‘They don’t care about you, me or anyone else’: populist storytelling in anti-lockdown protests

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the study of populism and populist social movements by emphasising the centrality of Manichaeism and conspiracy theories for populism. It reveals how these elements emerge organically from within the populist storytelling of a new wave of populist mobilisation, anti-lockdown protests, alongside identifying key narratives that collectively increase the ‘tellability’ of populist stories. Based on go-along interviews and participant observation during anti-lockdown protests in three cities of the UK, we identified four *key narratives* informing populist storytelling in the protests: Protesters believed that they are the (1) *truth-tellers*, who wake the people up to the truth that the pandemic is the result of a plot, as well as the (2) *heroes*, who oppose the *villain-elites* enacting the plot – a societal

(3) *crisis* – through the imposition of lockdowns and restrictions. While engaged in a moral struggle, the protesters were motivated by (4) *the promise* of averting the crisis and returning to normality. Our findings further our understanding of how joint grievances surrounding a threatening pandemic coalesced into a coherent populist narrative expressed by a protest movement.

Keywords:

COVID-19 pandemic; anti-lockdown protests; populism; storytelling; populist social movements

1. Introduction

Populist attitudes are on the rise, and the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new wave of populist mobilisation on a global scale, namely the anti-lockdown protests (Bratich, 2021; Vieten, 2020). Anti-lockdown protests are a novel populist social movement that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic and that vehemently opposed government mandated public health measures and restrictions such as vaccination campaigns and national lockdowns. Although most governments have increasingly eased national lockdown measures, the movement's political influence has only increased, as the November 2024 United States (US) presidential election has recently proved. US President Donald Trump and his cabinet appointee Robert Kennedy Jr have regularly broadcasted anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine messages (Hughes, 2024;

Russel, 2023). Anti-lockdown messages are likewise becoming normalised in Germany thanks to the German far-right (Heinze & Weisskircher, 2023). These developments suggest that the anti-lockdown ideas are being accepted by wider populations, which in turn suggests the need for a deeper understanding of the grievance narratives associated with this social movement and its cultures.

Anti-lockdown protests in the United Kingdom (UK) have emerged on the backdrop of rising anti-expertise and anti-establishment narratives that dominated much of the post-Brexit political debate (Foster & Feldman, 2021; Hall, 2023). These protests surfaced from a milieu of disillusionment, due to the failures of Brexit and austerity (Flinders, 2018; Hall, 2023), and found in post-Brexit Britain a favourable ground for expressing grievances about the political establishment. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities (Vieten, 2020), which favoured an increase in protest participation for those who experienced relative financial deprivation (Burciu & Hutter, 2023). Populist movements often emerge in response to a perceived disconnect between elites and the people, frequently manifesting in their rejection of legacy media and mainstream politics (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

The first COVID-19 cases (end of January 2020) were met by a weak reaction from the UK government. Weeks later, as the pandemic started spreading through Europe, the government advised Britons to forego non-essential travel but imposed no other restrictions. The first restrictions were imposed, including a ‘stay-at-home’ policy, only after the first deaths were recorded in March 2020, with many more deaths

predicted by a report from the Imperial College London (Sahin & Ianosev, 2021). In response, anti-lockdown protesters took to the streets after March 2020 to express their opposition to the restrictions and, eventually, to the national lockdowns. Once the first COVID-19 vaccines were announced for 2021, subsequent protests also incorporated a strong opposition to vaccination mandates and travel requirements for proof of vaccination.

Existing research on anti-lockdown protests has mainly investigated potential links between anti-lockdown protests and political parties in different places (Curley et al., 2022; Volk & Weisskircher, 2024; Wheeler, 2020). This covers the relationship between far-right populism and anti-lockdown protests in Spain (Wheeler, 2020), pre-existing far-right organisations and the anti-lockdown/vaccine protests during the pandemic in Germany (Volk und Weisskircher, 2024), and how the far-right unsuccessfully tried to capitalize on the alternative network structure created by anti-lockdown groups in Ireland to disseminate far-right ideas in the wider anti-lockdown communities (Curley et al., 2022).

Existing scholarship also points to a connection between anti-lockdown narratives, populism and conspiracy theories (Curley et al., 2022; Pickel et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories are stigmatised bodies of knowledge that are not normalised and that explain the world in terms of social calamities caused by alleged plots of evil elites that threaten the very existence of ordinary citizens (Kondor, 2024). Previous research focused

on the potential relationship between populism and conspiracy theories (Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Uscinski, 2018), and generally conceded a smaller role for conspiracy theories inside populist rhetoric (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Markou, 2022; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). At the same time, little research within the social movements literature tackled the role of conspiracy theories in mobilising protesters (Bertuzzi, 2021). It therefore remains unclear what roles conspiracy theories play in UK's anti-lockdown social movement.

