

## Bachelor Thesis

# The role of emotion in online political communication in times of Covid-19

## Study of a Dutch case

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## Abstract

In this study, a case study approach is employed to investigate the role of emotions in political communication on Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study focuses on the political communication of Dutch politicians on Twitter, including Siegrid Kaag, Mark Rutte, Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders. Literature on emotions during the pandemic indicates that there may exist a heightened state of emotion on Twitter. Therefore, this research examines differences in emotionality, by comparing tweets from periods before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, this study investigates whether or not any differences arise between emotionality in tweets by political actors who are considered populist and those who are considered non-populists. Additionally, as the literature indicates that populists are more emotional in their communications, the study assesses whether the pandemic may have had a disproportionate effect on the emotionality in tweets of populist actors. The results of the analysis indicate that the pandemic has in fact made the political discourse on Twitter more emotional, although this increase varies greatly from actor to actor. The results show no indication that populists are more emotional than their non-populist counterparts, and no disproportionate effect of the pandemic on emotionality in populist political communication.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, social media platforms have become an indispensable tool for social communication and sharing and receiving information on a variety of topics. In particular, Twitter has infused itself into the daily lives of millions of people all over the world. A group that has increasingly taken to Twitter in past years are politicians and political organizations. Politicians have been known to use Twitter to publicize their activities, project a personable image of themselves, and mobilize support (Lee et al., 2020). This development has further sparked the interest of researchers to assess the role of social media in politics. According to Enli & Skogerbø (2013) for example, politicians seem to use social media for both marketing and dialogue with their audiences. On the other hand, research suggests that politicians mostly use social media as a tool for one-way communication (e.g., Enjolras, 2014). A number of scholars have examined the use of social media by politicians, focussing on the ways in which politicians strategically manage their image, how they communicate with their public and under what circumstances social media campaigns are successful.

With its wide accessibility and the possibility to communicate at incredible speed, Twitter can be considered a highly emotional platform best suited for “shorter, simpler, and more emotionally charged messages” (Bollen et al., 2009). Moreover, research on Twitter users’ public emotional responses to the pandemic indicates that emotions on Twitter have evolved rapidly during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (Lwin et al., 2020). According to the results of their study, the discourse online seems to be driven by shared experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, including social isolation and the loss of human lives. Research by Lwin et al. (2020) describes how public emotions have shifted strongly from fear to anger, and from sadness to joy during the course of the pandemic. Findings suggest fear appeared in tweets discussing shortages in Covid-19 tests and other medical materials. Anger was found in tweets that included xenophobic attitudes, and in tweets discussing measures like lockdowns. Sadness appeared in tweets addressing topics such as losing friends and family members to Covid-19, while happier tweets included topics such as gratitude and good health. As the pandemic evolved, topics like the number of confirmed cases and death rates, health authorities and government policies, stigma, and negative emotional reactions (Xue et al., 2020). Pandemic-related fear, stigma, and mental health appear to be prevalent topics in the online discourse during the pandemic, these discussions may continue to influence the public when a new wave of Covid-19 occurs.

In order to navigate responses to pandemics successfully, governments are dependent on public cooperation with safety measures, and appropriate perceptions of risks, in which emotion and attention play important roles (Dyer & Kolic, 2020). Therefore, it would be helpful to assess emotions in online political communication systematically in this specific context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Until now, little research has been devoted to the emotional communication of (populist) political actors. Additionally, the recent event of the Covid-19 pandemic, and its effects on emotionality in the online political discourse, have not yet been thoroughly studied. Therefore, this paper sets out to answer the following research question:

“What is the role of emotion in the online political communication on Twitter in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?”

A case study approach is employed to further investigate the role of emotions in political communication on Twitter during the Covid-19 pandemic, which focuses on the political communication of Dutch politicians on Twitter, including Siegrid Kaag, Mark Rutte, Thierry Baudet and Geert Wilders. It includes an assessment of the influence of different political communication styles on the extent to which these actors show more emotion in their tweets. Additionally, this study examines differences in emotional expression between a period of time before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, and a period of time during the pandemic, to test the assumption that the political discourse on Twitter reflects the heightened emotionality that has been previously linked to the effects of the pandemic.

