stronger negative emotions in response to emotionalized media content and that negative emotions increase support for promoted policies and the promoting actor. However, persuasive effects were not limited to populist communication.

The success of populist actors or movements has often been attributed to emotions. It has been argued that emotions are inherent to populism (Canovan, 1999, Rico et al., 2017), and studies have shown that populist communication elicits emotions (Jost et al., 2020) that make populist claims especially persuasive (Wirz, 2018). To foster emotional reactions, populist actors tend to frame situations or issues as crises

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(Moffitt, 2015) and often use style elements such as emotionalization, dramatization, and absolutism (Betz, 1993, Bos & Brants, 2014, Bracciale & Martella, 2017). This sense of urgency then allows populists to put forward their drastic policies (Canovan, 1999, Moffitt, 2015).

Populist actors may not only profit from the emotions they evoke themselves but also those that arise in unrelated contexts, such as media reporting. Tabloid news outlets generally display more emotionalized style elements than quality news (Umbricht & Esser, 2016), and due to their focus on sensationalist topics, they spotlight populist actors and their policies (Mazzoleni, 2008). However, quality news reporting can also elicit emotions. A recent study showed that public service broadcasting on migration and Islam elicits substantial levels of fear and anger (Kieslich & Marcinkowski, 2020). The study also showed that these emotions may increase support for right-wing populist policies related to these issues. The authors concluded that high-quality media reporting can also serve populist agendas by reporting on issues associated with populist actors.

This important finding leads to further questions. First, is the impact of negative emotions elicited by media reporting on support for populist policies limited to issues that are already associated with populist actors, or does it extend to other issues? If the issue does not need to be associated with populist actors, this would imply that populist actors can jump on new issues that have elicited negative emotions among the population. Second, is the impact due to the emotionalization of media reporting or due to media reporting on an issue that is inherently emotional? In other words, do journalistic practices contribute to the impact? Third, do actors using populist communication gain more from emotion-inducing media reporting than do other political actors? Put differently, do citizens prefer populist solutions to address negative emotional states elicited by media reports, or can it be any solution? Fourth, how do populist attitudes influence the role of negative emotions elicited by media reporting for the persuasiveness of populist claims? To address these questions, this paper investigates whether emotionalized (vs. neutral) media reporting on a non-populist issue increases the persuasiveness of populist (vs. non-populist) communication in consideration of populist attitudes.

We understand persuasion in a broad sense as a procedure that potentially influences attitudes (e.g., Petty & Briñol, 2008, p. 137). We focus on two politically relevant types of attitudes: attitudes toward policies and attitudes toward politicians. Research has shown that media-induced affect and emotions can influence information processing and the formation of political opinions in various ways (Kühne, 2012). For example, emotions elicited by media reporting can influence which information from a news report is remembered and shape preferences for specific policies (Kühne &

Schemer, 2013). Media-induced emotions can thus serve as frames that suggest particular perspectives on political issues.

In this study, we explore whether the perspectives suggested by negative emotions foster support for populist policies and actors. Emotional framing suggests that individuals particularly support policies they believe will be effective in solving their emotional problems (Kühne & Schemer, 2013, Nabi, 2003). Populist communication may foster such beliefs by advancing a Manichean perspective in which there are only good and bad (Mudde, 2004) and claim that, because of its redemptive nature, it can restore the good (Canovan, 1999). This mechanism should be especially successful for individuals who support populist ideology, as previous research has demonstrated that populist attitudes amplify the effects of populist communication (Hameleers, 2020, Müller et al., 2017).

We conducted a 2×2 experiment to investigate the effects of emotionalized media reporting on negative emotions and the persuasiveness of populist communication. This study contributes to the literature in three ways: (a) it focuses on an issue that is typically not associated with populist actors, (b) it directly compares reactions to neutral and emotionalized media reporting, and (c) it explicitly tests whether media-induced emotions increase the persuasiveness of populist communication more than non-populist communication. Thus, we investigated whether actors using populist communication can benefit from media-induced emotions on non-populist issues and whether media-induced negative emotions make individuals more susceptible to populist persuasion. We employed the assumptions of emotional framing in a new context, namely populist communication. The results of our study indicate that citizens with medium to strong populist attitudes experience stronger negative emotions in response to emotionalized media content and that negative emotions increase support for promoted policies and the promoting actor. However, the persuasive effects are not limited to populist communication; that is, populist claims are not more persuasive to alleviate negative emotions elicited by media content.

Populism and the media—an unholy alliance?

Populism can be defined as an ideology that proposes an antagonistic relationship between a homogeneous, virtuous people and a corrupt elite and that demands popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2004). From a communication-centered perspective, political actors, as well as the media or citizens, can be classified as more or less populist based on the number of populist messages they communicate (Stanyer et al., 2017). Populist communication is thereby understood as messages that express

populist ideology (de Vreese et al., 2018)—that is, are anti-elitist, people-centrist, or demand popular sovereignty (Wirth et al., 2016).

The media, especially tabloid media, contribute to the success of populist actors in Western democracies. Scholars have argued that tabloid media give more space to populist actors than would be justified by their political relevance due to their focus on charismatic leaders, scandals, and emotions, which resonates with the commercial media logic (Mazzoleni, 2008). Moreover, due to their hostility toward elites and institutions, reliance on common sense, and appeals to moral sentiments, tabloid media are themselves considered populist actors (Krämer, 2014). Empirical analyses have shown that media reporting in Western democracies indeed has an anti-elitist and people-centrist bias that is stronger in tabloids than in quality media; however, populist actors are evaluated more negatively and challenged more often than other political actors in most media outlets (Wettstein et al., 2018). Thus, while most media reporting is critical of populist actors, the anti-elitist and people-centrist reporting style might foster a populist worldview.

Recent work by Kieslich and Marcinkowski (2020) suggests yet another mechanism through which the media may increase support for populist actors. Reporting on issues that are often associated with populist actors, such as immigration and Islam among right-wing populist actors, can activate and reinforce negative emotions, which then serve as frames through which the issues are evaluated. This means that emotion-congruent information becomes more accessible, and individuals prefer policies that promise to solve their emotional problems (Kühne & Schemer, 2013, Nabi, 2003). In Kieslich and Marcinkowski's (2020) study, the more anger or fear individuals felt in reaction to media coverage of immigration or Islam, the more they supported right-wing populist calls to tackle these issues. However, it remains an open question whether this mechanism is limited to populist issues and communication. Emotional framing effects have initially been shown for an issue that is not typically associated with populist actors, namely traffic security (i.e., drunk driving; Kühne & Schemer, 2013, Nabi, 2003); emotional framing effects should thus be generalizable to any political issue that elicits emotions. The only prerequisite, as demonstrated by Nabi (2003), is that the individual has already developed a cognitive schema for the issue; i.e., the issue must be familiar to the individual. However, it could be that populist policies, with their redemptive nature (Canovan, 1999), are more convincing in terms of their ability to address negative emotional states than the pragmatic approaches of non-populist actors.