Likewise, some bodies of research point to a central role of Manichaeism in populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014), while others suggest a secondary role for Manichaeism, as a potential but not necessary co-dimension of populism (Erisen et al., 2021; Ostiguy & Casullo, 2017). Manichaeism is a dualistic worldview, where society is starkly divided between two opposing groups (the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite'), which frames the struggle between these groups as a battle between good and evil. In populist rhetoric, this moralised dichotomy simplifies complex issues, delegitimizes opponents, and galvanises support by appealing to an inherent sense of justice for 'the people' (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). However, it remains unclear what role Manichaeism plays in shaping the populist narratives of the anti-lockdown social movement within the UK (Foster & Feldman, 2021; Vieten, 2020).

The present paper aims to address these gaps by making several contributions to the literature on populism, populist storytelling, and populist social movements. First, this paper contributes to the populist social movements literature (Aslanidis, 2016; Volk, 2023), with an analysis of

how the pandemic and pandemic restrictions in the UK are imagined and narrated by anti-lockdown protesters, using ethnographic observations in London, Bristol and Glasgow, and interviews in the anti-lockdown protests in London.

Second, the paper follows anti-lockdown narratives by paying close attention to populist storytelling patterns and key narrative themes (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022), as well as plot devices and populist tropes. Focusing on the populist storytelling of anti-lockdown narratives helps us unveil the evolution of collective and multiple grievances that united anti-lockdown protesters and galvanised them in the protest spaces (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). A focus on storytelling presents two main opportunities. First, storytelling represents the principal means by which individuals and communities understand the world around them (Gottschall, 2012). Localised stories of discontent can resonate across groups and unite multiple demographics (Polletta & Callahan, 2019), which could forge collective identity narratives (Frischmann et al., 2014).

Second, storytelling also plays a crucial role in the construction of both populist narratives (Polletta & Callahan, 2019) and conspiracy theories (Bonetto & Arciszewski, 2021). In this paper, storytelling helped us identify plot devices that reflect a Manichaean worldview and conspiracy theories as mobilisers of anti-lockdown protesters over two years. Our findings furthermore contribute to ongoing debates about the roles of

Manichaeism in populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2014; Ostiguy & Casullo, 2017; Pirro & Taggart, 2023), by proposing a central role for both Manichaeism and conspiracy theories as powerful plot drivers indispensable for populist narratives.

Our initial observations from legacy and social media uncovered a pro-freedom anti-restrictions inclination of protests in the UK. 'Freedom' has long been championed by far-right populist parties advocating for radical liberalism and the significant reduction of the role of the state (Betz, 1993). We therefore expected to encounter a far-right ideological component in UK's anti-lockdown protests.

Finally, we discuss the normalisation of stigmatised knowledge (Kondor, 2024) in the populist storytelling of anti-lockdown protesters in lieu of the normalisation of protester theory (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001). This strand of research shows that protests have recently become more heterogeneous in terms of the socio-economic status, political ideology and social identities of those involved (Peterson et al., 2018; Quaranta, 2014; Saunders & Shlomo, 2021; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001). In what follows, the article first lays out its theoretical framework on populism and populist social movements, followed by its methodology resting on a narrative analysis of interview and participant observation data collected in anti-lockdown protests, which feeds our subsequent findings section. We present the uncovered populist narratives in the 'key narratives' subsection of the 'findings' section, followed by our discussion and conclusions.

2. Theoretical framework: populism as storytelling

Scholars of populism (e.g. Mudde, 2017; Weyland, 2017) agree that a thin-centred ideology constitutes a core dimension of populism. This feature is sometimes called 'the lowest common denominator' of populism (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022). A thin-centred ideology is typically, but not always, accompanied by the Manichaean opposition between the people and the elite (Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Ostiguy & Casullo, 2017). Populism is typically used by pragmatic politicians as a rhetorical strategy to create convincing narratives that win over voters (Weyland, Citation2017), by arousing their emotions, quelling anxieties, and increasing psychological well-being (Oliver & Wood, 2018).

Populist storytelling is delivered through narratives that depict powerful elites as hateful others that encroach on the rights and well-being of the people, whom only the populists can defeat (Kinnvall, 2018). The narratives of populist storytelling revolve around a key event that disrupts existing equilibria and interprets complex societal outcomes as an antagonism between heroes and villains, where the heroes need to overcome a societal crisis to attain the promise of a utopian future. This narrative structure exhibits a high degree of 'tellability', which increases the success of populist ideas (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022).

Populist narratives benefit from plot devices that further contribute to their tellability. For instance, Manichaeism is a tried and tested plot device originating in antiquity (BeDuhn, 2017) that remains widespread in storytelling practices (Eberl, 2020). Likewise, 'the champion' theme is a powerful plot device of historical notoriety with origins in antiquity, which was later adopted by populism (Kelsey, 2016). In populist narratives, the champion of the people is typically a 'charismatic truth-teller' or hero, who takes on the establishment of powerful villains (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). The same 'hero as truth-teller' typology is also used in far-right populist environmentalism, where the 'unheard prophet' is a hero, who reveals the truth about a people's sacred relation to its land but who is opposed by the liberal and leftist establishment, the villains of the story, who are spearheading politically correct but philosophically corrupt climate policies (Olsen & Forchtner, 2024).