## 2. Theoretical background

This section serves to explain the theoretical background upon which the established assumptions are built. First, some of the major findings on the role of emotion in political communication are set out, followed by what is currently known about online political communication, specifically on Twitter. Secondly, some findings on the role of emotion in populist (online) communication are presented. Thirdly, a consideration of the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on online communication and emotional expression. Lastly, this section includes a clarification of the mechanisms that this study concerns and a visual representation of the analytical framework.

### 2.1 Emotions in political communication

Research in the field of political psychology has increasingly sought to combine insights from social psychology to study the influences of emotion on political behaviour. Research on emotion in politics has examined the impact of cognition versus emotion on political decisions and behaviour, the role of positive versus negative emotions, and more recently, the impact of specific emotions (e.g. fear, happiness, anger) on political behaviour. Marcus, et al. (2001) provide an overview of Affective Intelligence Theory, an influential theory of emotion in politics, which posits that emotional evaluations about people, places and situations are generated before conscious awareness. MacKuen, et al. (2010) provide an empirical test of this theory. Lodge and Taber (2005) describe how emotions and political information processing are closely connected. Huddy, et al. (2005) and Haas and Cunningham (2014) research the role of specific emotions or 'types of affect' as they call it. These studies demonstrate that emotions constitute a core part of the study of political behaviour and that emotions play an important role in political communication.

For the last two decades, researchers have taken to studying the political uses of microblogging social media sites such as Twitter. Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan (2012) observe an increasing relevance and need for analyzing political discussions as they unfold on social media platforms. Enli and Skogerbø (2013) show that politicians use social media for both marketing and dialogue with their audiences. They find that in comparison to Facebook, political actors are more likely to use Twitter as a tool for continuous dialogue. Moreover, they introduce the idea that on social media there is a focus on the individual politician rather than the political party, which allows more personalized forms of political campaigning. Stier et al. (2018) provide insights into how political communication is shaped by social media. They show that political actors and their audiences mostly discuss other topics on social media than those salient among a mass audience. The results of their study confirm that political actors and their audiences rarely discuss public policies, but rather campaign-related events and other topics that seem to be specific

to social media. All in all, these studies suggest that political actors use social media for a number of different purposes.

More recently, scholars have undertaken to examine the role of emotions in political communication as it takes place online. Studies indicate that messages that are high in emotional expression, both positive or negative, may generate more attention, feedback and participation. Dang-Xuan et al. (2013) further build upon the idea that due to the controversial nature of political discourse, political content on Twitter may exhibit higher levels of sentiment (i.e. opinions, appraisals, or emotions). The results of this research demonstrate a strong correlation between the level of emotionality in political actors' tweets, and the number of retweets they receive. Stieglitz and L. Dang-Xuan (2012) present the finding that the most influential accounts in the political discourse on Twitter (including journalists, political parties, individual citizens or civil society groups) differ in the extent to which they express themselves emotionally. Their study shows the effects of emotionality in political communication on Twitter, as well as differences between the emotional expression of different influential accounts. While previous research into political communication and emotions may to some extent predict the online behaviour of political actors, this area of research is still developing and there is much that remains to be studied. In the light of the Covid-10 pandemic, emotions are shown to have evolved rapidly online, it remains unclear, however, what effects the pandemic has had on the ways in which political actors express themselves emotionally in their online communication with the public.

## 2.2 Populist communication styles

Studies on online political communication by populist political actors suggest that social media are a suitable platform for sharing values and ideas that are extreme or controversial. Ernst et al. theorize that there are four attributes of social media that make it compatible with populist communication, these include access to the public without the interference of traditional media, connectedness to the people, its potential for personalization, and the possibilities it presents to target specific groups. The study further demonstrates that right-wing populists and opposition parties use higher amounts of populist communication strategies on social media than government parties. These findings show why Twitter can be considered a valuable instrument for populist communication.

