

Digital populism in political communication research: A systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis (2015-2025)

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Abstract

This study investigates the development of digital populism in political communication research through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and a bibliometric analysis of the Scopus database. Using the PRISMA screening framework, 18 relevant journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 were identified, suggesting that although research in this field remains limited, it has shown a notable increase, particularly after 2021. The findings indicate that the concept of digital populism has evolved from an initial focus on online activism and networked resistance to a more comprehensive framework that explains how populist messages are strategically created, distributed, and amplified through digital platforms and their underlying logics. Bibliometric mapping reveals key thematic clusters of digital populism, nationalism, and populism, with discourse analysis as the dominant methodological approach. Furthermore, the synthesis highlights five defining characteristics of digital populism: people-centrism, emotional communication, political visualisation, virality, and direct participation. Despite these insights, the literature remains heavily concentrated in Western contexts, with limited contributions from Asia and the Global South. Accordingly, future studies should broaden data sources and pursue comparative research across diverse sociopolitical contexts to enhance theoretical and empirical understanding.

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Introduction

Conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) on the variable of “digital populism” is increasingly important in the current political communication landscape, as digital platforms



have fundamentally transformed how populist narratives are produced, disseminated, and engaged with by audiences. An SLR enables a comprehensive synthesis of fragmented empirical findings on how populist content shapes user engagement across social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, while also identifying consistent patterns related to emotional appeal, polarisation, and virality (Bozdağ & da Silva, 2025).

Through a structured and transparent methodology, often guided by PRISMA standards, SLRs enhance methodological rigour, reduce bias, and ensure replicability, thereby strengthening the reliability of conclusions drawn from rapidly expanding and interdisciplinary bodies of literature (Alfagi et al., 2017; Syamsuar, 2024). Moreover, synthesising research on digital populism is crucial for understanding its broader implications for democratic discourse, particularly its role in amplifying misinformation, intensifying political polarisation, and reshaping public opinion through technopolitical configurations embedded in digital platforms (Essien, 2025). As societies undergo continuous digital transformation, SLR provides critical insights into how algorithmic dynamics, platform affordances, and participatory architectures influence political communication and democratic practices (Congge et al., 2023; Kraus et al., 2021; Lopes et al., 2025).

From an academic perspective, SLRs map key themes, theoretical trajectories, and research gaps, thereby offering a solid foundation for future studies on digital populism and related phenomena (Goel et al., 2024; Shafi et al., 2022). In practice, the cumulative evidence generated through an SLR can inform policymakers, platform designers, and political actors in developing strategies to mitigate the negative societal impacts of digital populism while fostering more inclusive, ethical, and participatory forms of digital democracy (Cepernich & Fubini, 2020; Santini & Carvalho, 2019).

This study explores the current landscape of digital populism research in political communication and evaluates its continued relevance as a strategic research agenda for the future. In line with the transformation of the digital media ecosystem that has reshaped the production, distribution, and consumption of political messages, the study systematically reviews the development of academic discourse on digital populism. It aims to identify how existing findings contribute to strengthening theoretical frameworks in political communication and to practical understandings of democratic dynamics in the digital era (Häussler, 2021). Through thematic mapping and critical analysis of the existing literature, this study seeks to bridge the fragmentation of scholarship, affirm digital populism as a multidimensional communication phenomenon, and provide a conceptual foundation for future research development and the formulation of more responsive policy strategies to address contemporary challenges in political communication.

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

RQ1: How has the concept of digital populism been examined in the field of political communication over the past decade?

RQ2: How is research on digital populism distributed across scholarly investigations?

RQ3: What are the theoretical and practical implications from the perspective of future research?

To address these questions, this study employs SLR combined with bibliometric analysis to examine the development and characteristics of digital populism research in contemporary political communication. The SLR method is considered appropriate because it enables a systematic and comprehensive synthesis of previous studies while also helping identify conceptual gaps, thematic patterns, and future research directions in a rapidly evolving, multidisciplinary field. This approach also provides evidence-based insights relevant to theoretical advancement, political communication practice, and public policy formulation in the digital era. By adhering to structured, transparent procedures, the SLR ensures that research

conclusions are drawn from a broad, representative body of studies while highlighting areas that require further scholarly exploration.

The bibliometric analysis further complements the SLR by quantifying the distribution, citation patterns, and scholarly impact of publications related to digital populism. By utilising VOSviewer and the Scopus database, this study analyses articles published across a range of academic journals up to 2 November 2025. This approach enables comprehensive mapping of the intellectual structure, collaboration networks, and developmental dynamics of digital populism research, thereby providing deeper insights into the field's growth trajectory and potential future research directions.

Digital populism is a contemporary form of populism that exploits the digital media ecosystem, including platform algorithms, content virality, and emotional mobilisation, to construct anti-elite identities, strengthen group cohesion, and shape public opinion through direct, visual, and often post-truth communication strategies. The development of populism in the digital era reveals a significant transformation driven by the collapse of traditional gatekeeping and the rise of new media ecosystems that enable political deception, visual manipulation, and the widespread dissemination of disinformation without effective institutional oversight. In this context, digital populism is closely associated with post-truth politics, in which emotional and ideological narratives prevail over fact-checking or objective truth (Prior, 2021). Social media has become a strategic arena for populist actors to disseminate anti-system messages, mobilise public anger against elites, and reinforce group identities by bypassing conventional journalistic mediation. This dynamic illustrates how the logic of virality and message personalisation reinforces populist communication patterns in contemporary digital spaces.

Moreover, the dynamics of digital populism are also shaped by grassroots activism practices (Álvares, 2025). Research on Bolsonaro supporters in Brazil shows that populist strategies are enacted not only by formal political actors but also by unofficial digital actors who serve as gatekeepers, intermediaries, and narrative amplifiers. This form of digital activism combines technopolitical strategies, emotional mobilisation, and religious framing to maintain ideological cohesion and construct echo chambers that further consolidate public support. Five key mechanisms, opinion leadership, moral political curation, religious affect, hybrid activism, and networked mediation, play a central role in sustaining pro-Bolsonaro ideological communities. At the same time, technopolitical strategies are used to counter regulatory pressure by framing oversight as censorship.

In China, digital populism takes a different form through the role of official media actors such as the Communist Youth League (CYL). Guo (2018) demonstrates that the CYL appropriates popular culture and digital populist strategies to mobilise nationalist sentiment, build alliances with patriotic netizens, and expand state political influence in digital spaces. The CYL blends socialist rhetoric with informal internet language, employing wordplay and metaphors to coordinate online actions, as seen in cases such as the Diba Expedition and the Leon Dai incident. These findings underscore that digital populism is adopted not only by opposition movements but also by state institutions seeking to construct legitimacy through more participatory, emotionally resonant communication strategies.

The visual dimension also constitutes a crucial aspect of digital populist practice. Demuru et al. (2021) show how Jair Bolsonaro constructs an image of authenticity through multiple *"body regimes"* on Instagram. Representations of military, humorous, and popular bodies reinforce the anti-political, anti-establishment image at the core of his populist communication, whereas institutional bodily representations appear far less frequently. This highlights how bodily expression and visual aesthetics contribute to the construction of political identity, demonstrating that digital populism relies not only on verbal rhetoric but also on visual persuasion strategies.

In the European context, digital populism is also evident in the participatory dynamics of activists within Italy’s Five Star Movement (M5S). Bedock & Cappellina (2024) emphasise that M5S activists view political participation as a democratic ideal requiring a strong civic culture. However, party experiences often generate disillusionment when these ideals clash with internal power practices and leadership structures, revealing a paradox between participatory visions and the realities of digital populist politics.

