

Performing the People and Depleting the Commons: Bottom-up Populism in Canada and France

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This study examines how ordinary citizens construct and circulate populist discourse through social media, comparing two cases of bottom-up populism: Canada's Freedom Convoy and France's Yellow Vests movement. Drawing on grounded theory and mixed-method content analysis of 4,725 Facebook threads, the study identifies three production strategies—labeling, linking, and critiquing—and three narrative styles—division, emotion, and drama—that structure grassroots populist communication. These strategies enable decentralized publics to articulate moral boundaries between “the people” and “the elite,” mobilize affective solidarity, and perform legitimacy in the absence of centralized leadership. Cross-national comparison reveals that while French discourse emphasizes confrontation and anger, Canadian discourse privileges gratitude and national pride, reflecting differences in protest culture and institutional context. Yet, both cases exhibit similar emotional intensification and retrotopian storytelling driven by algorithmic visibility, illustrating how digital participation can deplete the deliberative commons it relies on. Integrating Farrer's “tragedy of the commons,” the study reframes bottom-up populism as both a communicative empowerment and a potential mechanism of discursive exhaustion in networked democracies.

Keywords: bottom-up populism, affective public, political communication, tragedy of the commons, retrotopian storytelling

Populist currents continue to shape political discourse across Western democracies by asserting a moral-political dichotomy between the people and the elite (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004). While much scholarship emphasizes leader-centered mobilization and party-led strategies, the advent of interactive digital platforms has given rise to a complementary bottom-up dynamic in which self-organized publics co-construct antagonistic identities on collective grievances. Notable events, such as the Arab Spring, the

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Date submitted: 2025-08-04

¹ This work was supported by the Ministry of Education in China Project of Humanities and Social Sciences (Funding no. 25YJC860001). The author would like to thank the editors and the two reviewers for their constructive feedback and tireless patience throughout the production process.

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Occupy Wall Street movement, and the storming of the U.S. Capitol by supporters of former President Donald Trump following Joe Biden's election, point to the growing influence of a wave of grassroots populism driven by loosely networked publics.

In this study, a distinction is made between "top-down populism" and "bottom-up populism." While the former denotes a leader-centric model in which a charismatic figure channels the people's will through party structures or mass media, the latter refers to network-based publics that self-mobilize, often through digital platforms, generating populist content without stable, centralized leadership. Though hybrid configurations exist when leaders adopt social media tactics to simulate grassroots authenticity, this article focuses specifically on grassroots publics, analyzing user-generated content to understand how lay actors sustain and evolve populist discourse.

The comparative cases of the Canadian Freedom Convoy in 2022 and the French Yellow Vests movement in 2018 are particularly suited for this inquiry. As their origins differ—the former emerging from pandemic-related institutional distrust in the Canadian government and the latter erupting from long-standing socioeconomic frustration in France—both used Meta as a platform to narrate disillusionment via populist-style frames. Together, they illustrate how digital populist repertoires cross national boundaries while being shaped by local conditions of cultural, institutional, and discursive opportunities.

This article contributes to two interrelated debates. First, it advances the understanding of populism as a bottom-up communicative process, shaped by platform affordances, affective publics (Papacharissi, 2017), and participatory performance. Second, it recasts ordinary citizens, rather than leaders or journalists, as authors of populist meaning. Through this lens, populism becomes a vernacular mode of communication that thrives in hybrid digital spaces. Three research questions thus guide this study:

RQ1: How do decentralized publics articulate "the people" and "the elite" through emotional and moral discourse on Facebook?

RQ2: How do these user expressions resonate with, or diverge from, elite and media framings of populism identified in previous research?

RQ3: To what extent do expressions of anger, fear, and nostalgia among users mirror the emotionally charged communication styles characteristic of populist campaigns?

Literature Review

Populism has long been studied as a "thin-centered" ideology that pits a virtuous people against a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004), a discursive style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), or a communication strategy mobilizing people-centrism and anti-elitism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Yet, recent scholarship stresses that understanding populism also requires examining how it is perceived and interpreted by political actors, the media, and audiences, rather than only how it is defined. This shift from ontology to perception offers crucial insights for analyzing bottom-up and audience-driven populist communication.

From What Populism Entails to Perceiving and Interpreting Populism

Political scientist Jan-Werner Müller (2014) argues that populism is a distorted form of democracy that promises to uphold democratic ideals while undermining democratic institutions. Its emphasis on “the people” often transforms them into what Ernesto Laclau (2005) calls an “empty signifier,” representing a vague and unorganized mass rather than a cohesive political force. Earlier studies on populism focused primarily on its ideological dimensions, defining it as an antiestablishment, anti-elite, and anti-pluralist movement (Mudde, 2004). However, later studies conceptualize it as a political performance or communicative style that constructs “the people” in opposition to “the elites” through various rhetorical and performative means (Moffitt, 2016; Reinemann et al., 2017; Sorensen, 2021). Common examples include when populists employ rhetoric that portrays existing establishment leaders as corrupt, evokes nostalgia for a “golden age,” and frames the future in similarly idealized terms (Akkerman et al., 2013; Stauth & Turner, 1988).