In studies on political communication by populist political actors emphasize emotional appeals as a key characteristic of populist discourse. Canovan (1999), for example, describes the characteristic style of populist actors as a 'mixture of homespun common sense and emotional appeals'. Moreover, in a study of fear appeals in political communication, Scheller (2019) shows that fear appeals constitute a core part of populist communication strategies. Scheller argues that by inducing anxiety, people become more open to new information, and are more inclined to abandon partisan habits. Wildmann (2019) further emphasizes the link between negative emotions and populist communication. His study reveals that populist actors use more negative emotional appeals than non-populist actors. Overall, the literature indicates that populist political actors are more inclined to employ emotional appeals in their communication, than are non-populist actors. Moreover, in his study of fear appeals in political communication, Scheller (2019) shows that fear appeals constitute a core part of populist communication strategies. Scheller argues that by inducing anxiety, people become more open to new information, and are more inclined to abandon partisan habits. Wildmann (2019) further emphasizes the link between negative emotions and populist communication. His study reveals that populist actors use more negative

emotional appeals than non-populist actors. Overall, the literature indicates that populist political actors are more inclined to employ emotional appeals in their communication, than are non-populist actors.

## 2.3 A heightened state of emotion on Twitter in times of Covid-19

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, a growing number of studies have collected Twitter data to understand public responses and discussions. Xue et al. (2020) establish that there are several topics that remain dominant in the discourse on Twitter, these include numbers of confirmed cases and death rates, preventive measures, policies, and negative psychological reactions (eg, fear). Their research shows that Twitter data and machine learning approaches can be used for infodemiology studies and to research public discussions and sentiments during the pandemic.

While Twitter has always been viewed as an emotional platform, findings indicate that emotions on Twitter have evolved rapidly during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (Lwin et al., 2020). In this study, Lwin et al. reveal that negative emotions dominated the discourse on Twitter, and reported increased levels of anger and sadness in particular. Similarly, S. Kaur et al. (2020) observe emotional changes in the Twitter discourse and find a high level of negative sentiment in tweets related to Covid. The findings of these studies suggest that the communication on Twitter about Covid-19-related matters may have become highly emotional.

A study on emotions in the crisis communication of political leaders (M. Kaur et al., 2021) that was carried out in India, reveals that amongst a range of emotions, positive sentiment and ‘trust’ were most commonly found in crisis communication. They argue that this is because political leaders aim to build positivity and trust and to reduce the panic of the public. Furthermore, they find negative and fearful emotions, which, they argue, must be reduced as these emotions have a contagious effect. While there is still little known about the emotional aspect of the crisis communication of political leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic, the literature suggests a heightened state of emotion in the Twitter discourse, reflecting the emotions caused by the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 2.4 Mechanisms affecting emotions on Twitter

In this section, two proposed mechanisms are outlined, that may explain a heightened state of emotions on Twitter. While this study of the Dutch case is largely explorative in nature, these mechanisms serve to provide a foundation for further examination of the role of emotion in Twitter political communication in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 2.4.1 Influence of Covid on emotionality on Twitter

The first theoretical mechanism proposes that as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the (political) discourse on Twitter has become more emotional. According to Hasan et al. (2014), tweets may reflect the emotional state of individuals (such as happy, fearful, stressed etc.), as well of the emotions of larger groups of individuals (such as an organization or affiliation). While Twitter has always been viewed as an emotional platform, studies indicate that emotions evolved rapidly during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Lwin et al., 2020, Kaur et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be theorized that the political discourse on Twitter reflects this heightened emotional state that is prevalent among the public. As a result, emotions are expected to run higher in the current political discourse on Twitter, as compared to the period prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 2.4.2 Populist political communication strategies and emotionality