Media-induced emotions and persuasion

Before turning to the role of populism in emotional framing, we elaborate on the general emotional framing process. First, it is important to note that media reporting may elicit emotions by reporting on emotion-eliciting situations or issues that individuals experience vicariously through media reporting (Scherer, 1998), and emotions arise as a result of appraisal processes when individuals perceive the situation as relevant (Frijda, 1988, Lazarus, 2001, Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Journalists can, however, foster emotional reactions through their storytelling, as a sensationalist reporting style increases emotional arousal (Grabe et al., 2000, 2001) and episodic, as opposed to thematic, framing elicits stronger emotions because media users can empathize with specific examples (Aarøe, 2011, Gross, 2008). Thus, even if some news issues are inherently more emotional than others, the style of news reporting can enhance emotional reactions (Uribe & Gunter, 2007).

Research has shown that especially high arousing emotions, such as enthusiasm and anger, influence opinion formation: The more intense emotions a news report elicits, the more persuasive it is (Lecheler et al., 2013, 2015). Since news coverage is predominantly negative and news users pay more attention to negative news stories (Soroka et al., 2019), the present study focuses on negative emotions. The experience of negative emotions directs individuals' attention toward the emotion-eliciting event and activates goal-directed processes to resolve the encountered problem, which in turn affects judgments and choices (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). News users have stronger memories of information related to emotional problems and prefer policies that aim to resolve or prevent the emotion-eliciting situations (Nabi, 2003). For example, individuals experiencing sadness in response to a news report on a car accident prefer policies intended to help victims, while those experiencing anger prefer policies intended to punish culprits (Kühne & Schemer, 2013). Therefore, while different negative emotions shift one's focus to specific aspects of problems or proposed solutions, overall, negative emotions come along with the need to resolve these problems.

There is broad evidence that the evaluations of politicians and the way citizens think about political issues are intertwined (Capelos, 2010). For example, preferences for specific policies can spill over to actors who promote such policies. In the case of voting studies, this is referred to as policy or issue voting (Benoit et al., 2007), in which voters' preferences are influenced by how well their attitudes match the perceived attitudes of political actors, especially attitudes toward issues they consider important (Krosnick, 1988). Thus, if the emotions elicited by media reporting induce preferences for specific policies, these emotions may also lead to positive evaluations of actors who promote such policies.

In summary, we can assume that emotionalized negative news reports elicit negative emotions that, in turn, increase the persuasiveness of policies that aim to resolve the emotion-eliciting problems and the actors promoting such policies. This effect should occur irrespective of populist communication or attitudes. Therefore, we developed the following hypotheses:

H1: Emotionalized negative media reports elicit stronger negative emotions than neutral media reports.

H2: (a) The more negative emotions individuals experience, the more they support policies that promise to resolve the issue. **(b)** The more negative emotions individuals experience, the more favorably they evaluate political actors who want to resolve the issue.

Populist communication and emotions

To understand how populist communication affects the effects posited by H1 and H2, the general process of emotional framing must be extended and contextualized. Policies proposed using populist communication may be perceived as more efficient, faster, and more comprehensive in resolving emotional problems than those proposed using non-populist communication. Canovan (1999) describes populism as a redemptive version of democracy and as a "campaign to save the country" (p. 6). Moffitt (2015) sees the performance of a crisis as a central element of populism that allows populist actors to simplify political debates and put forward drastic policies and strong leadership. Thus, both scholars suggest that populism is successful when citizens yearn for solutions to negative situations. This entails that political claims communicated in a populist way are more persuasive among individuals experiencing negative emotional states than those communicated in a non-populist way. We developed the following hypotheses:

H3: (a) Populist communication leads to stronger support for promoted policies than non-populist communication among individuals who experience negative emotions in response to the media reporting. **(b)** Populist communication leads to a better evaluation of the political actor than non-populist communication among individuals who experience negative emotions.

The moderating effect of populist attitudes

Media users differ regarding populist attitudes—i.e., the degree to which they support populist ideology (Schulz et al., 2018). This may affect how they react to emotionalized media reports and populist communication. Research has shown that populist attitudes correlate with experiences of anger related to the economic situation (Rico et al., 2017). This finding suggests that individuals with strong populist attitudes tend to have stronger emotional reactions than less populist citizens. An experimental study

confirmed this assumption: Individuals with strong populist attitudes experienced more hope, pride, and anger (but not fear) after exposure to political advertisements (Wirz, 2018). Thus, populist attitudes seem to go hand in hand with a tendency for emotional reactions. We developed the following hypothesis:

> **H4:** Individuals with strong populist attitudes experience more negative emotions in response to media reporting than do individuals who do not support populist ideology.

In addition, populist attitudes have consistently been shown to enhance the persuasiveness of populist messages (Hameleers, 2020, Müller et al., 2017). This is unsurprising, as individuals generally support messages that resonate with their core beliefs or values (Nelson & Garst, 2005). When a policy is framed with populist communication, individuals with strong populist attitudes tend to assume that it matches their interests, while individuals who oppose the populist worldview tend to assume the opposite. Populist attitudes thus need to be considered a moderator of the emotional framing process; they are likely to enhance emotional reactions to media reports and increase support for policies that are promoted with populist communication. We developed the following hypotheses:

> **H5: (a)** The stronger an individual's populist attitudes, the more they support policies promoted with populist communication. **(b)** The stronger an individual's populist attitudes, the more favorably they evaluate political actors who use populist communication.

We also investigated whether populist attitudes moderate the effect of emotionalized media reporting on the experience of negative emotions, or whether individuals with populist attitudes experience more negative emotions in response to any type of media reporting, as postulated in H4. We further consider whether such attitudes moderate the capacity of populist communication to relieve negative emotions as postulated in H3a and H3b.

> **RQ1:** Do populist attitudes moderate the effect of emotionalized media reports on negative emotions?

> **RQ2:** Do populist attitudes moderate the effect of negative emotions on support for political policies and actors when populist communication is used?