At the same time, digital populism has fuelled anti-immigration activism in Portugal. Zanetti et al. (2025b) note that anti-immigration narratives in digital spaces link immigration to crime, public insecurity, and threats to national cultural identity. Digital platforms accelerate the spread of extremist and racist discourse, thereby intensifying polarisation and undermining the principles of pluralism and democracy. This phenomenon illustrates how “digital populism” can function as a catalyst for exclusionary and xenophobic politics.

Within the realm of digital communication strategies, Trillò and Starita (2025) show that politicians such as Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Renzi employ visual curation on Instagram to balance strong leadership images with impressions of everyday closeness. Through setting, framing, and the use of accompanying objects, they construct populist narratives that blend authority and intimacy, two core elements of modern digital populism. Finally, Domínguez-García et al. (2025) emphasise that polarisation and emotion lie at the heart of the digital strategies of radical right parties such as VOX and Chega. These actors deploy direct, visual, and emotionally charged communication styles using short videos, bold graphics, and simplified syntax to maximise virality. TikTok and Instagram emerge as the most effective platforms for disseminating emotional and confrontational populist messages, demonstrating how platform logic shapes the aesthetics and rhetoric of contemporary digital populism.

Table 1.

Defining elements of “digital populism”

No	Defining elements of “digital populism”	Refrence
1	Digital populism explains how populist leaders utilize visual-based social media and internet-celebrity styles to construct an image that is both charismatic and relatable to the public, while effectively disseminating populist narratives through the affordances of digital platforms.	(Trillò & Starita, 2025)
2	Digital populism is a concept that, in several instances, has driven mass collaboration and collective actions against authorities. The Communist Youth League (CYL) views digital populism through three dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and communication style. The CYL leverages digital populism to build alliances with internet users and revitalize its propaganda efforts. This practice is characterized by the appropriation of popular culture, the formation of alliances with patriotic netizens, the defamation of cultural elites, and shifts in rhetorical style.	(Guo, 2018)
3	Digital populism is enacted through the intertwining of technopolitical strategies and religious moral framing in the contemporary Bolsonarist movement.	(Álvares, 2025)
4	Digital populism is characterized by anti-political and anti-establishment attitudes. It involves leaders presenting themselves as simple, authentic, and spontaneous figures, distinct from traditional politicians. The effect of meaning is often constructed through visual language.	(Demuru et al., 2021)
5	Digital populism blends technocratic characteristics with populist approaches, positioning citizens not merely as information recipients but as actors assumed to possess	(Bedock & Cappellina, 2024)

- expert-like competencies. This approach places direct democracy at the core of political processes, rejecting the intermediary role of political actors in connecting citizens' preferences with decision-making processes. Within this framework, individual capacity to make choices directly through participatory democratic mechanisms is highly valued, even though it is not always accompanied by deliberative spaces or pluralistic principles.
- 6 Digital platforms have become political battlegrounds, providing fertile ground for populism, which is fundamentally a communication phenomenon. In this context, populism must inspire audiences to engage, driven by the logic of digital platforms. Populist discourse is generated by politicians and their supporters who incite, radicalize, and disseminate narratives (Zanetti et al., 2025b)
 - 7 Digital populism refers to the use of social media by radical right political actors to build public support through confrontational, emotion-driven, and highly visual populist discourse aimed at mobilizing the masses and reinforcing their political narratives. This strategy emphasizes polarization, emotions such as anger, pride, and hope, and leverages the features of digital platforms to enhance interaction, visibility, and message virality to consolidate their support base. (Domínguez-García et al., 2025)
 - 8 Digital populism is a phenomenon in which populism operates within the contemporary media ecosystem, combining digital media logic with the idea that political communication must be mediated, personalized, disruptive, and emotionally driven to influence public opinion. This approach emphasizes user engagement on digital platforms, emotional mobilization, and the use of aggressive communication strategies against political elites and opposing groups. (Prior, 2021)
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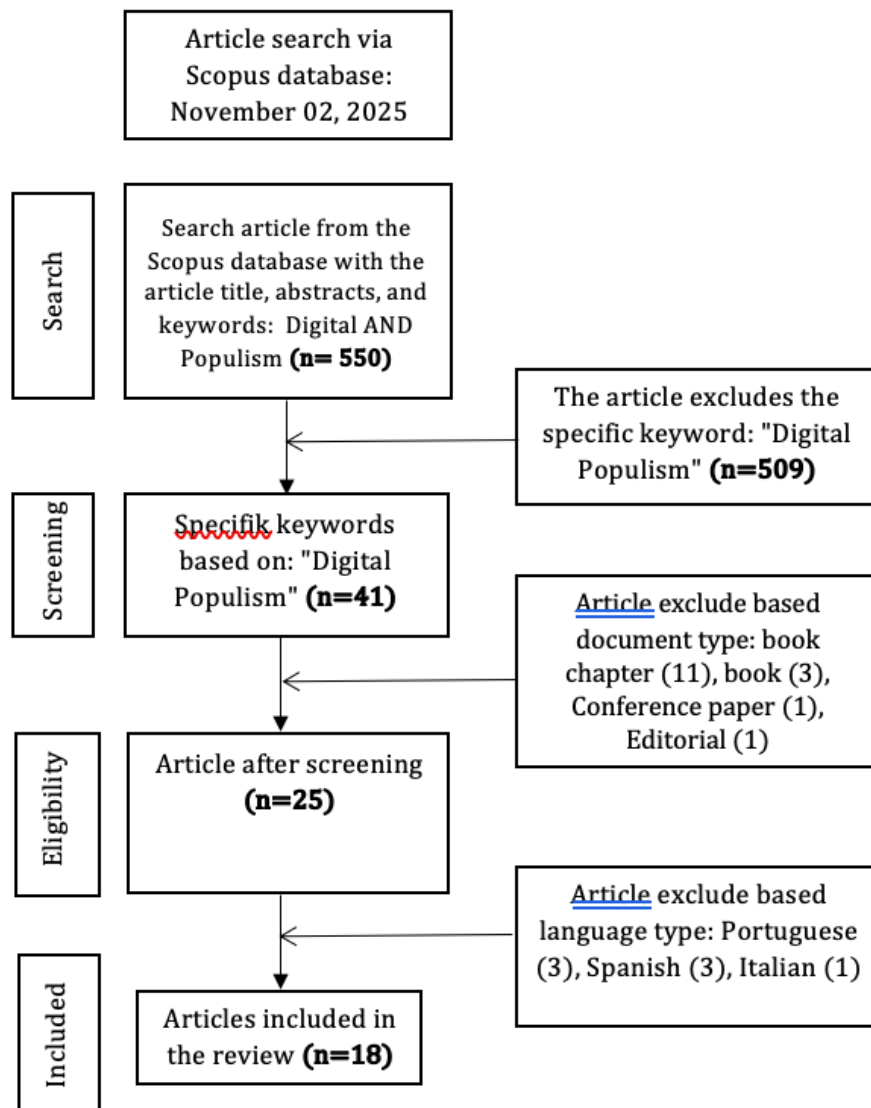
Method

The research method employed in this article adopts a systematic literature review combined with a bibliometric approach to quantitatively assess the literature, thereby enabling the identification of research trends, patterns, and key scholarly entities within a given discipline. The PRISMA framework is applied to ensure that the literature review process is conducted in a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable manner, thus providing a holistic overview of the topic under investigation (Afzal et al., 2023; Paré et al., 2016). The inclusion criteria established for this study comprise: (1) articles published up to 2 November 2025, (2) publications written in English, and (3) studies focusing on issues related to digital populism. Bibliometric analysis is conducted using VOSviewer, which facilitates the visualisation of bibliographic data to examine citation networks, co-authorship collaborations, and frequently co-occurring keywords. This approach enables the identification of the intellectual structure and developmental dynamics of the research field. The integration of bibliometric analysis and systematic review offers substantial contributions for researchers, not only by synthesising empirical findings but also by mapping the research landscape, identifying key contributors, and revealing emerging trends (Marzi et al., 2025). The combination of these two approaches provides a comprehensive understanding of the field's development, historical trajectories, and future directions, making it particularly valuable for interdisciplinary studies seeking deeper insights (Krauss, 2024; Wagner et al., 2011).

