Sincere Lies and Contrived Facts:

Individual Dispositions towards Factual Truth and the Persuasiveness of Populist Communication

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Dear *International Journal of Communication* editorial team,

We are pleased to submit our article “Sincere Lies and Contrived Facts: Individual Dispositions towards Factual Truth and the Persuasiveness of Populist Communication” for your consideration for publication in *International Journal of Communication*.

Since the beginning of their political rise, populists have come under fire for their complicated relationship with the truth. Strikingly, populists appear to benefit from these accusations and are often praised for being straight talkers who cut through the nonsense of political debate to reveal hard truths. To address this paradox, many observers suggested that, because of their uncouth political style, populists convey a sense of authenticity ultimately underlying their success.

In this article, we entered this debated by investigating the pre-registered assumption that the persuasiveness of populist messages is a function of individual epistemic preferences for *sincerity* (the preference for information that authentically represents one’s thoughts) rather than *accuracy* (the preference for factual, correct and verifiable information). We argue that individuals preferring sincerity over accuracy are more likely to perceive populists as more emotionally sincere – i.e. authentic –, thus be persuaded by their messages. We tested this assumption via an experiment on a convenience sample of US citizens (MTurk, N=424), in which we manipulated exposure to persuasive messages with “low” (i.e., simplified and uncivil) or “high” (i.e., sophisticated and civil) style.

Results showed that while persuasiveness was a function of political style and, marginally, of perceived emotional sincerity, their effect was reversed compared to the expected one; a populist style decreased persuasion by decreasing the perceived emotional sincerity of the candidate. In addition, this effect was not dependent on epistemic preferences. The result of an additional exploratory (not pre-registered) analysis indicated that it is how respondents perceive the argument (rather than the sponsor) that mediates the relationship between political style and persuasion. Additionally, political ideology significantly moderated the effect of political style. We argue that these results should not discourage researchers from placing issues of authenticity and epistemic preferences at the center of studies on the cognitive processes regulating populist communication. We instead suggest that our design could be largely improved when accounting for contextual information.

All data and materials, including the full online Appendix, are available for replication at the following Open Science Foundation (OSF) repository:

<https://osf.io/69a42/?view_only=b586f3b474a2427fadc73c562067a03d>

Please do not hesitate to get back to us should you have any questions about our submission. We are very much looking forward to hearing back from you and read the reviewers’ assessments.

Kind regards,

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