The theoretical model, including all the proposed relationships, is depicted in Figure 1. Overall, we propose that the effect of populist communication on support for populist policies and actors is mediated by the negative emotions elicited by emotionalized media reporting. We tested the indirect effect of emotionalized media reporting on attitudes with two additional hypotheses:

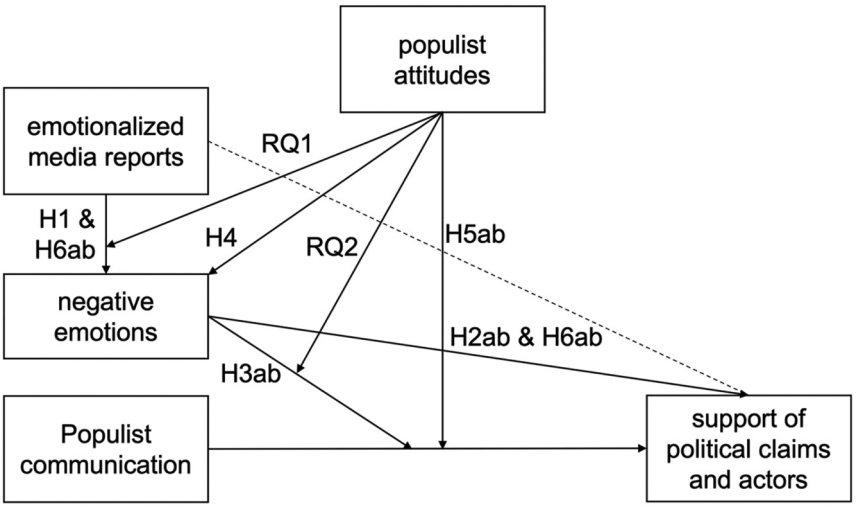

Figure 1. Theoretical Model.

Note. This theoretical model corresponds to PROCESS model 71. Additionally, attitudes toward the healthcare system (not depicted here) were included as a covariate. The dotted line represents an effect that was not tested; all participants were exposed to a second stimulus (populist communication); thus, there could not have been a direct effect.

H6: (a) Negative emotions mediate the effect of emotionalized media reporting on support for promoted policies. **(b)** Negative emotions mediate the effect of emotionalized media reporting on evaluations of political actors who want to resolve the issue.

Method

To test these assumptions, we conducted an experiment with a 2 (neutral vs. emotionalized media reporting) × 2 (non-populist vs. populist communication) between-subjects design. The stimulus material, written in German, can be found on OSF (https://osf.io/4vsgm/). The study was approved by the institutional review board of University of Zurich.

Participants

An online survey was conducted in September 2018. Participants were recruited in Switzerland through a market research company's online access panel. Of the 527 individuals who completed the survey, 494 successfully

passed the questionnaires' attention checks. In addition, participants who indicated that they did not fully read the stimulus or did not respond honestly were removed from the dataset, resulting in a final sample of 475. Of these, 259 participants were female and 216 were male with ages ranging from 18 to 69 years, $M = 45.36$, $SD = 14.51$. We conducted a sensitivity analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the strength of the effects that could be reliably detected with this sample size. H1 to H5 were tested with moderation models; therefore, we followed the recommendations of Perugini et al. (2018) for power calculations with moderation models. Given the sample size and an alpha .05, an R^2 increase of 0.02 for the interaction term could be detected with 80% power. Thus, small interaction effects could also be found with the achieved sample. The indirect effect predicted by H6 was tested using bootstrap confidence intervals; therefore, we did not perform a power calculation for this test.

Design and procedure

The first part of the questionnaire collected socio-demographic information and participants' general attitudes toward the healthcare system. Afterward, participants were presented the first stimulus: a newspaper article presenting a statistic about how many patients died during the last few years because of receiving the wrong treatment due to overworked medical doctors. The article criticized how little had been done to prevent medical personnel from working overtime, arguing that this constitutes a risk to everyone's health and safety. This issue was politically neutral and did not contain any elements of populist communication. Furthermore, the working conditions of healthcare providers were seldom discussed or politicized at the time of the study (i.e., pre-Covid-19). We created neutral and emotionalized versions of the article, as discussed below. After reading the article, participants reported their emotions and their perception of overworked doctors as a health risk. Next, we presented participants with the second stimulus: an interview with a fictitious politician who proposed a law designed to address the issue of overtime for medical personnel. The law was proposed in either a populist or a non-populist way, described below. A fictitious politician was chosen so that we could use the same person for both conditions and thus only vary the nature of the communication; the politician was introduced with a name but no party affiliation or function. His interview responses suggest that he is a member of parliament. It is important to note that, in the Swiss political system, all major parties are part of the government, meaning there is no opposition party. After reading this second article, participants indicated their support for the new law and their evaluation of the politician. Participants were also asked to rate their perceptions of different populist claims in the article and of

overall journalistic quality. Populist attitudes were assessed at the end of the survey, since we did not want to prime a populist worldview before participants were presented with the stimuli.

Measures

Manipulation of the Independent and moderator variables

Emotionalization. The article consisted of a headline and teaser, a picture, and several paragraphs of text. Although the facts about medical errors due to overworked physicians were held constant across both versions of the article, the neutral article focused on the medical staff, while the emotionalized article focused on the patients. In the neutral article, the picture showed a gray-haired man in a suit who was identified as the president of a foundation for patient safety. In the text, two physicians described their everyday work and how the long working hours negatively affected their private lives and work satisfaction. In the emotionalized article, the picture showed a young woman in an ICU bed. Her case, as well as a less severe incident, were described in the text. The patients' stories were written in a way that allowed readers to identify with them; they were both healthy individuals who went to the hospital with minor injuries that can happen every day. The text explains how doctors gave the patients the wrong medication and did not notice critical symptoms, which led to severe consequences for them. The emotionalized article was not designed to elicit a discrete negative emotion but rather a mix of sadness, anger, and fear.

Populist communication. The interview consisted of a headline, a picture of a middle-aged man in a suit, and several questions that were all identical across conditions. Only the answers by the fictitious politician were manipulated. In both versions, the politician, named Mr. Scherer, proposed introducing a new law that would provide more security for the patients. In the non-populist versions, the new law would strengthen the competencies of institutions that supervise hospitals and provide more resources to allow stricter control of working hours. In the populist version, the law would take away the competences from institutions and give more power to the communities in which the hospitals are located, eventually resulting in more control "for the people." Furthermore, the politician explicitly blames the elite, in this case the hospital management and institutions, and describes the people as more competent in solving this problem, while the politician, in the non-populist version, expresses his trust in the institutions to solve the problem. In both conditions, the law was described as a comprehensive and efficient solution.