The initial stage of this scholarly study involved selecting keywords using a macro-level (top-down) methodology, starting with broad search trajectories and progressively narrowing to more specific studies and topics. Accordingly, after evaluating the limitations of previous research and the paucity of studies addressing digital populism, this study placed the keyword 'digital populism' at the centre of the article title, abstract, and keyword section. In addition, the Scopus database was employed for various investigative purposes, including conducting the literature review, identifying subject-matter experts, and monitoring research trends.

Figure 1.

Systematic Literature Review information flow using PRISMA



Sources: Author, 2025.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the study selection process followed the PRISMA framework through four sequential stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. The identification stage began with a comprehensive search of the Scopus database conducted on 2 November 2025 using the keywords “digital AND populism” in the title, abstract, and keyword fields. This initial search yielded 550 documents published between 2015 and 2025. In the screening phase, records were filtered using more specific criteria, focusing on the exact keyword “digital populism”, resulting in a dataset of 41 documents. Subsequently, non-relevant document types, including book chapters (11), books (3), conference papers (1), and editorials (1), were excluded. Articles published in languages other than English (Portuguese = 3, Spanish = 3, Italian = 1) were also removed. During the eligibility stage, the remaining publications were carefully assessed against the following inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed journal articles

written in English and explicitly addressing “digital populism” in political communication contexts. After this evaluation, 18 journal articles met all eligibility requirements and were included in the final analysis. This structured selection process followed the PRISMA framework to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigour in synthesising the literature. These documents were subsequently analysed in this study to address RQ1: How has the concept of “digital populism” been examined within the field of political communication over the past decade? RQ2: How is the distribution of research investigations related to “digital populism”? Furthermore, RQ3: What are the theoretical and practical implications from the perspective of future research?

Results and Discussion

The results of this study focus on findings derived from 18 articles indexed in the Scopus database on “digital populism”. These data were obtained by identifying the number of published articles, year-based publication trends, and journal sources. This study also highlights the most influential elements in digital populism research, including the authors' contributions, their institutional affiliations, and the countries involved.

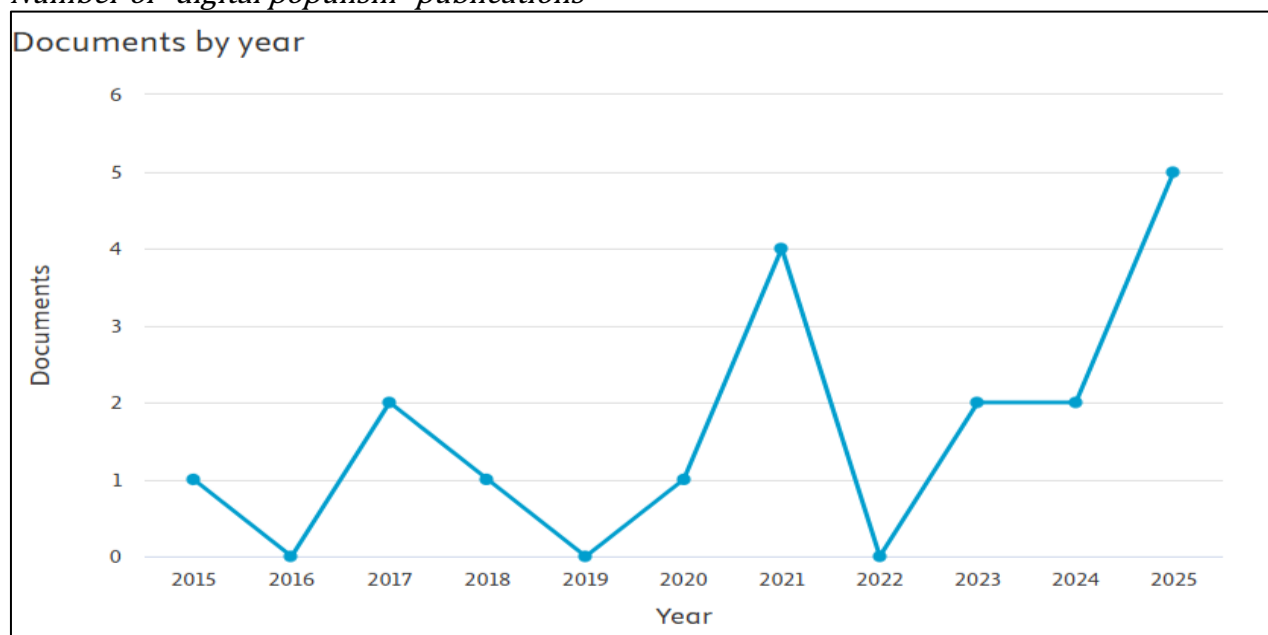
RQ1: How has the concept of “digital populism” been examined within the field of political communication over the past decade?

According to a Scopus database search, only 18 scholarly publications have addressed “digital populism” over the past 40 years. This number indicates that research in this field remains relatively limited, as illustrated in Figure 2. The development of studies on digital populism shows a gradual increase over the past decade, particularly after 2021.

The earliest study frequently cited was conducted by Tai (2015) in the work titled “Networked Resistance: ‘digital populism’, Online Activism, and Mass Dissent in China,” which marked the emergence of the term now known as “digital populism”. In more recent periods, research on “digital populism” has gained increasing attention among scholars, focusing on topics such as populism within political parties, communication in anti-immigration movements, populist political styles and nationalist sentiments, as well as the use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as tools of “digital populism” (Álvares, 2025; Bessai, 2025; Domínguez-García et al., 2025; Zanetti et al., 2025a). Furthermore, the concept of digital populism can be used to construct an individual’s political image (Trillò & Starita, 2025).

Figure 2.

Number of “digital populism” publications



Source: Scopus database (Author, 2025).

Beyond these thematic expansions, recent scholarship has begun to interrogate the algorithmic infrastructures that enable and amplify digital populism, particularly how platform logics—such as personalisation, virality, and engagement optimisation—shape the visibility of populist narratives and actors. Scholars argue that digital populism is not merely a communicative style but a socio-technical phenomenon in which political messaging is co-produced by users, influencers, and platform algorithms within a hybrid media system. This has led to the normalisation of emotionally charged, simplified, and often polarising content that resonates with “the people” while constructing antagonistic boundaries against perceived elites or out-groups. Consequently, digital populism increasingly operates through affective mobilisation, leveraging outrage, fear, and identity-based appeals, which in turn raises critical concerns regarding democratic deliberation, misinformation, and the erosion of rational public discourse in digitally mediated political environments

Since 2015, studies on digital populism have remained limited, as reflected in the small number of publications appearing in reputable scholarly journals. This condition creates substantial opportunities for researchers to conduct further exploration and to bridge existing research gaps. This study has academic urgency in enriching the understanding of the dynamics of “digital populism”, both in relation to the formation of individual behaviour and the conceptual development of the phenomenon. It is expected that this research will deepen scholarly interpretations of the implementation and practices of digital populism as they evolve across various domains of social and political life.