Populism is also increasingly framed as an interactive discourse, not only disseminated top-down by political leaders but also coproduced by networked publics who contribute to its meaning-making through different discursive and performative strategies (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). This communicative shift reflects broader changes in the structure of the public space, where traditional boundaries between elites and masses have blurred (Kefford et al., 2022). Moffitt (2016) conceptualizes populism as a political style characterized by an appeal to “the people” versus “the elite,” “bad manners” (that deviate from people’s conventional understanding and expectations of “good-mannered” leaders), and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat. This political style is contrasted with the technocratic political style, which emphasizes expertise, stability, and progress.

Studies on populism as a rhetorical category reveal that the term’s meaning is continuously negotiated across communicative arenas. In parliamentary discourse, Casiraghi and Bordignon (2023) show that populism functions as a flexible insult or claim deployed by opponents and sympathizers alike to assert moral authority. Likewise, Casiraghi (2021) traces the British use of “populist” as a political epithet from 1970 to 2018, demonstrating how the label evolves as a contested rhetorical resource. Elmgren (2018) describes this dynamic as the “double-edged sword” of populism, which political actors weaponize and appropriate for strategic advantage. Bailly et al. (2025) recently extended this argument to the mediasphere, showing that news outlets in Belgium, France, and Spain oscillate between “adversarial” and “banal” anti-populism, representing populism as a democratic threat or as a routine descriptive category, respectively. Together, these studies demonstrate that populism’s meaning is relational and context-dependent, contingent on who speaks, to whom, and for what purpose.

Audience-centered research also confirms that these rhetorical cues shape public interpretation. For instance, Bos et al. (2013), in an experimental study, found that communication style, especially moralizing and emotional appeals, significantly influenced how audiences perceived right-wing populist leaders. Nai (2021) similarly documents that populist communicators across global campaigns exhibit higher negativity, personalization, and fear-oriented messaging than mainstream counterparts. These patterns suggest that citizens are socialized into recognizing a distinct “populist style” through its affective tone, emotional intensity, and polarized framing. Examining bottom-up populism, therefore, requires analyzing

not only what users say but also how their messages might be received and interpreted within these recognizable stylistic conventions.

Affective Publics, Attention Economy, and Elective Affinity

Building on this interpretive perspective, the study draws from communication theory to understand how social media environments interact with the expression and circulation of populist discourse. Three interrelated concepts—*affective publics*, the *attention economy*, and *elective affinity*—provide a coherent framework for linking individual emotions, technological affordances, and collective meaning-making.

Building on the concept of networked publics (boyd, 2010), Papacharissi (2017) defines “*affective publics*” as networked publics that are identified, mobilized, connected, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment. Unlike the rational-deliberative model of the public sphere, *affective publics* often mobilize through connective feelings of outrage, empathy, or a sense of belonging. Emotions are not peripheral to communication, but serve as infrastructure; that is, they determine which messages circulate, whom users identify with, and what collective identities crystallize online.

If we examine contemporary social movements on social media, it is not hard to find *affective appeals* converged with user-generated content and algorithmic curation. The *attention economy*, coined by Bucher and Helmond (2018), provides the technological logic underpinning these processes. Platform affordances such as reaction metrics, threaded comments, and algorithmic ranking reward emotionally salient and polarizing content (Davenport & Beck, 2001; van Dijck et al., 2016). As a result, users may compete for visibility by amplifying dramatic or conflictual themes, a dynamic that also privileges populist framings of crisis and moral opposition.

This structural convergence creates an *elective affinity* (Gerbaudo, 2018) between *affective publics* and populist communication, as both rely on moral polarization, emotional immediacy, and the performance of authenticity. Moreover, populist rhetoric offers audiences clear moral binaries, while social media affordances reward exactly those discursive features (e.g., algorithmic curation and echo chambers). This affinity is mutually reinforcing, as platforms facilitate populist performance, and populist content, in turn, sustains engagement within attention-driven economies.

These converging dynamics, such as emotional amplification, competitive visibility, and moral polarization, suggest an inherent tension in the democratic potential of digital publics. As participatory platforms expand opportunities for voice, they also generate pressures toward sensationalism and conflict, risking the erosion of trust and deliberative quality. Scholars have coined the term “*tragedy of the commons*” (Farrer, 2022, p. 4) to describe how voice democratization can deplete trust, civility, and informational diversity.

This study, therefore, situates bottom-up populism within broader transformations of the digital public sphere. It emphasizes that understanding how grassroots movements construct and communicate populist discourse requires attention to the emotional, rhetorical, and technological structures that enable such communication. These insights inform the study’s methodological design, which examines how

ordinary users articulate “the people” and “the elite” across two distinct sociopolitical contexts through social media affordances.

Methodology

This study employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze user-generated content on Facebook on two populist movements: the Canadian Freedom Convoy and the French Yellow Vests. The methodology encompasses data collection (sources, timeframe, selection criteria), data analysis (coding procedures), and measures for ensuring reliability and transparency.