Populist narratives are typically told by charismatic political figureheads, such as Nigel Farage, UK's foremost far-right populist politician, that act as beacons of hope for the people. Farage was previously depicted by legacy media as a champion of the people and as possessing archetypal traits of hero mythology (Kelsey, 2016). Less frequently, populist narratives can also emerge organically from leaderless social movements (Aslanidis, 2016, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2023). Here, the heroes and truth tellers become the social movement itself. Populist social movements channel individual grievances into collective narratives independent of populist parties (Aslanidis, 2017; Bergem, 2023). For

instance, the French Yellow Vests movement portrayed itself as a spokesperson for the ‘people’, demanding concessions from the ‘corrupt elite’ (Bergem,2023).

Populist storytelling and conspiracy theories share the common quality of being highly tellable. Existing research shows that conspiracy theories can also be understood as ‘fictional creativity’ (Bonetto & Arciszewski, 2021). Conspiracy theories include a strong component of creativity because they conform to the criteria of originality and value that usually describe creative fiction. Conspiracy theories are original narratives that purport to explain world events that go beyond normative knowledge, such as shape-shifting aliens secretly controlling the world. Conspiracy theories also have aesthetic value across dimensions of style, simplicity and resolution, which increase their tellability (Bonetto & Arciszewski, 2021). Both conspiracy theories and populist narratives explain world events in affective, closure-inducing storytelling (Munro, 2024; Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022), and include Manichaeism among their features (Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Eberl et al., 2021), with some scholars even proposing conspiracism to be a central feature of populist discourse (Fenster, 2008).

3. Methodology

COVID-19 was the first major pandemic for many generations, creating a societal crisis on a global scale. Due to the novelty of this protest reaction to such an unprecedented event, we expected that social movements arising from this crisis would differ from previous movements in terms of ideologies and demographics. The emergence in the news of the first anti-lockdown protests in the US, which coincided with the announcement of the first protests for the UK, sparked our interest and informed our pilot study of the protests consisting initially of field observations, complemented by participant interviews at a later stage. To examine populist storytelling in anti-lockdown protests, we gathered empirical data in 2021 and 2022 in three cities of the UK; London, Glasgow and Bristol. We attended eight anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine passport protests over ten months between March 2021 and January 2022. Amongst these, six were in London (20 March 2021, 24 April 2021, 29 May 2021, 5 June 2021, 18 December 2021, 22 January 2022), one in Glasgow (24 April 2021) and one in Bristol (10 April 2021).

After gaining familiarity with the social movement and taking field notes, we collected thirty-three semi-structured interviews (N = 33) in three protests in London (see Table A1 in the Appendix for basic information on participants). We chose London as the space of interviews since we realised in the first few protests that we attended that anti-lockdown communities started travelling to London from different cities and areas as London protests were the largest anti-lockdown protests in the country. Additionally, the London protest demographics were more representative and diverse in comparison to Glasgow and Bristol. We asked participants about their motivations and reasons to join the

protests and their political backgrounds and practices, their previous political activities and ideologies and their views about the policies related to the pandemic and the social and political issues related to it.

We used the go-along interview method, an established method for participant engagement with local spaces that includes mingling with participants while engaging in natural protest activities (Hein et al., 2008). Go-along interviews enabled us to acculturate to the protest climate and navigate the social sphere wherein anti-lockdown meaning-making was emerging. Our ethnographic observations helped us to contextualise the input we received from our participants via interviews, thus connecting their expressions and practices to the visual and kinetic aspects of the protests, such as chants and banners. Go-along interviews helped us gain a sense of trust amongst the participants, otherwise difficult to attain due to the widespread distrust for institutions harboured by protesters. We received oral consent to record the interviews before going ahead, which we then transcribed while assigning a pseudonym for each participant to maintain anonymity.

We used narrative analysis to identify the key narratives in the storytelling of anti-lockdown protesters. Narratives are natural ways by which humans understand themselves and the world around them (Gottschall, 2012) and they feature in politics and populism as ways of interpreting unsettling outcomes (Oliver & Wood, 2018). We first assembled each participant's narrative based on the interviews, field notes and other additional materials supplied by the participants such as flyers. Through multiple readings of materials and building on the research

by Nordensvard and Ketola (2022), we analysed in these materials the following components of populist narratives: (1) the actors. We focused on how the protesters defined themselves and their aims. Their definitions told us whether they saw themselves as the 'true/pure people' and/or 'truth-tellers' against the 'corrupt elite'; (2) the setting/environment. Populist storytelling depicts the world as a place of 'social calamities caused by alleged plots of evil elites that threaten the very existence of ordinary citizens'. We analysed whether participants define the world similarly and identify villains in this space; (3) the crisis. Populist narratives revolve around a societal crisis, which we also identified in the text through our participants' framing of the pandemic and pandemic restrictions; (4) resolution. In the text, we focused on the proposed outcomes or goals embedded in the narrative of our interviewees. Associated with each of these four components, we identified four distinct key populist narratives within our materials.