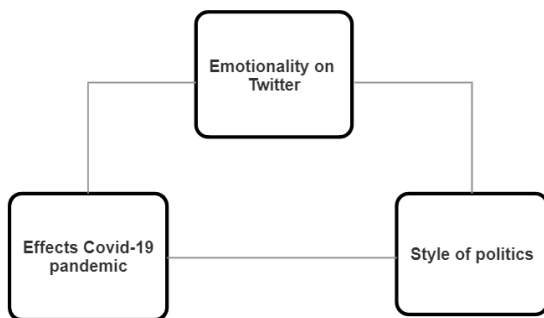
The second theoretical mechanism poses that those who are considered populist political actors are more prone to make emotional appeals in their political communication when compared to non-populist political actors. The literature frequently emphasizes emotional appeals, such as fear appeals as a characteristic of populist communication strategies (e.g. Canovan, 1999, Scheller, 2019). Others highlight the link between negative emotions and populist communication (Wildmann, 2019). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that populist attitudes are largely driven by feelings of anger (Rico et al., 2017). The findings of previous studies suggest that populist actors are more emotional in their political communication, therefore it is expected that this is also the case in their online communication on Twitter.

### 2.5 Analytical framework

Research indicates that Twitter has always been quite high in emotional expression. Additionally, there is reason to believe that the discourse on Twitter has become even more emotional today, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies have shown that the pandemic has had a considerable impact on the online discourse, for example, an increase in negative emotions in tweets (Crocamo et al., 2021). This heightened emotionality may be reflected in the tweets of political actors. The second theoretical argument follows the assumption that those who employ a populist style of politics are more emotional in their political communication, which may also hold true for their communication in online spaces, such as Twitter. Lastly, it may be that pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on emotion in the communication of populist actors, considering that theorized higher levels of emotionality.

#### Figure 1

*Visual representation of the analytical framework*



*Source:* own representation, based on assumptions from the cited literature

### 2.6 Implications and hypothesis

While there is a considerable body of research on emotions in political communication, populist communication styles, and online political communication, little research exists that combines insights on these topics. Additionally, the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the effects this has on emotionality



in the online political discourse, have yet to be studied systematically. To expand on the knowledge that is currently available on these topics, this paper seeks to answer the following research question:

“What is the role of emotion in the online political communication on Twitter in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?”

To further investigate the role of emotion in political communication in the contemporary context, a case study approach will be employed to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Communication on Twitter has become more emotional today when compared to the period preceding the Covid-19 pandemic.

H2: Populist political actors are more emotional in their Twitter communication than non-populist political actors.

H3: Populist political actors have become more emotional on Twitter as a result of the pandemic, than non-populist political actors.

### 3. Methodology

This section serves to explain and clarify the methods that were used in order to test the hypotheses and answer the research question. This section includes a short description of the research design, followed by an outline of the case and case selection, and last an explanation of the analysis process.

#### 3.1 Research design

This study aims to examine the emotions in political communication by analyzing tweets collected from the period before and during the event of the Covid-19 pandemic. The level of emotionality in tweets is determined using the English Emotional Terms (EMOTE) database, developed by O (2016). This database is one of the most extensive databases rating emotionally relevant word characteristics, as it includes ratings of 1287 nouns and 985 adjectives. In this database, words are rated on valence, arousal, emotionality, concreteness, imagery, familiarity, and clarity of meaning. For the purpose of this study, the rate of emotionality is used to test the level of emotionality of the contents of tweets. In the Emote database, the emotionality dimension ranges from not emotional at all, or neutral (1), to very emotional (7). A sample of tweets was collected from a number of Dutch political actors, both with populist and non-populist characteristics, from a specific time frame before, and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using the programme Atlas.ti, these tweets were coded according to the level of emotionality of the words that were used. The codes were then split into two groups; moderately emotional words (emotionality scores from 1-4) and highly emotional words (emotionality scores from 4-7). Finally, the levels of emotionality expressed in the tweets were compared for the two time periods, and for the two groups of actors.