Cases

Although most populism research stresses party leaders and political elites, a growing body of literature has examined bottom-up populism. In France, the Yellow Vests have been studied through diverse lenses: Della Sudda and Reungoat (2022) applied a mixed-methods framework to analyze the movement’s political claims and public engagement; Wagner-Egger et al. (2022) investigated psychosocial determinants of adherence to the movement; and Reungoat et al. (2020) studied the avoidance of institutional politics as political tactics and explored how ordinary citizens became politicized during the movement. These studies collectively highlight the complex social composition, media strategies, and emotional drivers behind the Yellow Vests Movement’s populist discourse.

Similarly, the Canadian Freedom Convoy has been studied for its hybrid ideological composition and rhetorical framing: Gillies et al. (2023) described the movement’s political entanglements and identity-based narratives, and Roy and Gandsman (2023) conducted a comparative framing analysis, demonstrating how populist rhetoric adapted to COVID-19-related anxieties. The above studies emphasize how digital environments facilitate message coordination and emotional resonance across diverse participant groups. However, few studies have explicitly put these two grassroots-driven populist social movements in parallel or systematically analyzed how user-generated content in distinct national and political settings structures populist discourse and facilitates populist styles.

The study adopts a “most-different systems” comparative design (Przeworski & Teune, 1970; Yin, 2014), selecting these two movements that differ markedly in context yet share key communicative features. The Yellow Vests in France and the Freedom Convoy in Canada, as previously studied, represent cases of bottom-up populism rooted in everyday grievances and amplified by Meta-based mobilization. This cross-national pairing allows a theoretical comparison of how similar affective-populist repertoires adapt to different institutional and cultural environments. Rather than claiming statistical generalization, the analysis aims for analytical generalization that derives theoretical insights about the dynamics of digital populism applicable beyond these cases.

Data Collection

Meta (Facebook) was chosen as the site of data collection because of its enduring importance as an organizing tool for bottom-up social movements and its role in fostering “networked publics” (boyd,

2010). Surveys show that Meta remains the most widely used social media platform among adults aged 30–65, who constitute the demographic backbone of both movements studied (Pew Research Center, 2023). This audience profile situates Meta groups as valuable sites for observing the vernacular articulation of populist sentiment, where affective ties and political discourse merge in everyday communication rather than formal political campaigning.

The decision to focus on Meta was also grounded in its specific affordances, which align with the aims of this study. Unlike X or Telegram, Meta enables richer comment threads, higher levels of interpersonal engagement, and longer-form user expression. It also maintains relatively stable community pages that act as centralized nodes for discourse, which is particularly useful for studying decentralized movements. Comment hierarchies and reaction features allow for detailed observation of emotional resonance and narrative propagation.

In the two cases selected, Meta was a central organizing and mobilization platform, making it a natural site for data collection. The choice also reflects practical constraints, including data accessibility, moderation transparency, and the consistency of public-facing content over time. For the Freedom Convoy, the period spans January 20 to February 3, 2022, coinciding with the movement's physical mobilization across Canada and its peak in national and international media attention. For the Yellow Vests, the period spans December 2 to December 16, 2018, aligning with the most intense weeks of protest activity in France and wide media coverage. These periods were purposefully selected to ensure that the analysis captured the most representative discursive patterns and emotional expressions during the respective movement's mobilization. This window ensures analytical consistency while focusing on moments when affective and populist rhetoric are most prominent in public discourse.

Meta's interface ranks comments under posts using a relevance algorithm that combines factors such as engagement, recency, and the social proximity of commenters (Meta Transparency Center, 2021). The first 50 comments, therefore, represent the most visible portion of the discussion, as experienced by ordinary users. Each post and its associated first 50 comments were treated as a single analytical unit, allowing us to study how meaning circulates between message production and audience response.

However, engagement metrics were not normalized relative to audience size, as this study's primary focus is on the discursive content and performative styles rather than comparative volume-based engagement. Still, it is acknowledged that differing page popularity could influence the number of comments and perceived resonance. This limitation is discussed further in the Discussion section.

The final data set includes 81 posts and 3,754 comments from the Freedom Convoy and 28 posts and 862 comments from the Yellow Vests (Table 1), totaling 4,725 threads. This imbalance reflects differential availability and activity levels during the respective time frames. While this asymmetry may influence inter-case comparability, the analysis emphasized qualitative dimensions of discourse rather than quantitative generalizations. Future research may benefit from a more balanced data set or the application of statistical weighting procedures to enhance comparability.

Table 1. Data Collection.

Social movement	Date range	Number(s) of post	Number(s) of comment	Number(s) of thread
Freedom Convoy Movement	2022/01/20– 2022/02/03	81	3,754	3,835
Yellow Vests Movement	2018/12/02– 2018/12/16	28	862	890

Data Analysis

This study adopts a mixed-method coding approach that integrates concept-driven categories derived from existing literature with emergent themes identified through grounded theory. The core analytical constructs—production strategies (labeling, linking, critiquing), narrative styles (division, emotion, drama), and modes of operation (legitimizing, mobilizing, monopolizing)—were predefined but allowed to evolve inductively based on the data. Non-English (French) posts were translated and cross-checked using both automated tools and manual validation to ensure semantic accuracy and tone fidelity.