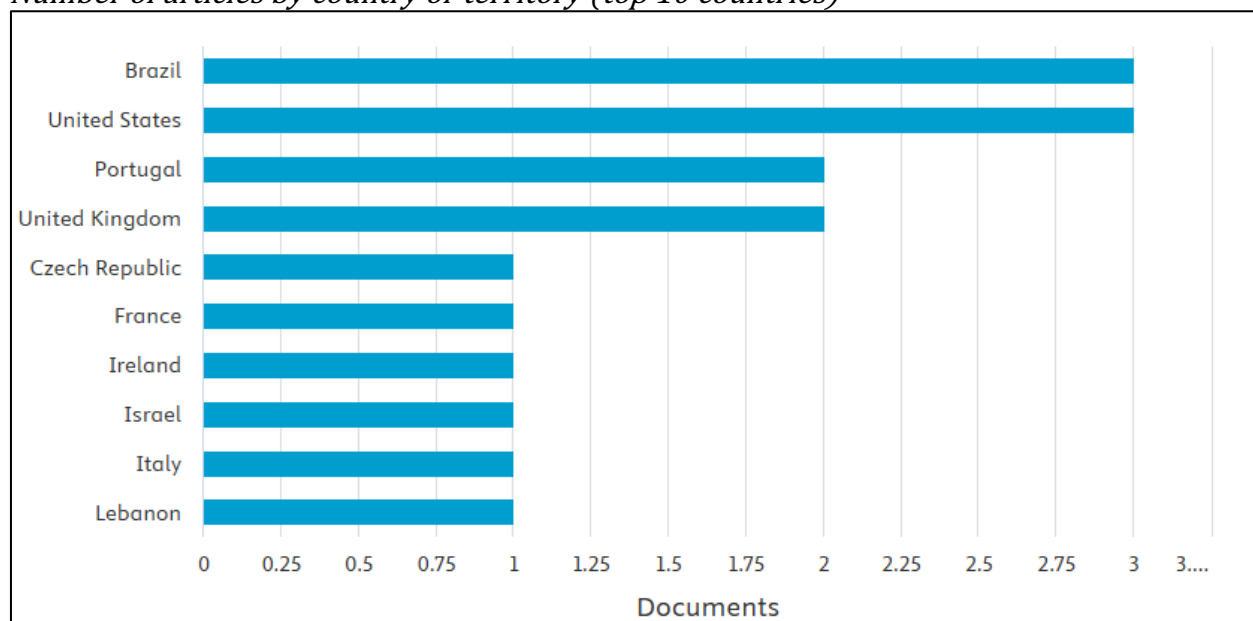
RQ2: How is the distribution of research investigations related to “digital populism”?

The analysis of research distribution across the 18 selected articles was conducted by categorising publications by country, region, institutional affiliation, journal source, and contributing authors, with the top 10 entries in each category. While mapping distribution provides a structural overview of the field, a deeper analytical interpretation is necessary to understand why certain countries dominate scholarly production on digital populism.

Geographically, academic studies on digital populism are predominantly concentrated in European and North American contexts, with significant contributions from Brazil (3 articles) and the United States (3 articles), followed by Portugal (2 articles) and the United Kingdom (2 articles). Additional contributions originate from the Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, and Lebanon, each represented by one article (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Number of articles by country or territory (top 10 countries)



Source: Scopus database (Author, 2025).

This pattern indicates a concentration of knowledge production in countries with strong academic ecosystems and intense political dynamics relating to digital populism. The dominance of Brazil and the United States, for example, not only reflects high research capacity but also suggests that these two countries serve as important empirical laboratories for the study of digital populism, owing to high social media penetration and sharp political polarisation. The smaller contributions from other countries indicate that research on digital populism remains fragmented and unevenly distributed globally, thereby opening up opportunities for further research, particularly in regions that are not yet significantly represented, such as Southeast Asia and Africa, to generate more contextual and comparative perspectives.

This concentration is not merely coincidental but closely aligned with major political developments over the past decade. In the United States, the rise of Donald Trump and his intensive use of Twitter (now X) as a direct communication channel fundamentally reshaped political communication scholarship, positioning digital populism at the centre of democratic debate. Similarly, in Brazil, the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro marked a pivotal moment in which social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, became central instruments for mobilising affective publics, disseminating nationalist narratives, and challenging mainstream media institutions. These political milestones likely spurred scholarly attention and shifted funding priorities, leading to a disproportionate concentration of research output in these regions.

Moreover, Western dominance in digital populism scholarship may reflect broader structural factors, including stronger research infrastructures, greater access to indexed journals, and the centrality of Western political crises within global media narratives. At the same time, platform dynamics differ significantly across regions. In Western contexts, populist communication often unfolds through highly visible platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, where algorithmic amplification and polarisation dynamics have been extensively documented. In contrast, in parts of the Global South, encrypted messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, along with informal digital networks, may play a more decisive role in shaping populist mobilisation, yet these dynamics remain under-theorised in mainstream communication scholarship.

The relative underrepresentation of Asian and broader Global South contexts, therefore, does not necessarily indicate the absence of digital populism, but rather highlights epistemic asymmetries in knowledge production. This imbalance suggests that the global mapping of digital populism remains incomplete and calls for more context-sensitive comparative research. Expanding inquiry beyond Western democracies would enable scholars to examine how digital populism interacts with hybrid regimes, emerging democracies, and distinct media ecosystems, thereby enriching both theoretical refinement and empirical generalisation.

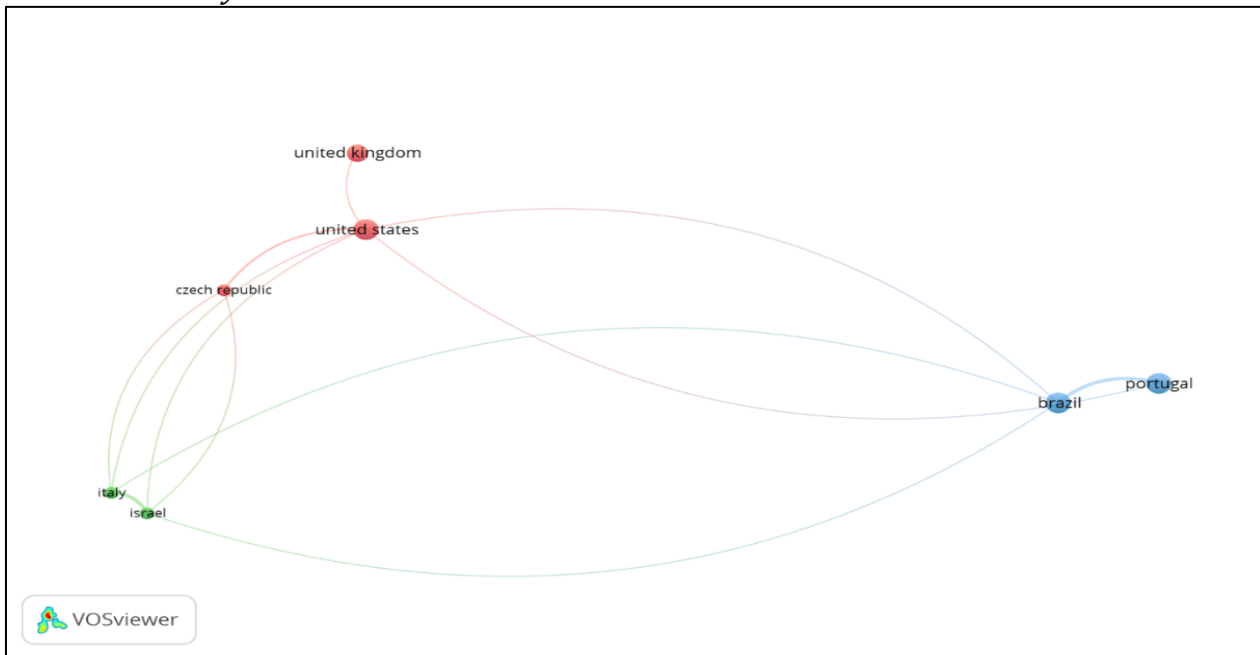
Beyond mapping country-level contributions, this study also analyses inter-country connections in digital populism research using VOSviewer software. This stage is crucial for formulating prospective research agendas and for understanding collaboration patterns and future directions in the development of digital populism studies. The VOSviewer network visualisation illustrates cross-national academic interrelations in examining the phenomenon of “digital populism” (see Figure 4).