4. Findings

4.1. Freedom beyond ideology in anti-lockdown storytelling

Our expectation of uncovering a far-right inclination within anti-lockdown storytelling was not supported by our findings. While we did find a strong emphasis on concerns for freedom, these only targeted pandemic restrictions and lockdowns, and hence did not conform to the far-right populist focus on the reduction of the state (Betz, 1993). Despite encountering sporadic markers of the far-right, such as a protester in

Bristol wearing a cap with the inscription ‘Make England Great Again’, and anti-state signs in Glasgow such as ‘Sovereign and Free’, our participants’ overall reaction to the unprecedented uncertainty associated with COVID-19 – and the reaction of protesters at large – was ideologically heterogenous and targeted the government and state only on issues specifically related to pandemic restrictions, vaccines, and lockdowns.

Our findings diverge from previous research (Kondor, 2024) by showing that conspiracy theories of the pandemic were not solely confined to the ideological far-right but also featured among participants from different ideologies. The diversity of messages mirrored our participants’ ideologically heterogenous leanings, ranging from favouring the Labour Party, the Conservatives, through the LibDems and UKiP, and ending up with boycotting voting altogether. These findings are more in line with the normalisation of protester theory (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001) and with previous research on populist social movements (Bergem, 2023). This diversity of views bears testament to the power of populist storytelling in moving past ideological boundaries to galvanise a protest movement.

4.2. Anti-lockdown key narratives

Anti-lockdown storytelling rests on narratives about a major disruption enforced by pandemic villains or the 'corrupt elite' in the guise of national lockdowns and COVID-19 vaccine rollouts, which aim to control 'the people'. Based on our interview questions and ethnographic observations about protesters' reasons and motivations for going against the lockdowns and vaccine passports, we identified four recurrent key narratives typical of populist storytelling. We argue that the slogans and banners displayed at the protests also reinforced these narratives.

4.2.1. The truth

Unlike orthodox scenarios that emphasise the role of charismatic leaders in generating populist stories as truth-tellers that try to mobilise the general public against elites, the role of 'truth-tellers' in anti-lockdown protests in the UK was performed by the protesters themselves. Our participants showcased a strong emphasis on the key narrative of 'waking up' to the truth, which identifies the official public health information and recommendations as doubtful and suspicious. Amara recounted:

> I am here because I know that there are people who are extremely keen about learning the truth here, at least questioning what is given to them. And this is a place where you get encouraged when you see other people's willingness to question things. A lot of the time, I see many truthful, honest doctors but they are just squashed and discredited. There is no scientific conversation between

anyone. It is like ‘you need to believe this, hear what we say, do what we tell you’ and if you don’t do it, you are an anti-vaxxer, you are a conspiracy theorist – all these negative words.

Amara felt marginalised by the elite and political mainstream, which brought a sense of belonging to the like-minded community of anti-lockdown protesters, who shared their perception. Amara identified the anti-lockdown community as truth-seekers that navigate the unilateral informational environment of official institutions. Specifically, anti-lockdown protesters were highly sceptical of public health communication. Amara was particularly suspicious of the perceived ‘tone’ of the public communication of pandemic information, and highlighted that any dissenting views, even those coming from other experts, were being discredited.

The narratives of our interviewees varied slightly when they talked about awakening the public to the truth. While Amara was balanced in their questioning of pandemic information, other participants were more proactive and steadfast. Some anti-lockdown protesters emphasised the need to reach the general public with a neutral tone, while others decried the restriction-adhering public as unsuspecting ‘sheep,’ urging them to ‘wake up’ by accepting anti-lockdown ideas. For instance, anti-lockdown protesters in Glasgow, London, and Bristol called the general public to wake up by chanting lyrics from a popular song by Bob Marley and the Wailers: ‘wake up, stand up, stand up for your rights’, contributing to a rather upbeat mood and general positivity that best describes these protests. In Bristol, two protesters had percussion instruments that

accompanied the upbeat songs and chants creating an overall joyous atmosphere. Likewise, in Glasgow there were mobile loudspeakers in the backpacks of marching protesters, playing upbeat music. John recounted:

> People are starting to wake up. I mean, since all of this started back last year, I realised there was something going on and each time learning a little bit more about why it's happening.

John stressed the importance of protesting and questioning dominant narratives and referred to his process of having a different understanding of what was going on as ‘waking up’. John welcomed the circulation of anti-lockdown ideas through various media, such as smartphone apps, onsite banners, and physical newspapers shared within the anti-lockdown community, which helped establish anti-lockdown storytelling as commonly shared truth.