The construct of “labeling” was operationalized by tracking how users named and described both in-groups (e.g., “the people”) and out-groups (e.g., “the elites” or “government”). “Linking” captured the connections drawn between the movement and broader sociopolitical contexts, while “critiquing” included expressions of grievance and/or complaints. A clear distinction was made between references to the general public and those aimed specifically at political leadership, especially in the Freedom Convoy case, where in-group identity was more pronounced.

Two independent coders from different academic backgrounds underwent training to ensure a shared understanding of the codebook. A 30% sample of posts and comments was double-coded. When the Holsti intercoder reliability coefficient reached 0.9, full independent coding was initiated (see, e.g., Che et al., 2023). Discrepancies were addressed through additional training and iterative adjustments to the codebook.

The link between production strategies and narrative styles was not predefined, but emerged inductively during the axial and selective coding phases. This emergent relationship is visually represented in Figure 1, which outlines the iterative analytic flow. The grounded theory process (open, axial, and selective coding; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) enabled the discovery of recurring patterns and theoretical categories that explain how populist content is constructed and disseminated by affective publics. This abductive approach, combining deductive structure with inductive flexibility, ensured that theoretical insights were both empirically grounded and conceptually robust.

This study acknowledges several ethical and reflexive considerations. First, although all analyzed data were drawn from public Meta pages, the use of pseudonymous accounts raises concerns about user consent and privacy. Care was taken not to disclose identifiable information, and all excerpts were anonymized. Second, the researcher approached the analysis with an awareness of potential biases, including interpretive framing and cultural standpoint. As social movements often evoke strong emotional

responses, both supportive and critical, the analytical lens maintained an inductive and theory-informed stance rather than a normative one. The goal was not to assess the legitimacy of the movements' claims, but to understand the communicative structures they employed. Ethical approval was not sought because of the study's focus on public discourse, but ethical guidelines for digital research were followed throughout.

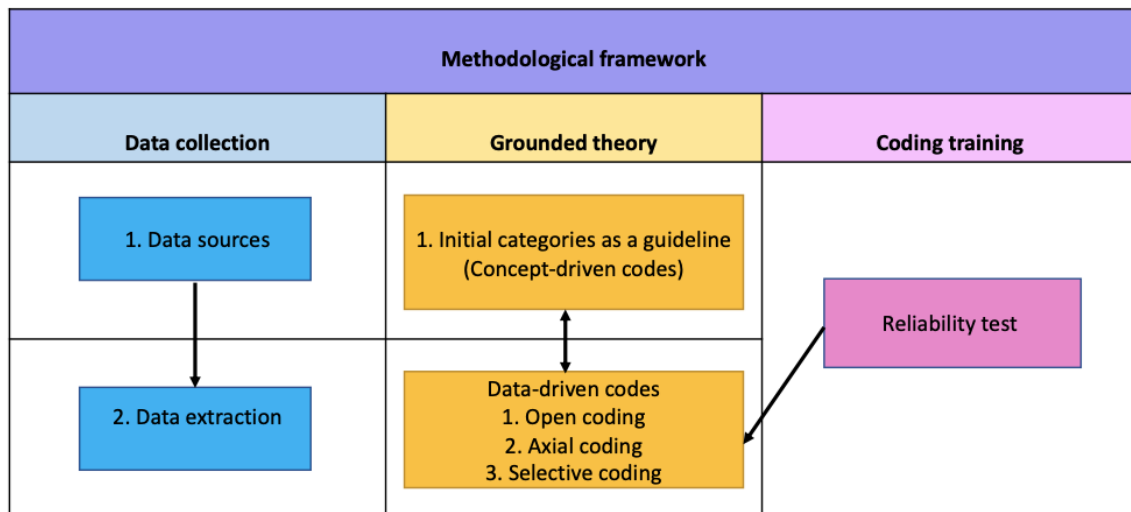


Figure 1. Methodological framework.

Results

The grounded theory analysis identified three discursive production strategies—labeling, linking, and critiquing—that were consistently deployed across both cases. These strategies informed three dominant narrative styles: division, emotion, and drama. The following sections interpret these findings in alignment with the research questions.

Discursive Strategies in Decentralized Populist Publics

Across both movements, users engaged in purposeful and patterned forms of discursive construction. Three dominant rhetorical strategies—labeling, linking, and critiquing—were consistently observed, each contributing to the formation of populist identity and the circulation of collective meaning within decentralized Meta publics.

Labeling operated as the most fundamental mechanism of polarization, establishing a moral dichotomy between “the people” and “the elites.” This discursive practice enabled participants to delineate moral boundaries, constructing an idealized in-group while delegitimizing out-groups. Labeling was identified in 74 posts (91%) in the Freedom Convoy data set and 17 posts (60.7%) in the Yellow Vests data set. Two recurrent subtypes emerged: the people label, which emphasized the collective agency and

virtue of ordinary citizens, and the leadership label, which framed political and institutional elites as corrupt or morally bankrupt.