Measures of the dependent, moderator, and control variables

Negative emotions. The M-DAS was used to measure different discrete emotions immediately after participants read the first article. Participants were asked to indicate how much they experienced the listed emotional states on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much* when they thought about the issue described in the article they had just read. All items were subjected to a principal component analysis with promax rotation, which yielded three factors as shown in the online supplemental material. The first factor contained eight items representing anger, fear, and sadness. These items were then combined into an index of negative emotions: $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.89$, $\alpha = .87$. Given the nature of our stimulus, we assumed that anger, fear, and sadness would be elicited. While we measured these as discrete emotions, the PCA led us to conclude that they were best represented as one construct reflecting mixed negative emotions.

Problem Awareness. To ensure that the manipulation had an impact on emotions—but not on the awareness of medical errors due to overworked physicians—awareness of this problem was measured immediately after measuring the emotions. Five items were constructed for this purpose: two reflecting the extent to which the article described the problem (e.g., "The article described how fatigue can lead to medical errors") and three reflecting participants' own perspectives on the issue (e.g., "I think that overworked physicians constitute a threat to our healthcare system"). Responses were measured on a 7-point scale from 1 = *does not apply at all* to 7 = *applies completely*. All items were combined into an index, $M = 6.15$, $SD = 0.91$, $\alpha = .81$.

Policy support. After reading the second article, participants' support for the promoted new law was measured with five items (e.g., "We need the new law to improve security for patients" and "We need the new law to improve physicians' working conditions") on a scale from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*. All five items were combined into an index, $M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.42$, $\alpha = .91$.

Evaluation of the politician. Participants were asked to evaluate the fictitious politician proposing the new law. Five items were used including "Mr. Scherer seems to be a competent politician" and "I think Mr. Scherer is a sympathetic person." Participants indicated their responses on a scale from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*, and all items were combined into an index, $M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.81$, $\alpha = .89$.

Perceptions of populist communication. To ensure that the populist version of the interview was indeed perceived as more populist, we included nine items reflecting populist claims in the context of the issue (e.g., "Mr. Scherer blames the elites for the current situation") and asked to what extent they had been promoted in the interview on a scale from 1 = *does not apply at all* to 7 = *applies*

completely. All nine items were combined into an index, $M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.01$, $\alpha = .77$.

Perceived policy promotion. Participants were asked to indicate how strongly the politician in the interview promoted the new law. This measure was a single-item semantic differential with a scale from 1 = *Mr. Scherer advocated for a new law* to 7 = *Mr. Scherer advocated against a new law*; $M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.25$.

Populist attitudes. Populist attitudes were measured with 12 items from Schulz et al.'s (2018) study on a scale from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*, and combined into an index, $M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.92$, $\alpha = .80$.

Controls. Gender (male or female) and age (in years) were included as control variables. Furthermore, four items were used to assess whether the stimuli were perceived as authentic media reports (e.g., "News reports like this one can regularly be found in the Swiss media" and "The articles were professional"). The index had a rather low reliability, $M = 5.22$, $SD = 0.90$, $\alpha = .64$, however. Although it was not used in any hypothesis tests, we relied on the index to report the perceived authenticity of the stimuli. Participants' attitudes toward the healthcare system may have influenced their emotional reactions and were thus also used as control variables. We used four items (e.g., "The healthcare system in our country is generally well functioning") on a scale from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree* to measure individuals' attitudes toward the healthcare system. The items were combined into an index, $M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.28$, $\alpha = .89$; low values indicate that individuals considered the state of the healthcare system to be problematic.

Results

The dataset is available on OSF (https://osf.io/4vsgm/). Table 1 shows the bivariate correlations of all the variables. All manipulations were successful and did not have any unintended effects on other constructs. See the online supplemental material for detailed results of the manipulation checks. To test our hypotheses, we estimated moderation and mediation models using PROCESS in SPSS (Hayes, 2017). See the online supplemental material for more details on the model estimation.[1]

[1]The following settings were used: 5,000 bootstrap samples and mean centering of continuous variables that define products. We also checked whether HC3 correction of standard errors affected the significance tests; most p-values < .05 without correction increased to < .10 with correction. We decided to report the uncorrected values to have clear directions for the rejection of hypotheses; however, we address this in the Discussion section.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations.

	Gender	Age	Healthcare system	Emotional-ization	Populist commun-ication	Policy support	Actor evaluation	Populist attitudes	Negative emotions	Problem awareness	Populist commun-ication	Policy promotion
Gender	1.00											
Age	−0.12**	1.00										
Healthcare system attitude	0.00	0.10*	1.00									
Emotionalization	0.04	0.03	−0.05	1.00								
Populist communication	−0.01	0.05	−0.01	−0.02	1.00							
Policy support	0.22**	−0.03	0.06	0.04	0.00	1.00						
Actor evaluation	0.16**	−0.04	.11*	0.00	0.09*	0.63**	1.00					
Populist attitudes	−0.04	0.09	0.04	−0.05	0.05	0.27**	0.29**	1.00				
Negative emotions	0.21**	−0.14**	−0.27**	0.17**	0.00	0.33**	0.20**	0.17**	1.00			
Problem awareness	0.12**	0.07	0.08	0.02	−0.03	0.44**	0.30**	0.14**	0.26**	1.00		
Perceived populist communication	−0.07	0.01	−0.07	−0.04	0.41**	0.25**	0.27**	0.32**	0.28**	0.13**	1.00	
Perceived policy promotion	−0.04	−0.03	−0.04	0.01	−0.08	−0.09*	−0.13**	−0.04	0.00	−0.19**	0.06	1.00

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

In the first step, we looked at only one part of our model: the effect of emotionalized media reporting on negative emotions. We considered pre-existing attitudes a covariate and populist attitudes a potential moderator, which corresponds to PROCESS model 1. The results are reported in Table 2. H1 predicted that emotionalized media reports elicit stronger emotions than neutral ones. This assumption was already tested with the manipulation check but was also confirmed by the moderation model. Emotionalized media reporting elicited more negative emotions; thus, H1 was accepted. Furthermore, women and individuals with negative attitudes toward the healthcare system experienced more negative emotions, whereas older individuals experienced fewer negative emotions.