4.2.2. Heroes and villains

In populist storytelling, the narrative revolves around a negative societal event that divides society into protagonists, who adopt specific roles such as heroes and villains (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). Our interviews showed that protesters, acting as the collective heroes of the movement, sought to advance the interests of the people. This is commensurate with previous studies on populist social movements, emphasising that the protesters often champion the interests of the people in populist movements (Aslanidis, 2016, 2017). This made anti-lockdown protesters both heroes of the people as well as the people themselves.

Anti-lockdown narratives portray protesters inside the signifier as 'the virtuous people' in opposition to the corrupted '1 per cent' of 'the elite'. This was evidenced by banners that read: 'We are the 99 per cent', which was one of the slogans that enjoyed high circulation in all three cities. Georgie recounted that anti-lockdown protests are 'a literal popular force', while Florian emphasised the common perception among our interviewees that anti-lockdown protests facilitate 'what the people want'. Here, people are considered to be a homogenous group with similar desires and interests. About the organisers of the protests, Sam recounted that they were 'the people themselves', suggesting that these were spontaneous protests with no obvious leaders but rather that the social movement itself channelled the collective grievances of protesters, which is common to populist social movements (Aslanidis, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2023).

Villains are selected to the extent that they can be plausibly linked to the meaningful event (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). The villains that the anti-lockdown discourse highlights are public figures, private companies, and institutions credibly linked to pandemic restrictions and the vaccine rollout, such as the UK government, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and pharmaceutical companies due to their perceived funding and their potential of developing vaccines. To this end, Helen recounted, 'I think it is really concerning the Bill and Gates Foundation […] owns part of the Guardian. The powerful own the media.' Likewise, Anton expressed their concerns about the British Public Broadcaster (BBC) and 'mainstream media' receiving money from Bill Gates and pharmaceutical companies, which requires them to conform to the secret 'agenda' of their donors. While it is true that companies consolidate media ownership and that the power of media corporations has been increasing in economic and political terms (Pickard, 2013), the concerns of our research participants such as Anton about the media ownership in relation to the Bill Gates Foundation, vaccines and lockdowns did not correspond to factual information at the time of writing. As Anton recounted:

> BBC is terribly corrupt, and they won't even report this protest. They receive money from Bill Gates, they're not impartial. The general mainstream media is not trustworthy, they have an agenda. They get money from pharmaceutical companies and their owners.

Anton's account reflects distrust and distancing from legacy media, in line with prototypically populist grievances that 'the elites' have been compromised by special interests (Akkerman et al., 2014; Kaltwasser et al., 2017), resulting in political alienation as well as anti-establishment and anti-expertise attitudes (Oliver & Rahn, 2016).

Ada recounted, 'I don't believe in politicians, they are corrupt', subscribing to the populist trope that politicians are inherently corrupt and that their only aim is to further their personal interests instead of the best interests of those who elected them (Akkerman et al., 2014; Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Angie identified the then prime minister Boris Johnson as one of the evil elites representing the establishment, which are in opposition to the 'people', while Rowan, Rob, and Georgie all expressed concerns that institutions such as the government, the media, or the judiciary are corrupted by the secret agenda of the pandemic villains. Protesters' signs and slogans conveyed similar anti-establishment messages, such as 'Boris Johnson is a fascist', 'Stop World Economic Forum', and 'The Government is the Virus.'

Many participants also voiced their categorical distrust of media and politicians, which anti-lockdown protesters deem partakers in the evil plot of pandemic villains. For instance, Claire recounted:

If the news comes on, I get some news but, on the whole, I just switch off when they appear, because I just think they are lying to us.

Claire operationalised a thin-centred ideological view on the pandemic and lockdowns, while siding with 'the people' against the elite. Moreover, Claire, similar to Ada and other participants, showed a dismissal and distancing from the messages conveyed by actors of the establishment. According to Ada and Claire, 'they'(i.e. the government and legacy media) 'lie' to 'the people'. Our research participants thus described elites as a homogenous group that is corrupt and greedy, a typical populist qualifier for the elite (Mudde,

4.2.3. The crisis

Populist narratives revolve around a societal and political crisis that needs to be overcome by the heroes of the people, who share the truth about the origin of the crisis (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). The narratives of anti-lockdown protesters also centre on a crisis, which they think is created by national governments'-imposed restrictions on personal freedoms. Protesters widely promoted concerns for the freedom from lockdowns. For instance, a protester in Bristol referenced a quote by well-known libertarian journalist Hunter S Thompson, 'Freedom is something that dies if it's not used. HST', by displaying it on the back of his leather jacket. Matthias pointed out:

> It's quite obvious that […] it's some kind of program that is not for life. It's [the lockdown] not for the reasons they projected, and it's caused a lot of pain and suffering in me, my family and everybody else.

Matthias suggested that the reason for enforcing vaccination campaigns and lockdowns did not rest on the desire to stop the pandemic but on the desire to control the people according to the hidden agenda of pandemic villains. Even though this narrative obfuscates the real disruption created by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is commensurate with the narrative structure of populist storytelling, which specifies that only the disruptive agency of villains can create the crisis, as opposed to other non-agentic causes such as natural disasters or pandemics (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). Margaret below echoes Matthias' apprehensions of the secret agenda to control the people:

> I believe that the government is a part of it, but I also believe that there are other people involved like big pharma companies pushing this agenda.