### 3.2 Description of the case

In this study, a case of four Dutch politicians will be further examined through their tweets. For this case, a number of national politicians were selected, from various different standpoints on the political spectrum. In this study, politicians Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom) and Thierry Baudet (Forum for Democracy) will be considered political actors that contribute to a populist discourse on Twitter. Both actors have frequently been known to endorse controversial and extreme views. According to Schoor (2020), both Wilders and Baudet fall within the populist spectrum but are different in terms of how they employ populist styles of politics. Wilders has presented himself as a voice of the public (presentational populism) while idealising a homogenous Dutch people (ideational populism), which he claims to support and represent (social populism). Baudet, who is identified as a populist in both the ideation and presentational dimensions, employs a political style of populism combined with some elitist traits. He presents himself as a conservative nationalist, frequently attributing his anti-pluralism to his ambition to 'preserve' traditional Dutch culture and history. Schoors' analysis of Baudet's speech indicates that Baudet style of politics is not particularly anti-elite, but more so specifically opposed to the current Dutch political elite, which he called 'the party cartel', and aspires to establish a new political elite including himself.

Further, two other Dutch actors were selected to represent the non-populist actors in the research. As non-populist actors, this study considers Sigrid Kaag, from 'Democrats 66' (D66), and Mark Rutte from the 'People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). Both Kaag and Rutte are heads of the two most popular national parties in the Netherlands. Rutte, who is currently in his fourth term as prime minister, has steered his centre-right liberal party through a number of political crises but has remained popular in national elections. Kaag currently serves in the positions of deputy prime minister and minister of Finance. Her party was very successful in campaigning for the Lower House elections in March 2021 and is now the second-largest party after VVD. Both of these actors can be considered as mainstream politicians within the Dutch political landscape, therefore these actors will represent the group 'non-populists'.

As the rise of populist actors and parties is not exclusive to Dutch politics and can be seen in a number of democracies around the world, the results of this case study may translate to other national contexts. Additionally, a heightened state of emotion in the political discourse on Twitter may indicate that this is also the case for other social networking sites.

### 3.3 Case selection

For this study, a hundred tweets were selected for each aforementioned political actor, meaning the sample for this study consists of 400 tweets total. The tweets were collected through the advanced search option in Twitter, which allows for searching for tweets from a specific time frame. Using this option, tweets were collected from the following Twitter handles: @sigridkaag, @thierrybaudet, @geertwilderspvv, and @minpres for Mark Rutte. One half of the tweets were collected from a period before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the other from a period during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, the periods of January 2018 to January 2020, and January 2020 to January 2022 were entered into the advanced search. Then, the top tweets were selected from these periods of time, as the only other option available was to select the most recent tweets from this period. In reality, the sample that followed this search mainly consisted of tweets from the last few months of the year 2019 (pre-Covid-19) and the year 2021 (during Covid-19). Following, the tweets were imported into separate

documents: one for each of the actors, for each time period. This was done to make the data more ordered, and to make it easier to perform the analysis in Atlas.ti. For the purpose of this study, a total of eight documents of tweets from Dutch political actors were analyzed.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

As the tweets were imported into the Atlas.ti system, the first step to analyzing the data was a process of open coding. As previously mentioned, the Emote database was used to attach meaning to the words that were mentioned in the tweets. This was done by noting down the emotionality scores as obtained from the Emote database, ranging from 1: neutral or slightly emotional, to 7: highly emotional in meaning. For each emotional word in the data, an emotionality score was connected, to express the extent to which the word is emotionally loaded. Tweets that were not in English were translated first, before attaching an emotionality score. It was made sure that Dutch words were accurately translated and that the emotional meanings of the words were highly, or exactly similar. Words that had no equivalent in the Emote database were left uncoded. After a series of coding, an elaborate code scheme started to emerge. Codes started to reappear in the data, and only a few new codes needed to be developed to capture the level of emotionality in the last few sets of tweets. Following these first steps of the analysis, the codes were tidied, and any superfluous, or codes that were too similar were merged into one another, creating a slightly more concise coding scheme. Then, to confirm that all relevant concepts from the data were coded, one last round of coding was done. After having created an extensive list of codes, the codes were divided into two groups, based on the level of emotionality that was expressed through the emotionality scores. The two code groups that were created were ‘Moderately emotional words’, containing words that ranged from an emotionality score of 1 to 4, and a group ‘Highly emotional words’, containing words that ranged from an emotionality score of 4 to 7. This was done so that later in the analysis, a distinction could be made between the two time periods, to see whether or not emotionality in the language of tweets had significantly increased. For a better overview of the data, the documents were grouped into ‘populists’, containing the tweets of both Wilders and Baudet (from both periods), ‘non-populists’, containing tweets from Kaag and Rutte (from both periods), ‘tweets 2018-2020’, with tweets from before the pandemic, and ‘tweets 2020-2022’, with tweets from during the pandemic. Additionally, two groups were created to test any differences in the tweets of the populist actors, when comparing the periods before and during the pandemic. Last, the function ‘co-document table’ in Atlas.ti was used to make comparisons between the documents and the document groups. This function allows to cross-tabulate the codes or code groups that were found in the documents. The results of this analysis will be laid out in the next section of this study.