H4 postulated that individuals with strong populist attitudes experience more negative emotions, irrespective of the type of media reporting, and RQ1 asked whether they responded more strongly to emotionalized media reports. Populist attitudes had an unconditional positive effect on the experience of negative emotions, lending support for H4. The interaction effect of the type of media reporting and populist attitudes was not significant. However, Johnson-Neyman intervals for the interactions were estimated with the R package interactions (Long, 2019). As shown in Figure 2, the effect of emotionalized media reporting on negative emotions is only significant, $p < .05$, for individuals with values ranging from −0.75 to 35.40 on the z-transformed populist attitudes measure. Thus, the effect exists for those with average to strong populist attitudes.

In the second step, we tested the next part of our model: the effect of populist communication on policy support and actor evaluations with negative emotions and populist attitudes as moderators, which corresponds to PROCESS model 3. We estimated separate models for each dependent variable. The results are reported in Tables 3 and 4. H2 postulated that negative emotions have a positive direct effect on (a) support for promoted policies and (b) evaluations of actors who want to resolve the issue. Both hypotheses were supported.

Table 2. Model coefficients: negative emotions as a function of media reporting (emotionalization) and populist attitudes.

	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.23	0.23	14.83	<.001	2.89	3.78
Emotionalization	0.29	0.07	3.85	<.001	0.14	0.43
Populist attitudes	0.13	0.06	2.23	.03	0.02	0.24
Emotionalization * populist attitudes	0.15	0.08	1.86	.06	−0.01	0.31
Attitudes toward the healthcare system	−0.18	0.03	−5.99	<.001	−0.23	−0.12
Age	−0.01	0.00	−2.58	.01	−0.01	0.00
Gender: female	0.35	0.08	4.63	<.001	0.20	0.49

$R^2 = .20$; LLCI and ULCI are the lower and upper level 95% confidence intervals; populist attitudes are mean-centered.

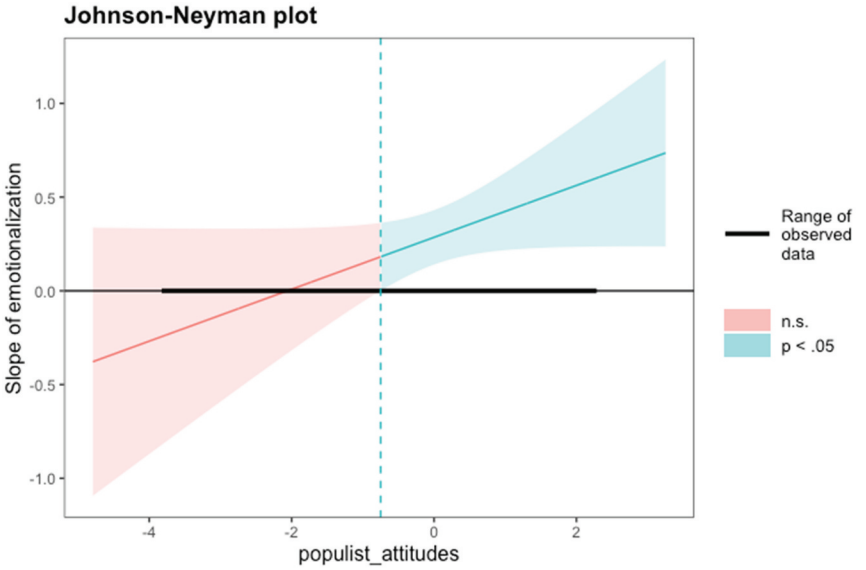

Figure 2. Johnson-Neyman Plot.

Table 3. Model coefficients: policy support as a function of negative emotions, populist communication, and populist attitudes.

	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.75	0.36	10.36	<.001	3.04	4.46
Negative emotions	0.49	0.10	4.77	<.001	0.29	0.69
Populist communication	−0.03	0.12	−0.25	.81	−0.26	0.21
Negative emotions * populist communication	−0.04	0.14	−0.31	.76	−0.31	0.23
Populist attitudes	0.22	0.09	2.34	.02	0.04	0.40
Negative emotions * populist attitudes	−0.06	0.10	−0.58	.56	−0.25	0.14
Populist communication * populist attitudes	0.24	0.13	1.82	.07	−0.02	0.49
Negative emotions * populist communication * populist attitudes	0.04	0.14	0.32	.75	−0.23	0.31
Attitudes toward the healthcare system	0.14	0.05	2.97	<.001	0.05	0.24
Age	0.00	0.00	−0.09	.93	−0.01	0.01
Gender: female	0.46	0.12	3.75	<.001	0.22	0.70

$R^2 = .20$; LLCI and ULCI are the lower and upper level 95% confidence intervals; populist attitudes are mean-centered.

We predicted that negative emotions (H3) and populist attitudes (H5) moderate the impact of populist communication on (a) support for promoted policies and (b) evaluations of the promoting actor. However, there was no significant interaction of negative emotions and populist communication on policy support and actor evaluation; thus, H3a and H3b were rejected. By contrast, populist attitudes increased the impact of populist communication on policy support (in tendency, $b = .24$, $SE = .13$, $p = .07$), and on actor evaluations, $b = .19$, $SE = .08$,

Table 4. Model coefficients: Actor evaluation as a function of negative emotions, populist communication, and populist attitudes.

	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.79	0.21	13.16	<.001	2.37	3.20
Negative emotions	0.14	0.06	2.34	.02	0.02	0.26
Populist communication	0.13	0.07	1.83	.07	−0.01	0.27
Negative emotions * populist communication	0.01	0.08	0.09	.93	−0.15	0.17
Populist attitudes	0.14	0.06	2.49	.01	0.03	0.24
Negative emotions * populist attitudes	−0.01	0.06	−0.09	.93	−0.12	0.11
Populist communication * populist attitudes	0.19	0.08	2.47	.01	0.04	0.34
Negative emotions * populist communication * populist attitudes	0.03	0.08	0.37	.71	−0.13	0.19
Attitudes toward the healthcare system	0.09	0.03	3.30	<.001	0.04	0.15
Age	0.00	0.00	−1.00	.32	−0.01	0.00
Gender: female	0.20	0.07	2.83	.01	0.06	0.34

$R^2 = .17$; LLCI and ULCI are the lower and upper level 95% confidence intervals; populist attitudes are mean-centered.