The above quotes draw a qualitative semblance between populist narratives and conspiracy theories within anti-lockdown storytelling, since both types of narratives attribute a hidden meaning that is to explain observed outcomes (Brotherton, 2015; Oliver & Wood, 2018). Moreover, Margaret conveyed a suspicion about the generally accepted version of events, suggesting the presence of a counter-normative aspect in anti-lockdown storytelling. Counter-normativity tends to emerge in conspiracy-fuelled political activism and reflects an opposition to the accepted version of events and a desire to uncover the truth that is otherwise hidden by the falsification of elites (Sternisko et al., 2020).

The crisis depicted in anti-lockdown storytelling is also reinforced by the Manichaean perception that the elites conspiring against the people are inherently evil and waging a war against the public. We identified a Manichaean plot device and conspiracism in narratives around the crisis as well. For instance, John recounted:

> You know it's ridiculous what's going on. It is a war. It's a war by stealth. It's not, you know, we're gonna shoot you with these bullets. It is a biological war, using the media and using politicians who are right now no more than puppets. They control their funding.

In John's version of the crisis narrative, politicians are subservient to pandemic villains, who influence the polity from behind the scenes. John employed a Manichaean narrative attributing to pandemic villains categorically evil intentions to modify human biology via vaccines. Brian, another participant, reinforced the idea that vaccines are a means of controlling the people:

> The Great reset[1] and the Casedemic[2] we have here and […] the fact that vaccines are not necessary and that vaccines are dangerous. The pandemic is for the vaccine and vaccine passports and they are for control.

Brian echoed the QAnon conspiracy theory[3], which was at times disseminated in the protest sites through various visual channels such as QAnon banners, insignia, and t-shirts. Both QAnon believers (Kruglova, 2023) and anti-lockdown protesters expressed unfounded beliefs that villains used the COVID-19 pandemic to destroy the lives of ordinary people and vaccines to alter human DNA. In Bristol, protesters displayed claims that lockdowns and vaccines are 'plagued by bad science' and that 'vaccines are not necessary'. Concerns for protecting freedoms and opposition to vaccines were conveyed by many slogans, chants, and signs, both in Glasgow and Bristol, such as: 'my body, my choice' and 'resist, do not comply', regarding the vaccine mandate, as well as by the popular chant 'You can stick your poison vaccine up your ass'.

In other examples of unfounded beliefs, Marvin, equated COVID-19 to a seasonal influenza virus, while Tom expressed their belief that COVID-19 was a 'hoax'. Likewise, Ada recounted:

> And when they tested this type of technology [mRNA] on animals, when the animals were introduced to the live virus, they all basically died. And this is not the first time they are doing this. And I also believe that this pandemic has been planned. This is a man-made virus that was allowed to escape the lab, and it all was part of a plan to bring in a few social restrictions to make people enslaved. […] This is not the first man-made virus. Zika, AIDS, the Rockefellers, the Rothschilds, they are manipulating and controlling the world and people like the governments are just puppets.

Ada's populist storytelling includes a disruption to the societal order due to the secret plot by villains. In this narrative, villains used the virus as a biological weapon, creating the crisis that has unravelled the plot by elites to control the people. By identifying a historical continuity with villains from previous epidemics, anti-lockdown storytelling here first reinforces the Manichaean key narrative, which implies that a world without evil cannot be envisioned, and second, points to the villains that the people can defeat (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). This enables populist storytelling to reduce complex and uncontrollable societal outcomes to closure-inducing narratives (Gorman & Gorman, 2016;

Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). Such narratives provided our participants a secular story in a bid to establish order and stability, constructing an image of indisputable truths (Lubarda & Forchtner, 2023).

Ada's perception was shared by David, who conveyed that elites follow a secret agenda to enact total control over people:

> Protests don't make any difference that is why you come here. They might loosen restrictions a bit, they might help us go back to normal. You still have to wear a mask, you still have to be vaccinated to access facilities. In the long run, the main goal is to control people because they are psychopathic, and they have no empathy. They don't care about you, me or anyone else.

David's account denies villains' social emotions, which reinforces the Manichaean divide between the people and the elite and suggests that pandemic villains can neither be changed nor redeemed because they represent evil. David's account concludes with the populist trope that politicians only care about furthering personal interests to the detriment of their voters (Akkerman et al., 2014). Despite the fact that our participants' accounts that the pandemic was created to control the people by villains such as the Bilderberg Group and the Rothschilds are

consonant with the opinions expressed by members of far-right organisations in places such as Italy and Hungary (Kondor, 2024), none of our participants were themselves members of any far-right organisations.