In both cases, “the people” functioned as an empty signifier, a flexible identity marker more easily defined by exclusion (i.e., who the people are not) than by inclusion. In the Freedom Convoy discourse, “real Canadians” were contrasted with passive or complicit citizens, while the Yellow Vests similarly distinguished “the real French” from those aligned with President Emmanuel Macron. Through this rhetorical opposition, labeling sustained a moralized logic of division and authenticity characteristic of populist communication.

Linking situated individual posts within broader political, economic, and moral frameworks, thereby transforming local grievances into shared ideological narratives. It appeared in 63 posts (77.8%) from the Freedom Convoy and 20 posts (71.4%) from the Yellow Vests. For instance, one Convoy post declared: “Our first priority has always been and will continue to be to hold peaceful assemblies to make voices heard across Canada” (personal communication, January 28, 2022), converting logistical coordination into an expression of civic pride and collective agency. Similarly, a Yellow Vests post from December 2018 tied economic frustration to systemic critique—“Reducing employers’ costs by 50% . . . 40% for hiring, 40% for raising wages . . .” (personal communication, December 12, 2018). By embedding individual discontent within national moral narratives, linking facilitated resonance between personal experience and structural critique, amplifying the populist moral economy of grievance and justice.

Critiquing targeted perceived institutional failures and injustices, functioning as a rhetorical catalyst for collective indignation. This strategy encompassed attacks on government mandates (Freedom Convoy: 10.35%, nine posts), economic inequality (Yellow Vests: 14.81%, four posts), media complicity (Freedom Convoy: 34.91%, 29 posts; Yellow Vests: 34.57%, 10 posts), and political corruption (Freedom Convoy: 54.74%, 44 posts; Yellow Vests: 50.62%, 14 posts). These patterns align with the broader literature linking populist rhetoric to generalized discontent, whether understood as a “cultural backlash” against liberal cosmopolitanism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) or as a symptom of “societal malaise” (Aschauer & Mayerl, 2019). By externalizing blame onto elites, participants transformed diffuse frustration into moral accusation and legitimized the movement’s oppositional identity.

Notably, posts receiving minimal engagement, typically fewer than five comments or reactions, were predominantly descriptive and emotionally neutral. They conveyed logistical updates (e.g., meeting times, route changes) or procedural notices devoid of affective language or symbolic imagery. This contrast reinforces the notion that visibility within Facebook publics is contingent on affective intensity and rhetorical salience. In short, engagement within algorithmic environments appears to privilege emotional and moralized communication over informational content.

Narrative Styles: Division, Emotion, and Drama

The strategic patterns described above coalesced into three overarching narrative styles—division, emotion, and drama—that structured how users articulated collective identity and mobilized affect. Table 2 summarizes the dominant characteristics of each across the two movements.

Table 2. Narrative Styles.

Narrative style	Freedom convoy movement	Yellow vests movement
Division	Emphasis on patriotic unity; anti-elite moral labeling	Strong oppositional tone; use of insults and profanity
Emotion	Hope; gratitude; national pride	Anger; frustration; economic despair
Drama	Nostalgic appeals; symbolic restoration	Apocalyptic framing; violent metaphors

Division emerged as the most pervasive narrative style, observable in 68 posts (83.95%) from the Freedom Convoy and 21 posts (75%) from the Yellow Vests. These narratives relied on explicit out-group constructions and dramatized moral binaries. One Convoy post proclaimed: "For those Canadians who do not support this, hold your head down in shame. Your hate didn't drown us—it has created a huge wave of UNITED CANADIANS" (personal communication, January 26, 2022). The Yellow Vests employed even harsher language, using profanity to vilify Macron supporters. While the Freedom Convoy tended to exclude "agitators" or "left-wing extremists" (personal communication, January 29, 2022), the Yellow Vests directed antagonism toward "the biggest polluters" (personal communication, December 8, 2018), who were excluded from the category of "the people." This rhetorical pattern aligns with Hameleers' (2021) findings that digital populist discourse amplifies moral polarization by framing social conflict as a struggle between virtuous citizens and corrupt elites.

Emotional expression varied between the two movements. While the Yellow Vests displayed some levels of anger and frustration (17.05%, five posts), gratitude and pride were the most salient affects, especially in the Freedom Convoy (63.39%, 51 posts). Contrary to common assumptions that populist mobilization depends primarily on rage, the Freedom Convoy discourse frequently expressed appreciation and solidarity through statements such as "You have restored my faith in this country" (personal communication, January 29, 2022). These positive emotions suggest that bottom-up populist communication mobilizes through resentment and identity-affirming sentiments, such as hope and belonging. Within such environments, gratitude functions as a community-maintaining emotion, fostering cohesion and reinforcing shared moral purpose.