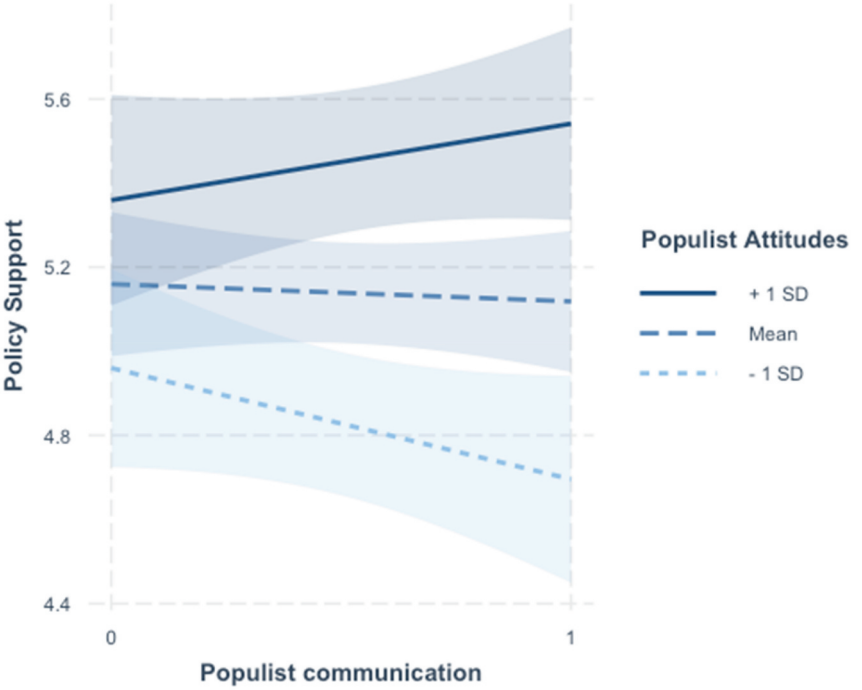

Figure 3. Simple slopes for the interaction effect of populist communication and populist attitudes on policy support.

$p = .01$. Simple slopes and Johnson-Neyman intervals for the interactions were estimated as shown in Figures 3 and 4: There was no area of significance for the impact on policy support, thus there is no significant effect of populist communication on policy support across all levels of

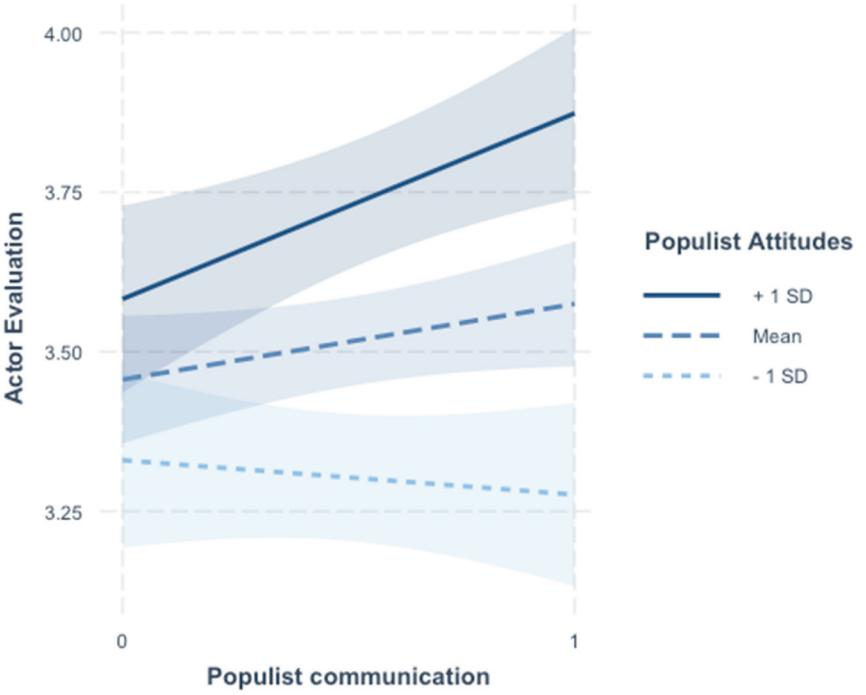

Figure 4. Simple slopes for the interaction effect of populist communication and populist attitudes on actor evaluation.

populist attitudes. On the other hand, populist communication increased (in tendency) the actor evaluation for individuals with medium, $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .07$ and, in particular, strong populist attitudes, $b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$ but not among those with weak populist attitudes, $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .65$. Thus, H5a was rejected, but H5b was supported.

RQ2 asked whether negative emotions only increase support for policies and actors who use populist communication among individuals with populist attitudes. This was not the case for policy support, $b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .75$, nor for actor evaluation, $b = 0.03$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .71$. Thus, negative emotions generally increase support for promoted policies and actors, irrespective of whether actors argue in a populist way. In addition, individuals with strong populist attitudes are persuaded more when a politician uses populist communication; however, this is independent of negative emotions. There were two additional significant effects in these models: The more individuals perceive the healthcare system to be well functioning, the more they support the promoted policies and the actor. Women were also more supportive of the policies and the promoting actor.

To test H6, which postulates that negative emotions mediate the impact of emotionalized media reports on (a) policy support and (b) actor evaluations, a complex moderated mediation model was estimated. It represents the whole theoretical model as depicted in Figure 1 and corresponds to model 71 in PROCESS. Again, we estimated separate models for the two dependent variables. Additionally, gender, age, and attitudes toward the healthcare system were included as covariates. The results are depicted in Tables 5, 6, and 7. There was a positive indirect effect of emotionalized media reports via negative emotions on policy support among individuals with medium and strong populist attitudes, but not among those with weak populist attitudes. Likewise, the indirect effect on actor support was not significant among individuals with weak populist attitudes but was positive among those with medium populist attitudes. Among those with strong populist attitudes, the indirect effect was only significant in the populist communication condition. We thus found mixed evidence regarding H6a and H6b. A pairwise comparison, however, revealed that the indirect effects do not statistically differ between levels of populist attitudes. Considering this, it is not possible to conclude that the presence of indirect effects depends on the level of populist attitudes.

Looking at the other effects in this comprehensive model, as shown in Tables 5 and 6, most effects were consistent with the previous analyses. However, the interaction between populist communication and populist attitudes (H5) was no longer significant. Additionally, there is a significant interaction of reporting style and populist attitudes on policy support, $b = -0.38$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .04$, but not on actor

Table 5. Model coefficients: policy support as a function of media reporting (emotionalization), negative emotions, populist communication, and populist attitudes.