4.2.4. The promise

Another common popular narrative was the promise that the protesters can evade the crisis created by pandemic villains if enough people 'wake up'. The populist narrative promising a better future circles back to the hero truth-teller narrative, reinforcing intrinsic connections between key narratives that we previously identified. Our participants placed their faith in the promise that a major awakening could change society for the better. John recounted:

> So, I think that humanity is coming to a stage now where there could be some great awakening. I am an eternal activist and I think there is a good chance. A lot more people are going to wake up.

John was hopeful that anti-lockdown protests could wake the people up and change society for the better. Other protesters, likewise, saw a promise for societal betterment in the coming-together for a joint cause. Rob talked about what the protests can achieve when enough people wake up:

> At the start I was thinking police mobs will sort of come more and more, but I knew sort of in the end when the people come together, actually the elites are far outnumbered by the people. You can see today, the police, where are they? They are afraid of people. That's the way it should be. Not the people being afraid of the police. And even I imagine, there are certain police officers, questioning this as well. So, the police are not complete robots.

The togetherness of anti-lockdown protesters enabled the possibility that the people may eventually defeat the evil elites. As Rob expressed above, there is hope in the power of the truth that can 'wake people up' and even some members of the police could join the anti-lockdown cause. Anti-lockdown narratives anticipate the political future through uneasiness and aspirations, but the promise of waking up from the institutional narratives about the pandemic instigates alternative possibilities of collective hope in the protest spaces.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper shows that anti-lockdown narratives in the UK take the form of populist storytelling, shaped by key narratives of 'heroes and villains', 'the crisis', 'the truth' and 'the promise', accompanied by plot devices, such as a thin-centred ideology, Manichaeism, and conspiracy theories, which further increase the tellability of anti-lockdown narratives. These findings challenge the secondary role traditionally ascribed to conspiracy theories in populism literature (Bergmann & Butter, Citation2020; Moffitt Citation2017; Fenster, Citation2008; Ostiguy, Citation2017). Instead, we show that conspiracy theories are deeply interwoven with populist narratives, particularly through their synergy with Manichaean dualism. This points to a more central role for Manichaeism and conspiracy theories inside populist narratives that previously thought. We also contribute to social movement scholarship, which highlighted that post-2010 protest movements tend to include populist narratives that leverage a sense that 'the people' have been treated unfairly by 'the elite' (Ditto & Rodriguez, Citation2021; Gerbaudo, Citation2023). Our findings show that anti-lockdown collective grievances are streamlined and amplified by conspiracy theories and populist storytelling.

Anti-lockdown protests in the UK demonstrated a distinct grassroots character, as shared narratives emerged organically in the absence of charismatic populist leadership. This contrasts with most populist movements, which, except for notable exceptions such as the Yellow West

movement in France (Bergem 2023), are usually spearheaded by charismatic politicians. Moreover, Nigel Farage attempted to seize the anti-establishment momentum created by the anti-lockdown protests in the UK, by declaring that he rebranded his anti-immigrant Brexit Party into 'Britain's first anti-lockdown party', ReformUK. Despite this rebranding, we have observed that Farage has failed to increase any traction or electoral support for Reform UK within anti-lockdown communities.

Previous research found that populist politicians normalise far-right discourse by portraying it as commonsensical (Newt, 2024). The pandemic provided an unprecedented opportunity for far-right ideologies to become normalised within broader public discourse by banking on frustrations at government restrictions and economic disruptions created by the pandemic (Vieten, 2020). For instance, mainstream parties in Germany demonised the German anti-lockdown movement, labelling them as violent far-right conspiracy theorists, and claimed that they attempted to delegitimize state institutions. Despite this, the far-right populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) adopted anti-lockdown claims and sent AfD politicians to speak at anti-lockdown rallies (Heinze & Weisskircher, 2023). Future research could explore the factors that facilitate such collaborations in places such as Germany, but preclude such collaborations from taking place, in places such as the UK.

The normalisation of the protester phenomenon led to an increasingly more representative distribution of protester demographics and identities that speak to majority grievances (Saunders & Shlomo, 2021; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001). For instance, the White March in Belgium

was heterogeneous, representative, and lacked charismatic leaders and organisers (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2001). Likewise, anti-lockdown protesters in the UK lacked a dedicated leadership galvanising momentum, while protesters themselves came from various socio-demographic backgrounds, occupying a host of diverse and liberal professions (see Table A1 in the Appendix). The social composition of anti-lockdown protests seems to mirror that of the wider UK population, reflecting the normalisation of protests in the country.

Our research is not without limitations. Firstly, just as anti-lockdown protesters were reluctant to talk to the media, which they discarded wholesale, they seemed equally reluctant to engage with university researchers, perceiving them as part of the 'establishment' on pandemic-related issues. As a result, we may have only reached those participants who were more outgoing, while failing to reach those participants who were more withdrawn and who perhaps entertained even more radical versions of the anti-lockdown narratives. Secondly, while we only present results from anti-lockdown protests in the UK, we have highlighted some tentative differences to protests in other countries. Future research could take our contribution as a starting point for conducting further qualitative and quantitative research in multiple countries to narrow down the common themes and narratives that galvanise anti-lockdown protests cross-culturally.