The findings from the VOSviewer network visualisation indicate that studies on digital populism have attracted substantial attention, particularly in Western countries, with the strongest research linkages observed among Brazil, Portugal, the United States, and the United Kingdom. In addition, research connections also emerge from countries such as Italy, Israel, the Czech Republic, and France, signalling that the phenomenon of digital populism is not confined solely to American and Western European political contexts but has also extended into Eastern Europe and the Middle East. These results suggest that studies on digital populism are developing across diverse academic regions and reflect a growing global interest in

understanding the dynamics of populism in digital spaces and its implications for contemporary democracy.

Figure 4.

Network country visualisation



Source: Output VOSviewer Software (Author, 2025).

The distribution of research on digital populism by institutional affiliation appears relatively even, with each institution contributing one article. These institutions include Orient-Institut Beirut (Lebanon), Lusofona University (Portugal), Universidade da Beira Interior (Portugal), Universitatea din București (Romania), Università degli Studi di Perugia (Italy), Palacký University Olomouc (Czech Republic), Universidade Estadual Paulista “Júlio de Mesquita Filho” (Brazil), Koç University (Turkey), Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel), and the CNRS – Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (France) (see Figure 5).

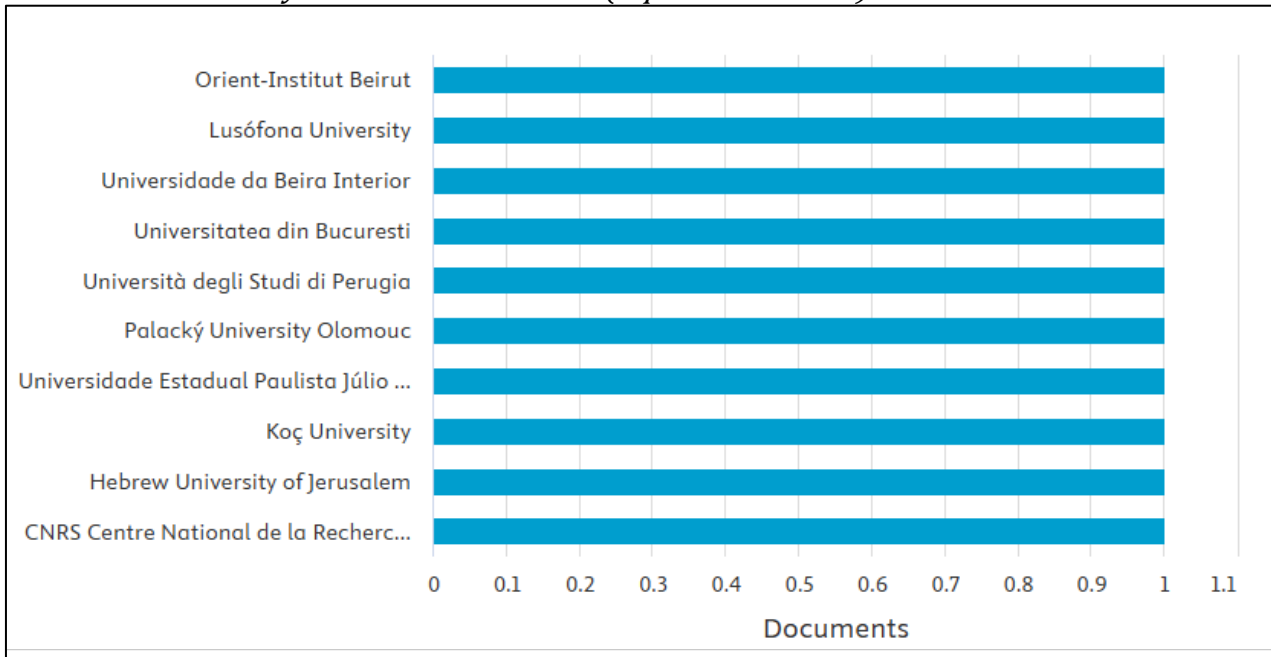
This pattern indicates a concentration of knowledge production in countries with strong academic ecosystems and intense political dynamics relating to digital populism. The dominance of Brazil and the United States, for example, not only reflects high research capacity but also suggests that these two countries serve as important empirical laboratories for the study of digital populism, owing to high social media penetration and sharp political polarisation. The smaller contributions from other countries indicate that research on digital populism remains fragmented and unevenly distributed globally, thereby opening up opportunities for further research, particularly in regions that are not yet significantly represented, such as Southeast Asia and Africa, to generate more contextual and comparative perspectives.

The distribution of studies on digital populism by institutional affiliation indicates that academic interest in this issue is widely dispersed and not concentrated in any single region or type of institution. Research on digital populism has been conducted by various institutions across Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. This distribution is reflected in the equal contribution of one article from each institution, namely Orient-Institut Beirut (Lebanon), Lusofona University (Portugal), Universidade da Beira Interior (Portugal), Universitatea din București (Romania), Università degli Studi di Perugia (Italy), Palacký University Olomouc (Czech Republic), Universidade Estadual Paulista “Júlio de Mesquita Filho” (Brazil), Koç University (Turkey), Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel), and the CNRS – Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (France) (see Figure 4). These findings indicate that scholarly attention to the phenomenon of digital populism emerges from a broad geographical and

institutional spectrum, reflecting the global nature of populism in digital spaces, which is not confined to any single political or cultural context.

Figure 5.

Number of articles by documents affiliation (top 10 affiliations)



Source: Scopus database (Author, 2025).

The distribution of research on digital populism based on publication sources also remains evenly spread, with one article each published in Civil Szemle, Communication Review, Communication and Society, Communication and the Public, Comunicación y Sociedad (Mexico), Critical Asian Studies, Cuadernos.Info, European Journal of Korean Studies, International Journal of Communication, and the International Journal of Press/Politics (see Figure 6).

Figure 6.

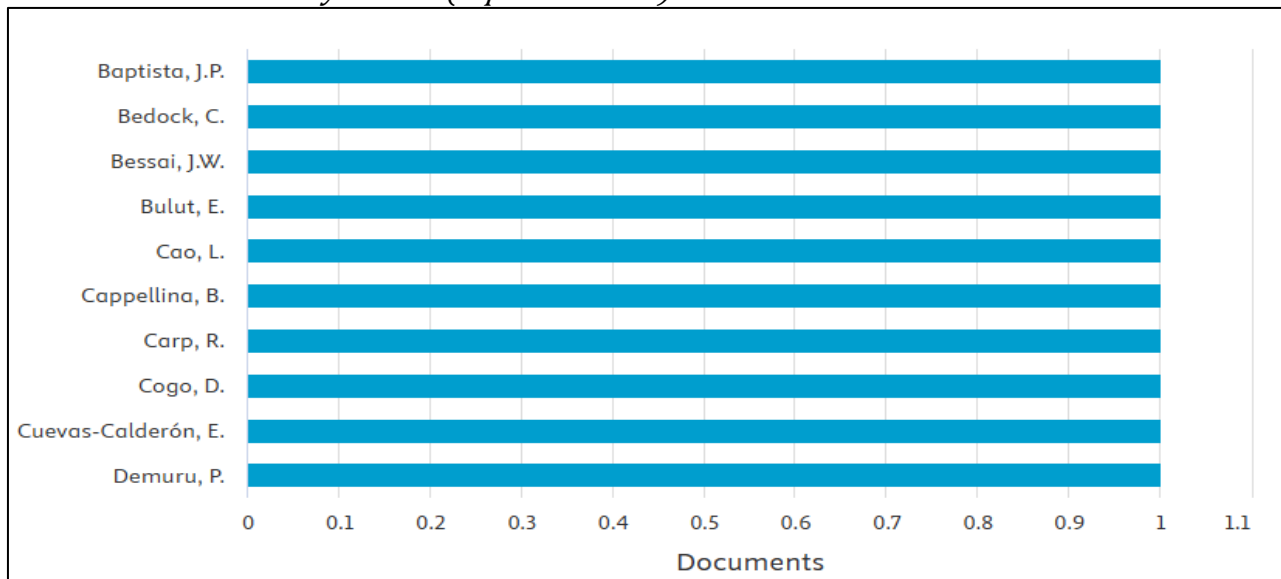
Number of articles by sources (top 10 sources)



Source: Scopus database (Author, 2025).