While anger dominated posts directed toward elites and institutions, gratitude appeared frequently within comment threads, often responding to peers. This contrast suggests an affective division of labor where anger mobilizes, but gratitude maintains the community. Such expressions are likely tied to the Meta group architecture, which privileges sustained, semiprivate interaction among known participants. Comparative studies find that platforms with broadcast-oriented affordances (e.g., X, YouTube) amplify outrage and confrontation, whereas group-based platforms cultivate affiliative emotions and reinforcement (Bossetta, 2018; Graham & Wright, 2014). In this light, gratitude is not an anomaly, but a sign of inward-facing populism, or simply a style of belonging nurtured within enclosed digital publics.

The narrative style of drama combined hyperbolic language, apocalyptic metaphors, and temporally charged affect. Yellow Vests posts warned that "Things will eventually go by force" (personal communication, December 13, 2018), whereas the Freedom Convoy proclaimed: "The history we are making today—

tomorrow is freedom!" (personal communication, January 29, 2022). These dramatizations intertwined hope and nostalgia, framing the present as a site of struggle between loss and redemption.

Nostalgia, in particular, served as a central affective mode linking individual grievance with collective identity. Two distinct temporal framings were evident. Personal retrotopia drew on autobiographical memory (e.g., "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time"; personal communication, December 13, 2018), while collective retrotopia invoked shared national renewal (e.g., "This is our only hope to take back Canada"; personal communication, January 21, 2022). The collective form predominated, suggesting that memory operates as a moral resource for populist publics. Following Aslam (2023), such retrotopic longing represents not escapism, but a politics of repair, signaling an attempt to restore moral coherence in fragmented societies. This affective mechanism aligns with media memory scholarship emphasizing how digital publics reconstruct idealized pasts to legitimize present claims (Erlil, 2023; Neiger, 2020).

By simultaneously invoking nostalgia and hope, participants reimagined lost moral orders as attainable futures. These narratives thus functioned as mnemonic anchors, connecting emotional belonging to political action. The interplay of personal and collective nostalgia, hope, and grievance exemplifies how affective storytelling sustains populist mobilization in networked publics.

Taken together, the three rhetorical strategies (i.e., labeling, linking, and critiquing) operated in concert to produce the narrative styles of division, emotion, and drama. These communicative mechanisms collectively enabled users to construct legitimacy, monopolize moral authority, and mobilize participation. Across both movements, the transition from strategic discourse construction to affective narrative outcome was systematic and consistent, illustrating how decentralized publics transform everyday communication into collective populist expression.

Cross-National Differences: Contextualizing France and Canada

The divergent trajectories of the Yellow Vests Movement (YVM) and the Freedom Convoy Movement (FCM) reflect not only distinct cultural and political contexts but also differences in institutional configurations, protest traditions, and socioeconomic structures. While both emerged as expressions of discontent toward perceived elite unresponsiveness, their communicative forms and emotional repertoires were conditioned by the contrasting political cultures in which they were embedded. This study does not intend to confirm a causal relationship between each political culture and its communicative repertoires; instead, inferential discussions are made based on differences in context.

First, France has long been characterized by a culture of contentious politics, with street protests constituting a legitimate and routine mode of political participation. The French state's centralized authority and strong bureaucratic apparatus have historically encouraged citizens to express dissent through collective mobilization rather than institutional channels. The Yellow Vests thus drew on a deeply ingrained repertoire of contention rooted in revolutionary and labor-movement traditions that normalize confrontation with the state. In contrast, Canada's political culture privileges civility, proceduralism, and negotiation (Laycock, 2019). The Freedom Convoy's mobilization was therefore exceptional in the Canadian context, almost as an

episodic eruption rather than a routine practice, and reflects what scholars describe as a “thin populism” that arises in moments of moral crisis rather than enduring political conflict.

The two countries also differ sharply in their party system structures and the institutional channels available for expressing populist sentiment. In France, the existence of established populist parties, most notably Rassemblement National (formerly Front National), has provided a partial outlet for anti-elite and nationalist grievances within the electoral arena. This institutionalization of populism has paradoxically both constrained and amplified street-based mobilization. That is, while offering representation, it has also normalized the language of opposition (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2020). Canada, on the other hand, lacks a major populist party of comparable ideological intensity. Populist currents have appeared within mainstream or regional parties, such as the Reform Party in the 1990s and the People’s Party of Canada in recent years, but these have remained marginal to the federal consensus (Laycock, 2019). Consequently, the Freedom Convoy’s discourse filled a representational vacuum, operating as a surrogate channel for grievances that lacked strong partisan articulation.

Migration and multiculturalism further shape the moral economy of populist discourse. In France, anxieties surrounding immigration and secularism have long fueled populist narratives of cultural decline and national betrayal (Stockemer, 2017). The Yellow Vests’ rhetoric occasionally reflected these tensions, though their economic focus distinguished them from explicitly xenophobic movements. Canada, by contrast, has built a national identity around multicultural inclusion, where overt ethnic exclusionism is largely delegitimized in public discourse. Yet, Freedom Convoy rhetoric often reconfigured cultural boundary-making through moral rather than ethnic terms, such as by dividing “real Canadians” from “complicit citizens” rather than from immigrants. This suggests that moral populism can substitute for ethnonationalist populism (Bonikowski, 2017) when overt exclusion is socially disfavored.