The present paper underscores the transformative potential of populist storytelling to reshape public discourse and mobilise action during periods of profound societal crisis. Future research could examine the evolution of anti-lockdown communities in the aftermath of the

pandemic to study the wider mainstreaming of these narratives, as it is already evidenced in the US. Our findings highlight the power and ubiquitousness of key narratives and plot devices within anti-normative and anti-establishment rhetoric, which are able to increase the reach of populist storytelling and help explain the current resurgence of anti-establishment and anti-vaccine attitudes across wider society.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1 The Great Reset theory may have originated from the misunderstanding of a development proposal with the same name debated at the World Economic Forum. The Great Reset proposal was designed as a response to the major disruptions caused by COVID-19 to the world economy.

2 The Casedemic theory claims that governments inflated the number of COVID-19 infections and exaggerated the statistics in order to frighten the population.

3 QAnon is an American populist conspiracy theory that successfully inspired a political movement, promoting anti-democratic ideas such as a refusal to accept democratic governance and election results, denying the legitimacy of the state, and dehumanisation of all opposition.

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Appendix

Table A1. Protest participants information.

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Table A1. Protest participants information.

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Profession
1	Betty	50	State admin
2	Claire	67	Retired
3	Nicole	45	Physiotherapist
4	Pawel	57	Marketing manager
5	Carly	27	Education sector
6	Karen	66	Retired
7	Tom	61	Forklift operator
8	Kate	30	Fine arts
9	Amelia	49	Previously tourism
10	Sam	19	University student
11	Georgie	59	Retired

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Profession
12	Eva	30	Finance
13	Brian	45	Unemployed
14	Helen	39	Teaching and coaching
15	David	27	Software Engineer
16	Alex	44	Driving instructor
17	Rob	37	Betfair trader
18	Rowan	48	Waiter, furloughed
19	Florian	46	Creative Director
20	Nikki	47	Education sector
21	Abel	40	Construction worker
22	Paul	50	Works for the church
23	Alexis	58	DJ
24	Hana	57	Teacher

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Profession
25	Davide	39	Engineer
26	Barkley	56	Decorator
27	Skyler	40	Radiologist
28	Josh	52	Decorator and writer
29	Daniel	35	Gym director
30	Ethan	57	Company director
31	Arjun	34	Medical practitioner
32	Ethel	35	Medical practitioner
33	Mia	42	Accountant

The potential of emotional labour

Despite the potential issues associated with emotional labour, there are many potentially positive consequences for Occupational Therapists. The act of emotional labour could contribute to the professional artistry of *doing* occupational therapy; thereby, representing a valued skillset of strategies for managing the emotional vulnerabilities of clients in the context of the therapeutic relationship, which has been long shown to positively impact patient outcomes (Horton, Holman and Hebson, 2022). By acknowledging the inevitability of emotional labour, Occupational

Therapists could engage in reflective practice and supervision discussions, thereby heightening awareness and preparedness for emotional labour as well as ensuring support for staff dealing with the emotional demands of their profession.

In response to calls from the RCOT (2021b) to prioritise research into (a) *how* Occupational Therapists ensure person-centred care is central to service delivery, (b) *how* Occupational Therapists can be more inclusive of both mental and physical health considerations and (c) *how* Occupational Therapists can work effectively in multidisciplinary teams, emotional labour can provide a useful theoretical framework in terms of understanding the strategies used to interpret, manage and express emotions in workplace interactions to meet the demands of their role. Future research could investigate the professional challenges associated with performing emotional labour in different Occupational Therapy practice areas. For example, the emotional labour demands of a practitioner specialising in paediatrics might differ to those operating in palliative care. Such knowledge could lead to the development of innovative methods of teaching emotional labour in education through clinical simulations, virtual reality spaces and storytelling as educational tools to equip Occupational Therapists with skills to effectively enact emotional labour. Given the potentially challenging nature of interactions between Occupational Therapists and clients, deliberately practicing emotional labour skills in safe environments overcomes ethical challenges and reduces the emotional labour knowledge–practice gap. Furthermore, reflective accounts from practicing Occupational Therapists about their experiences of emotional labour in the field would enhance understanding of how social identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability) might influence emotional labour demands. There is also the potential to investigate the role of resilience building interventions acting as a buffer for emotional labour demands.

Conclusions

Occupational Therapists are all entitled to feel the same range of emotions as intensely as those in other professions, but what are we entitled to show in the workplace? The answer to this question is subjective; thus, highlighting the challenge for researchers to further understand how emotional labour is performed across practice areas, how managers and organisations can best support Occupational Therapists with their emotional labour demands and whether this can enhance job satisfaction and retention in the future.

Ethical approval

Not applicable.

Consent

Not applicable.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Data availability statement

During the development, progress and reporting of the submitted research, patient and public involvement in the research was not included at any stage of the research.

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