The distribution of research on “digital populism” based on authorship shows no clear dominance. Among the top 10 authors, Baptista, J. P.; Bedock, C.; Bessai, J. W.; Bulut, E.; Cao, L.; Cappelina, B.; Carp, R.; Cogo, D.; Cuevas-Calderon, E.; and Demuru, P.-each has contributed one article (see Figure 7).

Figure 7.
Count of Publications by author (top 10 authors)



Source: Scopus database (Author, 2025).

RQ3: What are the theoretical and practical implications from the perspective of future research?

This study was conducted on 18 manuscripts collected from the Scopus repository. VOSviewer was used to demonstrate that the findings of this research have both theoretical and practical implications for future studies on “digital populism”. Metadata analysis using VOSviewer helps researchers and practitioners gain a clearer understanding of the assumptions, approaches, and findings related to the dynamics of digital populism. The results of the bibliometric analysis also reveal research variables and themes that have been extensively examined, while identifying areas that remain underexplored, thereby providing a foundation for subsequent studies. From a practical perspective, these findings are expected to encourage the development of more comprehensive and sustainable research strategies in understanding the phenomenon of digital populism and its implications for political communication, the public sphere, and democracy at the global level.

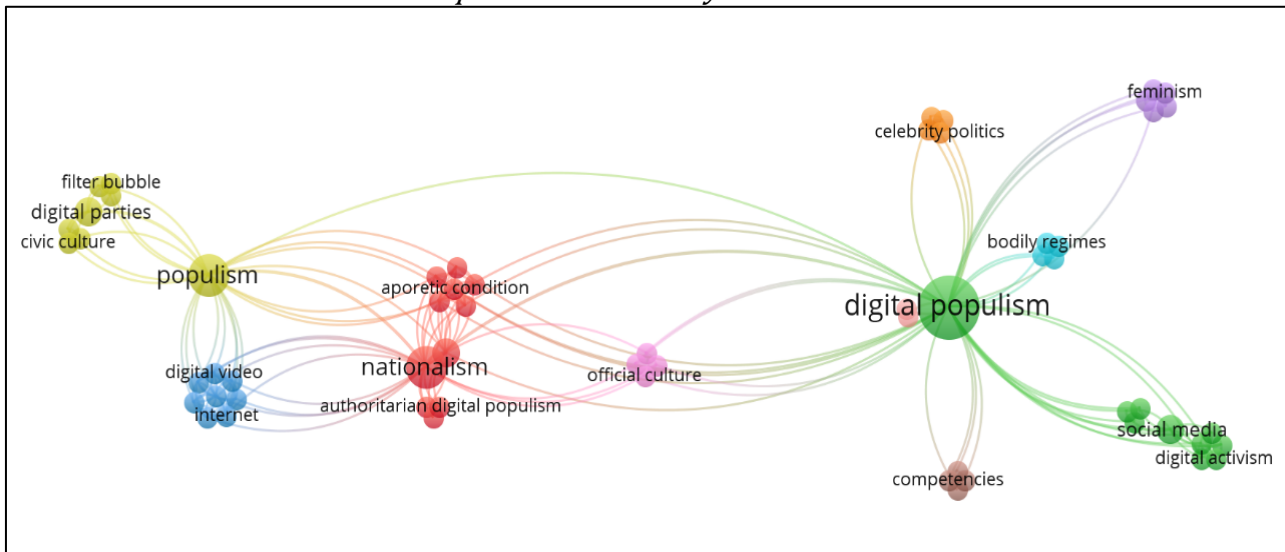
Based on Figure 8, the frequency of occurrence of research topics is as follows: digital populism (9), political communication (1), social media (2), techno-politics (1), digital activism (1), competencies (1), celebrity politics (1), official culture (1), feminism (1), authoritarian “digital populism” (1), nationalism (4), discourse analysis (2), aporetic condition (1), bodily regimes (1), digital video (1), internet (1), populism (4), digital parties (1), civic culture (1), and filter bubble (1).

This distribution of topic frequency indicates that while digital populism remains the central analytical anchor, the field is increasingly characterised by thematic fragmentation and interdisciplinary expansion. The relatively high co-occurrence of themes such as nationalism (4) and populism (4) suggests a strong conceptual linkage between identity politics and digital-mediated political expression, reinforcing the idea that digital populism often operates through the construction of collective identities and exclusionary narratives. At the same time, the presence of more specialised and less frequent topics—such as techno-politics, filter bubbles, and aporetic conditions—points to emerging micro-level analytical lenses that examine the epistemological and affective dimensions of digital political engagement. This pattern implies

that the scholarship is gradually moving beyond descriptive accounts toward more critical, theory-driven investigations, particularly in understanding how digital environments restructure power, discourse, and citizen competencies within contemporary democratic and non-democratic contexts.

Figure 8.

Co-occurrence framework and representation of key terms



Source: Output VOSviewer Software (Author, 2025).

Based on the results of thematic mapping and the analysis of prior studies, it is evident that research on digital populism primarily concentrates on core concepts such as digital populism (46), nationalism (28), and populism (27), as well as methodological approaches such as discourse analysis (13). In addition, there is a strong tendency toward the use of digital platforms and technologies, including social media, the internet, digital video, and online politics (each appearing 10 times), indicating that contemporary populism is understood as a political practice deeply embedded in the digital media ecosystem and online public sphere.

Table 2.

Keywords by authors

Rank	Keyword	Total link strength
1	digital populism	46
2	nationalism	28
3	populism	27
4	discourse analysis	13
5	digital video	10
6	internet	10
7	mass media	10
8	online politics	10
9	party politics	10
10	social media	10