The case of Québec provides a revealing intermediate position. Québec’s political culture shares with France both a linguistic heritage and a robust protest tradition. Historically, movements in Québec, from the Quiet Revolution to student protests, have embraced a civic nationalist ethos centered on autonomy and identity (Gagnon & Iacovino, 2007). In the Freedom Convoy data, Québec-based posts displayed a more confrontational and secular moral tone, echoing the French populist idiom of resistance to centralized authority. This cultural resonance suggests that Québec may function as a bridge between the two cases, embodying a Francophone populist habitus that mediates between Canadian civility and French contestation.

Finally, the economic and geographical structures of each country condition the grievances articulated in these movements. France’s high levels of regional inequality, coupled with the decline of rural and peri-urban economies, have long produced a “territorial fracture” that populists exploit (Guilluy & Debevoise, 2019). The Yellow Vests’ opposition to fuel taxes symbolized this rift between metropolitan elites and the peripheral working class. Canada shares similar regional disparities, yet its vast geography and resource-based economy diffuse the intensity of urban-rural polarization. The Freedom Convoy’s rhetoric of “freedom” and “working Canadians” nevertheless echoed the symbolic geography of populism, valorizing mobility and self-reliance against bureaucratic overreach. Both cases thus reveal how economic precarity and perceived distance from political power feed into moralized narratives of injustice.

Taken together, these contextual factors illuminate the structural underpinnings of the movements' discursive differences. French populism operates within a contentious and ideologically saturated public sphere, where antagonism toward elites is normalized through both party competition and protest culture. Canadian populism, by contrast, emerges from a moral and affective public sphere, where grievance is articulated through civic rather than ideological registers. Québec, positioned at the intersection of these two traditions, exemplifies how cultural proximity to France can shape emotional intensity and rhetorical form.

Ultimately, these contrasts support the broader argument that national political cultures mediate populist expression, even as global digital affordances and transnational affective repertoires generate convergent discursive logics. The interplay between institutional structure, cultural memory, and media ecology explains why the Yellow Vests and the Freedom Convoy produced distinct affective and rhetorical outcomes despite sharing digital infrastructures and moral vocabularies.

Discussion

This study sheds light on the rhetorical mechanics of bottom-up populism by analyzing the social media discourse of the Canadian Freedom Convoy and the French Yellow Vests. The findings affirm that social media users play an active role in shaping populist narratives, particularly through the systematic use of production strategies (labeling, linking, critiquing) and narrative styles (division, emotion, drama). These discursive tools enable decentralized actors to perform populist rhetoric even in the absence of formal leadership or institutional affiliation.

Beyond affirming prior work on populist performance and affective publics (Moffitt, 2016; Papacharissi, 2017), this study offers comparative insight into how national and cultural contexts shape the tone and structure of populist discourse. Notably, the Freedom Convoy's rhetoric often employed unifying and hopeful language, framing the movement as peaceful and patriotic (e.g., "our children have no future" and "I am proud to call myself Canadian again"; personal communication, January 20, 2022). In contrast, the Yellow Vests movement displayed more confrontational and emotionally charged expressions, often resorting to direct insults, profanity, and declarations of institutional collapse.

The cases, in comparison, produced varied affective and rhetorical outcomes despite their consistency in digital infrastructures and moral vocabularies. In line with De Vreese et al. (2018), political entertainment and satire in the French media landscape exacerbate polarization by providing simplified, emotionally charged narratives that reinforce preexisting political views. This process leads to an echo chamber effect where viewers are increasingly exposed to content that aligns with their beliefs, further entrenching their ideological positions and diminishing the likelihood of encountering alternative viewpoints, as noted by Stroud and Muddiman (2013). Such differences may also stem from platform-specific or linguistic affordances, including how national pages moderate discourse or how language traditions (e.g., rhetorical directness in French vs. hedging in Canadian English) affect expression. These cultural-linguistic patterns may shape how movements articulate grievances and mobilize supporters.

While the ideological content and socioeconomic demands differed across cases, the emotional dynamics and narrative strategies showed striking parallels. This may suggest that algorithmic curation and attention economies on social platforms create similar discursive incentives across contexts, such as by rewarding emotionality, polarity, and visibility regardless of national setting (Cinelli et al., 2021; Gerbaudo, 2018). Thus, the convergence in form (if not tone) may be explained by cultural factors, platform logic, and digital affordances. However, as a cross-platform comparative analysis is beyond the scope of this study, the author would like to encourage future research to focus on the insights offered by different platforms.

In sum, this research advances theoretical understandings of bottom-up populism by demonstrating how production strategies and narrative styles are co-constructed by digital publics. Several analytical expectations follow about how grassroots movements articulate and circulate populist discourse. First, populist discourse may include a configuration of collective emotions, such as anger, fear, nostalgia, or hope that should shape how users define “the people” and “the elite.” Second, the technological affordances of each platform, including comment visibility, reaction metrics, and moderation norms, should influence whether populist communication adopts confrontational, solidaristic, or ironic tones. Furthermore, sociocultural (e.g., history and politics) repertoires of protest are expected to condition which populist narratives resonate, for example, anti-institutional language in Canada versus anti-technocratic rhetoric in France. Future work should explore how the above factors—a configuration of collective emotions, technological affordances, and national politics/history—affect the tone and trajectory of grassroots populism. By attending to both structural and contextual variables, the field may gain a more comprehensive view of how populist narratives are crafted, performed, and sustained in a global yet fragmented digital environment.