## 4. Results

This section discusses the results of the previously outlined analysis, and what these imply with regards to the previously set-out hypotheses.

H1: Communication on Twitter has become more emotional today when compared to the period preceding the Covid-19 pandemic.

The analysis results show that, overall, the emotionality in the political discourse has indeed increased, supporting the first hypothesis. When comparing the number of emotional words in the tweets before and

during the pandemic, a minimal increase is found. While in the sample from before the pandemic, 347 emotional words were found, and 359 were found in the sample from during the pandemic (Table 1). This means that there were only 12 more emotional words used in the sample from the Covid-19 period, which is an increase of only 3.6 per cent. Further, an increase in the number of highly emotional words was found, as can be seen in table 1. Whereas the number of highly emotional words in the political discourse before the pandemic was 214, during the period of the pandemic, the number of highly emotional words found was 230. This constitutes an increase of 7.5 per cent.

Examples of some of the highly emotional words connected to the Covid-19 pandemic include ‘crisis’, ‘panic’, ‘infections’, ‘death’, ‘authorities’, and more. Some highly emotional words that emerged from the tweets from before the Covid-19 pandemic include words like ‘threat’, ‘hate’, ‘power’, ‘coward’, ‘regret’ and more. Some examples of highly emotional tweets from the period during the pandemic (some translated from Dutch):

Sigrid Kaag @SigridKaag Nov 1, 2021

We must draw a line here. Doctors do their important work in the service of society. We owe them the freedom to speak without fear. These boundaries, which are systematically crossed, harm our society and ultimately our democracy (Kaag, 2021).

Mark Rutte @MinPres · Dec 30, 2021

Get the booster shot, just like me - in my case of Moderna. In this way you protect yourself and your environment, and together we ensure that the pressure on healthcare decreases. Kudos all those people who work hard to make this booster offensive go well (Rutte, 2021b).

Thierry Baudet @ThierryBaudet · Dec 22, 2021

Seven months ago: Chamber blocks debate on The Great Reset. Because "conspiracy theory". After persistent questions, #FVD finally received black-on-white evidence this week that Klaus Schwab's agenda is leading for Rutte et al. How hard can you get caught? (Baudet, 2021)

Moreover, it seems that tweets that were unrelated to the Covid-19 crisis the language have also become more emotional in language:

Mark Rutte @MinPres · Oct 29, 2021

The Netherlands is eternally grateful to Canada for the key role its brave soldiers played at the end of the Second World War in liberating this country. On behalf of NL I conveyed my deep appreciation to Prime Minister @JustinTrudeau (Rutte, 2021a).

Geert Wilders @geertwilderspvv · Dec 29, 2021

TENS OF THE ELDERLY PUT ON THE STREET What kind of country do we live in where 800 asylum seekers a week are welcomed with open arms by @MinPres Rutte with free housing and free care while our elderly are kicked out on the street.

This country is sick (Wilders, 2021).

Overall, these findings indicate that the political discourse on Twitter has indeed become slightly more emotional as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting the overall heightened emotional mood that has been prevalent on the social media site.