	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.83	0.34	11.26	<.001	3.16	4.50
Emotionalization	−0.13	0.17	−0.76	.45	−0.47	0.21
Negative emotions	0.51	0.10	4.91	<.001	0.31	0.71
Populist attitudes	0.43	0.14	3.01	<.001	0.15	0.71
Emotionalization * populist attitudes	−0.38	0.19	−2.02	.04	−0.74	−0.01
Negative emotions * populist attitudes	−0.05	0.10	−0.47	.64	−0.24	0.15
Populist communication	−0.14	0.17	−0.85	.40	−0.47	0.19
Emotionalization * populist communication	0.26	0.24	1.07	.28	−0.21	0.73
Negative emotions * populist communication	−0.08	0.14	−0.57	.57	−0.35	0.20
Populist attitudes * populist communication	0.04	0.19	0.22	.82	−0.32	0.41
Emotionalization * populist Communication * populist attitudes	0.36	0.27	1.35	.18	−0.17	0.88
Negative emotions * populist Communication populist attitudes	0.03	0.14	0.21	.83	−0.25	0.30
Attitudes toward the healthcare system	0.14	0.05	2.81	.01	0.04	0.23
Age	0.00	0.00	−0.17	.87	−0.01	0.01
Gender: female	0.46	0.12	3.78	<.001	0.22	0.70

$R^2 = .21$; LLCI and ULCI are the lower and upper level 95% confidence intervals; populist attitudes are mean-centered.

Table 6. Model coefficients: Actor evaluation as a function of media reporting (emotionalization), negative emotions, populist communication, and populist attitudes.

	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.75	0.20	13.72	<.001	2.35	3.14
Emotionalization	0.01	0.10	0.09	.93	−0.19	0.21
Negative emotions	0.14	0.06	2.31	.02	0.02	0.26
Populist attitudes	0.15	0.08	1.82	.07	−0.01	0.32
Emotionalization * populist attitudes	−0.03	0.11	−0.23	.82	−0.24	0.19
Negative emotions * populist attitudes	−0.01	0.06	−0.09	.93	−0.12	0.11
Populist communication	0.16	0.10	1.58	.11	−0.04	0.35
Emotionalization * populist communication	−0.05	0.14	−0.36	.72	−0.33	0.23
Negative emotions * populist communication	0.01	0.08	0.11	.92	−0.15	0.17
Populist attitudes * populist communication	0.15	0.11	1.36	.18	−0.07	0.36
Emotionalization * populist Communication * populist attitudes	0.08	0.16	0.53	.60	−0.23	0.39
Negative emotions * populist Communication * populist attitudes	0.02	0.08	0.28	.78	−0.14	0.19
Attitudes toward the healthcare system	0.09	0.03	3.29	<.001	0.04	0.15
Age	0.00	0.00	−1.01	.32	−0.01	0.00
Gender: female	0.20	0.07	2.76	.01	0.06	0.34

$R^2 = .15$;; LLCI and ULCI are the lower and upper level 95% confidence intervals; populist attitudes are mean-centered.

Table 7. Indirect effects of emotionalizing media reports via negative emotions on policy support and Actor evaluation for different levels of populist attitudes.

	Populist attitudes	Populist communication	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Policy support	−0.92	0.00	0.08	0.06	−0.03	0.21
	−0.92	1.00	0.07	0.05	−0.02	0.18
	0.00	0.00	0.15	0.05	0.06	0.26
	0.00	1.00	0.12	0.04	0.05	0.22
	1.00	0.00	0.20	0.09	0.04	0.40
	1.00	1.00	0.18	0.09	0.04	0.38
Actor evaluation	−0.92	0.00	0.02	0.02	−0.01	0.07
	−0.92	1.00	0.02	0.02	−0.02	0.07
	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.02	0.00	0.09
	0.00	1.00	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.08
	1.00	0.00	0.06	0.05	−0.03	0.16
	1.00	1.00	0.07	0.04	0.01	0.15

BootLLCI and *BootULCI* are the bootstrapped lower and upper level 95% confidence intervals; populist attitudes are mean-centered; and the depicted values are the 16th, 50th, and 84th percentiles.

evaluation, $b = -0.03$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .82$, which describes the effect of emotionalized media reporting that is not mediated by negative emotions as shown in Figure 5. This effect shows that emotionalized media reporting also leads to increased policy support among individuals with weak populist attitudes but not via the mechanism we investigated. However, a simple slope analysis with the R package interactions revealed that the increase was not significant: $b = 0.18$, $SE = 0.17$, $p = .29$.

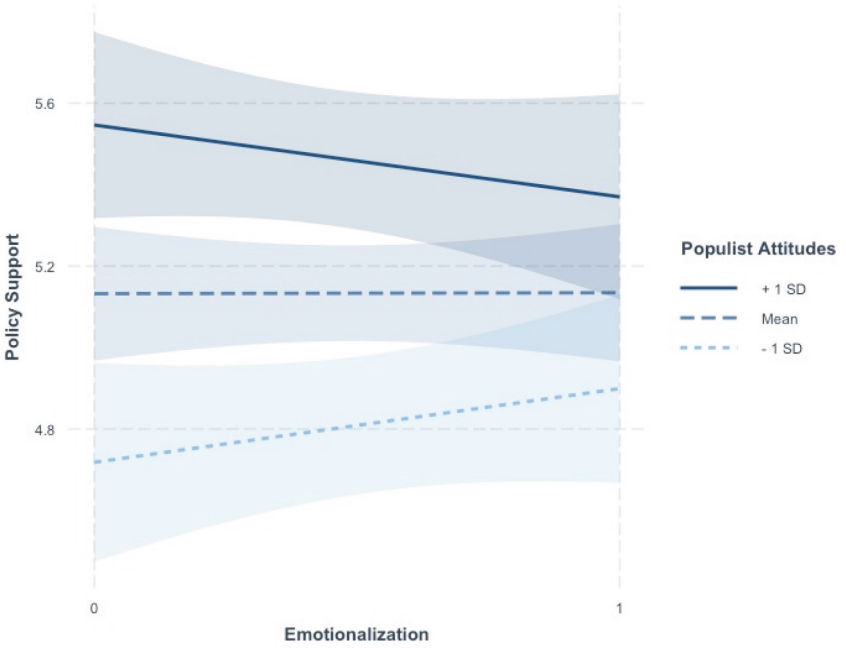

Figure 5. Simple slopes for the direct effect of emotionalized media reporting on policy support as a function of populist attitudes (c′-path interaction).