Our findings offer empirical nuance to Farrer’s (2022) diagnosis of the “tragedy of the commons” in political communication (p. 4). Across both the Freedom Convoy and Yellow Vests cases, emotionally resonant and highly dramatized narratives proliferated. The threads were effective at mobilizing affective publics, as they almost reflected a communicative arms race, where actors escalated emotionality, polarity, and dramatic symbolism to capture attention. In both contexts, rhetorical intensification appeared as a strategic, and perhaps necessary, response to a crowded digital environment. Yet, this overproduction of emotionally heightened content may ultimately undermine the discursive commons by polarizing audiences and eroding trust in political discourse.

In this sense, our study reveals how ordinary users may inadvertently participate in communicative depletion. The very tactics that generate resonance and visibility also risk devaluing the shared discursive space. This calls into question the romanticization of grassroots social movements as inherently democratic or egalitarian in their effects. Rather, without mechanisms for self-restraint or collective rule-making as envisioned in Ostrom’s (1990) governance principles, bottom-up communication may reproduce the same destructive dynamics attributed to elite-dominated systems.

Building on Farrer’s (2022) framework, our findings suggest that the communicative tragedy does not merely stem from emotional manipulation or algorithmic incentives, but from a more structural paradox embedded in networked participation itself. In both movements, affective intensification became a form of symbolic capital within the attention economy, where visibility conferred legitimacy and moral authority.

This dynamic aligns with Papacharissi's (2017) notion of affective publics, wherein emotional expressivity is not only a mode of connection but also a competitive resource subject to overuse. What emerges, therefore, is a recursive cycle of amplification where emotional dramatization drives engagement, reinforcing the expectation of heightened affect. Over time, such recursive emotional escalation risks transforming civic discourse, as shared norms erode under the weight of performative participation. Crucially, this process implicates not only political elites or influencers but also ordinary users whose desire for recognition sustains the very dynamics that exhaust the discursive ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study examined the communicative mechanics of bottom-up populism through a comparative analysis of two grassroots movements—the Canadian Freedom Convoy and the French Yellow Vests. By integrating content analysis with grounded theory, the research identified a dynamic meaning-making framework composed of production strategies (labeling, linking, critiquing) and narrative styles (division, emotion, drama), and highlighted how factors like a configuration of collective emotions, technological affordances, national politics/history, and movement organization may altogether affect the tone and trajectory of grassroots populism.

This study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it advances the conceptualization of populism as a bottom-up communicative process and recasts leaderless, self-motivated citizens as authors of populist meaning. Second, by integrating Farrer's (2022) "tragedy of the commons" into the analysis of grassroots populist communication, the study points out that bottom-up populism is not only affectively performative but also potentially self-defeating for the public sphere, introducing a new theoretical lens for understanding discursive sustainability (p. 4). Third, it emphasizes the dual affective mechanism of nostalgia and hope, which is conceptualized here as "retrotopian storytelling" that enables populist actors to draw legitimacy from both past imaginaries and utopian futures.

These findings urge reconsideration of how we assess the democratic value of participatory digital publics. Rather than purely liberating or empowering, they, intentionally or not, tend to intensify political fragmentation, emotional polarization, and rhetorical extremism. The study ultimately calls for a more nuanced platform design and digital civic education to mitigate communicative depletion and support healthier public discourse.

Another key insight of this study lies in its demonstration that decentralized social media users can effectively co-construct populist narratives without relying on centralized leadership. These users effectively draw on emotionally resonant rhetoric to build collective identity, articulate grievances, and frame political crises. Bottom-up populism enhances the negative consequences of political polarization and monopolization of public opinion on social media platforms, not only by dividing people into disconnected groups and legitimizing the claims of insider groups but also by constructing specific frameworks to produce dominant discourses and discursive hegemony in the public sphere.

Finally, this study demonstrates that populism's power is rooted not only in ideology or elite message but also in the everyday discursive practices of regular users in digital spaces. The performative,

emotionally charged narratives found in both case studies demonstrate how bottom-up populism exploits the expressive affordances of social media to generate political impact, legitimize counter-hegemonic claims, and polarize public opinion.

This work has two major limitations. To examine cross-case similarities and differences more thoroughly, more data might need to be added to the Yellow Vests Movement sample, which makes the two cases align better in terms of sample size. In addition, this study only focused on a single platform, limiting the extent of accessible digital data across different platforms. While this study is limited by its reliance on a single platform and by sample size disparities across cases, its findings offer a conceptual foundation for future research. Comparative and cross-platform studies will be essential to further examine how emotional expression, cultural context, and digital affordances interact to shape the trajectory of populist discourse in the 21st century.

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