**Table 1**

*Number of emotional words used in tweets from before and during the Covid-19 pandemic*

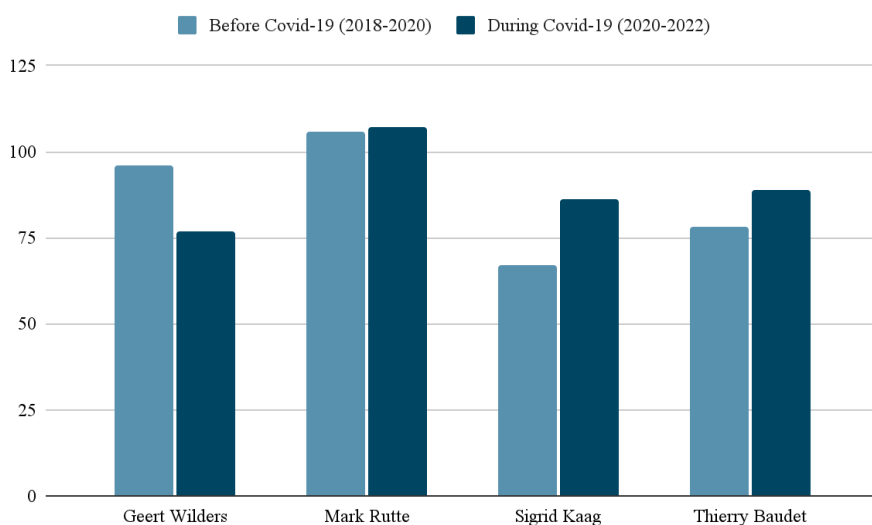
Level of emotionality	Years		Totals
	2018-2020	2020-2022	
High	214	230	444
Moderate	133	129	262
Totals	347	359	706

*Note:* this table shows the results of the analysis on a sample of 400 tweets from four actors.

Additionally, when reviewing the differences between the individual actors (see figure 2), it seems that all but one have become more emotional in their expressions on Twitter. The results show a considerable increase for both Sigrid Kaag and Thierry Baudet, a minor increase of just one for Mark Rutte, and a decline in emotionality for Geert Wilders. This decreased emotionality of Wilders may explain why the overall increase in emotionality for all actors is not as large as would be expected.

**Figure 2**

*Number of emotional words used by individual actors before and during the Covid-19 pandemic*



H2: Populist political actors are more emotional in their Twitter communication than non-populist political actors.

Contrary to indications from the literature, the results show that in this research there is no indication that populist political actors are more emotional in their Twitter communication when compared to non-populist actors. It seems that those who are considered non-populists are even slightly more emotional. In the Twitter communication of the populist actors, 340 counts of emotionality were found, compared to 366 for the non-populist actors (Table 2). As a result, the second hypothesis can not be supported.

**Table 2**

*Number of emotional words used in tweets for populist vs non-populist actors*

Level of emotionality	Style of politics		Totals
	Populist	Non-populist	
High	211	233	444
Moderate	129	133	262
Totals	340	366	706

*Note:* this table shows the results of the analysis on a sample of 400 tweets from four actors.

H3: Populist political actors have become more emotional on Twitter as a result of the pandemic, than non-populist political actors.

In accordance with the second hypothesis, there is no indication that the pandemic has had a larger effect on the emotionality in Twitter communications of populist actors. On the contrary, it seems that the group of populist actors has actually become less emotional during the pandemic. While 174 counts of emotional expression were found in the first period, only 166 were found in the second (see table 3). However, there does seem to be an increase in the use of highly emotional words. This means that in general, the populist actors expressed emotionality less frequently than before the pandemic, however, when they do express themselves, the words that are used are more emotionally loaded. It must be noted that one of the populist actors, Wilders, has seemingly become less emotional on Twitter, which may explain why overall, there seems to be little effect of the pandemic on the emotionality of their communication. It was found that tweets of Baudet do in fact show an increase during the pandemic (78 vs 89), but this increase is no larger than that of Kaag (67 vs 86), contradicting the theoretical expectations. These results show that the pandemic may have actually had a larger effect on those considered non-populist actors, as their Twitter communications have seemingly become more emotional. In the tweets by Kaag, a significant increase in emotionality can be found, while Rutte's emotional expression remained relatively the same. Where the populists seemingly show little increased emotionality as a result of the pandemic, both non-populist actors show an increase in their use of highly emotional words. All in all, the findings fail to support the third hypothesis.