Discussion

Because emotions are considered to play a key role in the success of populist actors, the aim of this study was to investigate whether emotionalized media reports increase susceptibility to populist communication. Previous research has shown that emotions elicited by populist communication itself, as well as by media reporting about issues typically associated with populist actors, elicit emotions that in turn increase support for populist claims (Kieslich & Marcinkowski, 2020, Wirz, 2018). These findings raise the question of whether actors using populist communication can benefit more from media-induced emotions than other political actors because their drastic policies seem more effective at addressing negative emotional states. To address this question, we conducted an experiment in which participants were exposed to emotionalized (vs. neutral) media reporting on an issue that is not typically associated with populist actors and, afterward, to an interview with a fictitious politician who promoted a solution to the issue in either a populist or a non-populist way.

The results of our study suggest that emotionalized media reporting induces negative emotions that in turn increase support for policies designed to resolve the issue and for actors who promote these policies.

This effect was found mostly irrespective of the type of communication; thus, all political actors—i.e., not only those using populist communication—can benefit from emotionalized media reporting if they put forward policies that promise to solve the emotional problem quickly and efficiently. Nevertheless, populist actors may benefit more. Individuals with weak populist attitudes seem to be immune to emotionalization through media reporting; that is, they do not feel more negative emotions when exposed to an emotionalized article compared to a neutral one. Thus, populist actors might benefit from the stronger emotional reactions of their voters. Additionally, individuals with medium to strong populist attitudes seem to prefer politicians who use populist communication, regardless of negative emotions.

The idea of an unholy alliance between the media—especially tabloid media—and populist actors (Kieslich & Marcinkowski, 2020, Mazzoleni, 2008) is not supported by our findings. Media reporting that elicits negative emotions does not foster support for populist policies or actors, in particular. However, it is noteworthy that the potential of media reporting to elicit emotions depends on populist attitudes. While individuals with weak populist attitudes did not experience negative emotions in reaction to the emotionalized article, those with medium to strong populist attitudes did. This is in line with findings from previous research establishing a connection between populist attitudes and emotional reactions (Rico et al., 2017). Nevertheless, we still know little regarding the direction of causality in this relationship. Are individuals who tend to have stronger emotional reactions more likely to form populist attitudes, or does having a populist worldview result in stronger emotional reactions? Since our study demonstrates that the negative emotions elicited by media reporting foster support for promoted solutions, irrespective of the communication style, further research is needed to clarify why certain groups of the population experience such emotions more than others.

The finding that negative emotions do not make populist claims more persuasive than other claims may suggest that populist communication is persuasive because it elicits emotions (Wirz, 2018) and not because it is particularly suitable for addressing the problems that cause the emotions. However, this finding may be influenced by the manipulation of populist communication we applied: The law was described as efficient and comprehensive in both versions with only the justifications and mechanisms differing between the populist and non-populist versions. However, one could argue that populist actors often promote quick, simple, and efficient solutions, while other political actors tend to assume complex and lengthy processes in problem solving. Perhaps the results would have been different if populist communication had been defined based on the promised outcome; however, describing one solution as more efficient would be a severe

threat to the internal validity of the experiment. Similarly, we used a fictitious politician to ensure that the effects were due to the nature of communication rather than the type of political actor; therefore, the politician was identical in the populist and the non-populist versions. Since the perception that a message is populist seems to depend on the actor's reputation or image (Blassnig & Wirz, 2019), future research should consider this complex relationship.

This study has some limitations. Most importantly, due to the complex design with two subsequent stimuli and a three-way interaction, we focused on one issue. The results need to be replicated in other contexts. We assume that emotional framing effects are especially relevant when novel topics arise or when individuals do not have strong prior convictions about an issue. Our findings are also limited to issues that have at least some potential to elicit emotions. Second, the effect sizes we found were rather small, and when applying heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors, many p-values changed from below to slightly above the conventional significance level. This can most likely be attributed to the low levels of negative emotions elicited through the media report we used. Our aim was to ensure that negative emotions could be causally attributed to an emotionalized reporting style rather than issue relevance. Future research could complement our approach by choosing stimuli that elicit stronger emotional reactions, though most likely at the expense of a comparable level of problem awareness in the control group. Another option would be to include physiological measures of emotional reactions. These have the advantage of not directing participants' attention to their emotional reactions, which might affect their emotions or their effects on attitudes. However, physiological measures are hard to collect from a diverse sample, such as the one we recruited for this study, as they require in-person attendance.

It should be noted that the emotional framing effects in this study are attributed to the one-time exposure to the issue. In real life, media users may be exposed to several emotion-eliciting news reports about an issue. Media reporting is, of course, not the only source of information that can elicit negative emotions toward an issue, but our findings show that even a single media report can potentially elicit emotions that shape political preferences. Relatedly, our measures of distinct negative emotions were combined into a single index of negative emotions—a mix of fear, anger, and sadness. Thus, our study investigated mixed emotions rather than specific discrete emotions. Despite being a negative emotion, anger has appraisal tendencies that are more similar to positive emotions (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). Future research could use stimuli that evoke distinct, rather than mixed, emotions to see if they have differential effects on the persuasiveness of populist communication.

Finally, to avoid priming populist attitudes before participants were exposed to the first news report, we measured populist attitudes at the end of the questionnaire but still used them as a moderator in our analyses. The level and variance of populist attitudes did not differ between the experimental groups and was thus not affected by the treatment as explained in the online supplemental material. Nevertheless, this procedure can be criticized. Future research could avoid this limitation by measuring populist attitudes on a different day (e.g., a week before the experimental study). Our findings involving the moderator variable should be interpreted with caution and supported by further research.

Despite these limitations, this study makes some important contributions. First, it shows that all political actors, not only populists, can benefit from emotionalized media reports. Second, it highlights the relevance of emotionality not only as a feature of populism (Canovan, 1999) or populist communication (Jost et al., 2020, Widmann, 2021), but also a characteristic of populist citizens. This corroborates the importance of emotional framing as a political persuasion mechanism (Kühne & Schemer, 2013, Nabi, 2003) and thus reminds us that reporting style can have a substantial impact on political decision making.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

Data and additional online materials are openly available on the project's Open Science Framework page (https://osf.io/4vsgm).

Open Scholarship

This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data are openly accessible at https://osf.io/4vsgm.

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