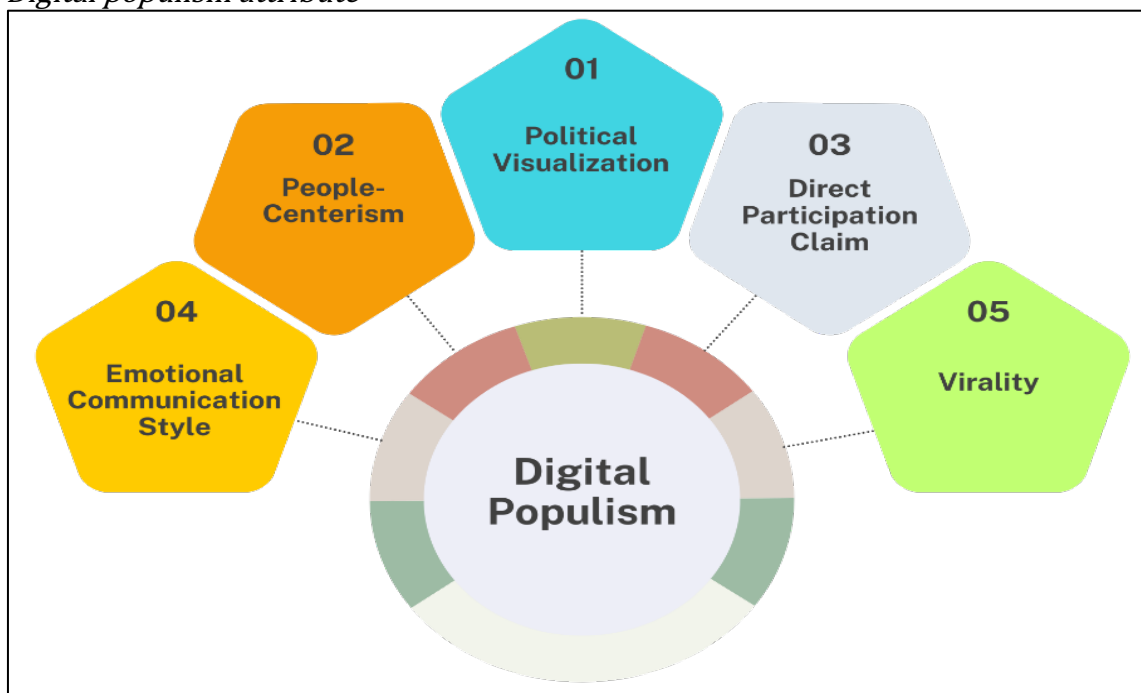
Source: Output VOSviewer Software (Author, 2025).

However, region-based studies and analyses grounded in more diverse social contexts remain insufficiently explored, particularly beyond Western countries that dominate the existing literature. Therefore, future research needs to broaden its geographical and social scope, including investigations into the dynamics of digital populism in the Global South and developing countries, to provide a more comprehensive, globally relevant understanding of its characteristics within the contemporary political landscape.

Findings from various studies on digital populism in political communication indicate that this phenomenon constitutes a multidimensional communication strategy, constructed through people-centrism, anti-elitism, emotional mobilisation, and the strategic use of digital media logic. The literature synthesised through a systematic literature review confirms that the effectiveness of digital populism is determined by political actors' ability to construct authentic, visually based images, activate collective emotions, and exploit virality and platform algorithms to expand message reach. Moreover, digital populism is characterised by discursive polarisation, claims of direct participation, and the deployment of technopolitical strategies that strengthen its influence in shaping public opinion and democratic dynamics. Based on the synthesised literature, these attributes consistently emerge as key indicators of digital populism and serve as an analytical foundation for understanding the dynamics of contemporary political communication in the visual and digital media era, as illustrated in Figure 9.

Figure 9.

Digital populism attribute



Source: Adapted from previous research (Bedock & Cappellina, 2024; Zanetti et al., 2025b; Prior, 2021; Trillò & Starita, 2025; Guo, 2018) (Author, 2025).

Digital populism refers to a pattern of political communication that leverages the digital media ecosystem to construct, disseminate, and reinforce populist narratives directly to the public. This phenomenon is distinguished by five interrelated attributes: people-centrism, which positions *“the people”* as the primary source of political legitimacy; an emotional communication style that emphasizes affect and symbolic proximity; political visualization as a means of constructing authentic and easily recognisable images; virality as a message-dissemination mechanism shaped by the algorithmic logic of digital platforms; and claims of direct participation, which assert citizens' involvement without mediation by traditional political institutions.

Beyond describing communicative features, these five attributes collectively update traditional political communication theories by demonstrating how digital infrastructures fundamentally reshape mediation, agenda-setting, and mobilisation processes. For instance, while classical mass mobilisation relied on party structures, broadcast media, and organised rallies, algorithm-driven virality enables rapid, networked, and often decentralised bursts of mobilisation triggered by engagement metrics and platform recommendation systems. In this sense, gatekeeping shifts from institutional media actors to algorithmic curation, and agenda-

setting becomes increasingly influenced by engagement intensity rather than editorial prioritisation. Similarly, emotional communication style intensifies affective framing, suggesting that political resonance in digital environments is not solely cognitive but deeply driven by emotional amplification. Political visualisation further expands personalisation theory by transforming leaders into continuously performed visual personas optimised for platform visibility.

These attributes underscore that digital populism operates not merely at an ideological level but through technologically mediated communication practices that maximise engagement, visibility, and algorithmic amplification. Within this framework, digital populism becomes audience-oriented and platform-conditioned, emphasising emotional bonding and collective identification while simultaneously exploiting the affordances of participatory architectures. The claim of direct participation, although framed as democratic inclusion, may also challenge deliberative democratic norms by bypassing institutional mediation and reinforcing polarised echo chambers.

The practical implications of this framework are equally significant. For policymakers, understanding the role of algorithmic virality and affective communication highlights the need for regulatory approaches that address transparency in recommendation systems and the amplification of emotionally charged political content. For platform developers, the five-attribute model offers a diagnostic lens for evaluating how design features such as ranking algorithms, sharing mechanisms, and visual affordances may unintentionally incentivise populist amplification. For future researchers, the framework provides a structured basis for operationalising digital populism in empirical studies, enabling comparative cross-national research and deeper investigation into how algorithmic systems interact with populist communication strategies across diverse sociopolitical contexts.

Political Visualisation

Political visualisation in the context of digital populism refers to the strategic use of visual content such as images, videos, memes, and digitally mediated storytelling to construct, disseminate, and legitimise populist narratives within digital media ecosystems. In the digital era, populist actors and their supporters increasingly engage in visual self-mediation, shifting political communication from elite-controlled traditional media to self-produced and self-broadcast visuals distributed through social media platforms, thereby enhancing visibility, authenticity, and claims of popular legitimacy (Moffitt, 2025). Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), and Instagram play a central role in democratising visual production while simultaneously enabling populist leaders to bypass journalistic gatekeepers, mobilise emotions, reframe national identity, and consolidate political support through polarising and affect-driven imagery (Barbabela, 2025; Boban & Kumar, 2024; Prior, 2024).

Within this framework, political visualisation functions as a narrative device, leveraging immersive digital storytelling to simplify complex political issues into emotionally resonant visual frames that reinforce the *“us versus them”* dichotomy characteristic of populist rhetoric, a process increasingly intensified by the use of generative and data-driven technologies (Goff, 2024; Mazzoni & Mincigrucchi, 2022). Moreover, algorithmic infrastructures amplify populist visual content by prioritising highly engaging and emotionally charged materials, allowing tailored messages to reach specific audiences and thereby strengthening mobilisation, polarisation, and opinion shaping (Guerrero-Solé et al., 2020; Vale, 2025). Consequently, political visualisation emerges as a core mechanism of digital populism, illustrating how visual communication, platform algorithms, and populist strategies intersect to transform contemporary political communication and pose significant challenges for democratic deliberation and regulation.

People Centrism

People-centrism in the context of digital populism refers to a communicative and ideological orientation that places *“the people”* at the core of political meaning-making, legitimacy, and action. The affordances of digital media significantly amplify this orientation. Digital platforms facilitate the construction of imagined communities in which individuals identify with a morally unified and authentic collective, often portrayed as hardworking, guided by common sense, and emotionally bonded through shared experiences both online and offline (Juarez Miro, 2025).