**Table 3***Emotionality in tweets of populist actors before and during the Covid-19 pandemic*

Level of emotionality	Years		Totals
	2018-2020	2020-2022	
High	105	106	211
Moderate	69	60	129
Totals	174	166	340

*Note:* this table shows the results of the analysis on a sample of 200 tweets from two actors.

## 5. Discussion

The results indicate that while there is a slight increase in emotionality for all actors when comparing the periods before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, this increase is minimal. When looking at the individual actors almost all have become more emotional in their communication on Twitter. However, the emotionality in the tweets of Wilders has changed hardly. An explanation for this is that it may be that Wilders has become a little less obtrusive in the ways in which he phrases his opinions, as compared to previous years. Consequently, when leaving Wilders out of the analysis, a very significant increase in the emotionality in actors' tweets becomes noticeable, suggesting that the inclusion of the tweets by Wilders into the analysis makes the overall tweets from the period during the Covid-19 pandemic appear drastically less emotional.

## 6. Conclusion

This study focused on the role of emotion in online political communications on Twitter. To further assess emotionality in the political discourse, a case study of a Dutch case was carried out. In this case study, the Twitter communications of four Dutch political actors were assessed in terms of the extent to which they use words that are found to be highly emotional. Using the Grünh (2016) database of emotional words (EMOTE) and the software programme Atlas.ti a discourse analysis was performed on a sample of 400 tweets. The analysis included a comparison between emotional expressions in tweets from a period before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, and between the extent to which populist and non-populist actors express themselves emotionally. The results of the analysis showed that there is indeed a slight difference in emotional expression between these two periods of time and that a slight increase in emotionality took place during the pandemic. However, the results of the analysis show no indication that populist political actors are more emotional on Twitter than their non-populist counterparts. Consequently, there was no larger effect of the pandemic found on the emotionality in populist political communication.

“What is the role of emotion in the online political communication on Twitter in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic?”

The results of this study indicate that online political communication has become more emotional for almost all of the actors that were selected for this case study. This increase in emotion, in line with the theoretical argument, may be a result of heightened anxiety and tension that was found in the public discourse on Twitter during the pandemic. The results of this study indicate that emotionality in political communication on Twitter changes with the times. In times that are highly stressful and emotional, such as the Covid-19 crisis, this heightened state of emotion will be reflected in the political discourse on social media. Emotionality in tweets by political actors may have implications on the public perception of the pandemic, as it may facilitate emotional contagion, the dissemination of accurate information, and nurturing of public trust. Leveraging knowledge of social media communications during crises and inspecting tweets as a representation of the public mood, may present a new tool in the toolbox of public management.

The current research adds to the existing literature on online political communication, as it combines insights on emotionality in political communication and emotion on social networking sites during times of crisis. Additionally, the study aimed to determine differences in emotionality for different types of political actors, populists and non-populists in this case, but found no apparent differences concerning their use of emotional terms. These findings go against previous knowledge, which suggests that populist actors are more inclined to be emotional in their appeals to the public. This appears to not be the case, at least not when it comes to these specific actors and the studied Dutch case. However, different patterns may emerge in other national settings, which may be considered an interesting topic for further research.

Additionally, further research may look into the more nuanced ways in which politicians express themselves emotionally online. Examples of this include their use of emoticons, pictures, what information and links they decide to share, subtle changes in tone, such as tweeting in a sarcastic tone and writing in all capital letters. Further, it would be useful to develop a more extensive word database covering the emotionality of terms that are more specific to the political discourse, and terms specific to the Covid-19 crisis, including words like lockdown, social-distancing, mask mandates, and so on. It is currently unknown what emotional impact these words have on the people that share them, and on the people that read tweets about such topics. Such knowledge may be helpful when analyzing swings in the public mood during surges of Covid-19 or other pandemics, and to help better navigate and manage responses to the public in times of (health) crises.



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## Data appendix

All supplementary files can be found under the folder 'Data Appendix' on Canvas. These include: eight documents including tweets of Dutch politicians and the complete project in Atlas.ti.