Within digital populism, people-centrism is enacted through a form of technological performance, whereby populist actors strategically employ controlled interactivity, participatory content, amateur aesthetics, and platform-specific features to simulate direct proximity and responsiveness to *“the people,”* while bypassing traditional media gatekeepers and political elites (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Guerrero-Solé et al., 2020). This process is closely intertwined with anti-elitist rhetoric and emotional polarisation, as digital media enable the continuous reproduction of antagonistic narratives that oppose *“the people”* to corrupt or disconnected elites, thereby fostering strong in-group cohesion and reinforcing populist identities through emotionally charged discourse (Barbabela, 2025; Jungherr et al., 2022). Moreover, in the era of personalised and data-driven politics, people-centrism is further strengthened by the use of real-time data analytics and AI-enabled communication strategies that allow populist leaders to tailor messages, co-create content with supporters, and perform a political self that mirrors the perceived values, emotions, and preferences of *“the people”* (Guerrero-Solé et al., 2020; Hong & Bhuiyan, 2024). As a result, people-centricism in digital populism emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon that reshapes political communication by combining collective identity construction, technological mediation, emotional mobilisation, and data-driven personalisation, while simultaneously posing challenges to democratic resilience through algorithmic polarisation and the erosion of deliberative norms.

Direct Participation Claim

The direct participation claim in the context of digital populism holds that citizens should exercise immediate, unmediated influence over political decision-making, a claim that is significantly reinforced by digital technologies and platform-based communication. Digital populism leverages online public spaces such as social media, messaging applications, and participatory platforms to blur the boundaries between the public sphere and everyday digital interaction, enabling populist leaders to communicate directly with supporters and present themselves as authentic conduits of the popular will (Adiga & Padmakumar, 2024; Mankulam, 2024). Rooted in a critique of representative democracy, the direct participation claim frames political institutions and intermediaries as obstacles to genuine popular sovereignty, promoting ideals of direct democracy in which citizens are portrayed as capable of expressing collective preferences without mediation (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018; Welp, 2022).

Digital platforms such as participatory decision-making systems exemplify this logic by enabling users to submit proposals, endorse arguments, and engage in online deliberation, thereby symbolically expanding access to political participation (Lopes et al., 2025; Serramia et al., 2019). However, empirical studies, particularly on the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, demonstrate a persistent tension between the rhetoric of direct participation and its institutional realisation, as early commitments to digital direct democracy were gradually undermined by organisational centralisation and leadership control (Bedock & Cappellina, 2024; Vakhrushev, 2024). Consequently, within digital populism, the direct participation claim often functions less as a fully realised democratic practice and more as a strategic narrative that legitimises populist authority through the promise of immediacy, empowerment, and popular control, while simultaneously risking exclusion, unequal participation, and the consolidation of power behind the façade of digital democracy.

Emotional Communication Style

The emotional communication style in the context of digital populism refers to a strategic mode of political communication in which emotions are deliberately mobilised to attract attention, foster identification, and stimulate political engagement through digital platforms. Empirical studies show that populist actors frequently rely on negative emotions such as fear, anger, resentment, and uncertainty directed toward political elites, immigrants, supranational institutions, or perceived out-groups, as a means of generating emotional polarisation and reinforcing the antagonistic “*us versus them*” narrative that lies at the core of populist discourse (Alonso-Muñoz & Casero-Ripollés, 2023; Prior, 2021). At the same time, positive emotions such as pride, hope, and joy are often associated with the populist leader and their movement, enhancing the leader's likability and strengthening affective bonds with supporters, as observed in the digital communication strategies of figures such as Matteo Salvini and other European populist leaders (Bobba, 2019).

Digital platforms, particularly Facebook, X, and Instagram, facilitate this emotional style by enabling direct, personalised, and multimodal communication that combines text, images, video, and sound to produce immersive affective experiences (Pettersson & Martikainen, 2025; Sintes-Olivella et al., 2020). Case studies of actors such as André Ventura and Donald Trump further demonstrate how emotion-driven messaging is used to mobilise outrage, construct collective identity, and consolidate political support in highly polarised digital environments (Barbabela, 2025; Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benítez-Castro, 2022). Moreover, the emotional communication style of digital populism is shaped by platform logics and cultural contexts, resulting in variations across countries and political systems while consistently contributing to algorithmic amplification, affective polarisation, and challenges to democratic deliberation (Lin et al., 2024).

Virality

Virality in the context of digital populism refers to the rapid and expansive circulation of political content across digital platforms, primarily driven by the persuasive and affective qualities of the content itself rather than by the prominence of individual influencers. Studies on social networks show that virality is strongly shaped by linguistic and communicative features that stimulate emotional and cognitive engagement, making certain messages more likely to be widely shared, reproduced, and amplified in online environments (Guerini et al., 2011; Strapparava et al., 2011). In digital populism, virality becomes a central mechanism through which populist rhetoric gains visibility and political impact, as populist actors strategically use social media to bypass traditional gatekeepers, mobilise supporters, and construct leadership legitimacy through direct and emotionally charged communication in digital public spaces (Arslan, 2025; Mankulam, 2024). The logic of virality is reinforced through engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, which function as interpretive cues that shape user perceptions of controversy and encourage further sharing, thereby accelerating the diffusion of politically polarising narratives (Na, 2026).

Empirical evidence indicates that populist messages often achieve virality by activating high-intensity emotions, particularly anger, pride, and indignation, especially when framed around contentious issues such as immigration, security, and elite betrayal, which generate stronger mobilisation and high-threshold interactions like sharing (Domínguez-García et al., 2025; Gerbaudo et al., 2023). Moreover, virality in digital populism is frequently intertwined with the circulation of propaganda, neo-propaganda, and disinformation, as digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of fake news narratives that delegitimise opponents, reinforce ideological divides, and shape perceptions of electoral legitimacy (Kundu & Nagariya, 2025; Maweu, 2024; Vieira et al., 2025). Consequently, virality operates not merely as a technical feature of online communication but as a strategic engine of digital populism that amplifies populist discourse, intensifies polarisation, and transforms contemporary political communication dynamics.

Conclusion

This study investigates the scholarly development of digital populism in the field of political communication by applying a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and a bibliometric analysis of the Scopus database. Drawing on the PRISMA-guided screening process, the review identified 18 eligible journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, indicating that research on digital populism remains relatively limited but shows a clearer upward trajectory after 2021.

Firstly, the findings demonstrate that the concept of digital populism has evolved from early discussions centred on networked resistance and online activism into a broader analytical framework that explains how populist communication is strategically produced, circulated, and amplified through social media infrastructures and platform logics. *Secondly*, the distribution of publications shows that research attention is still concentrated in Western-oriented contexts, with strong contributions from countries such as Brazil and the United States. At the same time, scholarly exploration in Asia and other Global South regions remains comparatively underrepresented. *Thirdly*, bibliometric mapping suggests that dominant thematic clusters revolve around key terms such as “digital populism”, “nationalism”, and “populism”, alongside methodological orientations such as discourse analysis, confirming that “digital populism” is increasingly recognised as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by both communication strategies and technological dynamics. *Fourthly*, the synthesis of literature highlights that “digital populism” is consistently characterised by five interrelated attributes—people-centrism, emotional communication style, political visualisation, virality, and direct participation claim—which together form a conceptual foundation for explaining how populist actors generate legitimacy, mobilise affective publics, and influence democratic practices within algorithmic media ecosystems.

Finally, this study acknowledges several limitations, particularly reliance on Scopus-indexed, English-language publications, which may limit generalizability and exclude relevant regional scholarship. In addition, the use of a specific search term, limited to “digital populism,” may have narrowed the corpus's scope, potentially excluding relevant studies that employ related concepts such as “online populism,” “social media populism,” or related terminology in digital political communication research. While this focused strategy was intentionally adopted to maintain conceptual precision and analytical coherence, it may have reduced the overall sample size. Future research is therefore encouraged to broaden search terms and to incorporate additional databases, such as Web of Science (WoS), to enhance data coverage, strengthen comparative robustness, and provide a more comprehensive mapping of global scholarship on populism in digital environments.

Therefore, future studies are encouraged to integrate additional databases and expand comparative inquiry across diverse sociopolitical contexts, including emerging democracies, to refine theoretical understanding and strengthen empirical insights into the global dynamics of “digital populism”.

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