

# **Greta Thunberg's Populist Performance: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Thunberg's Political Style within her Speeches**

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### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to climate activism, investigating how populism can facilitate widespread support for the fight against climate change, which undeniably poses one of the most pressing threats to humankind and the living planet today.

## **Abstract**

The emerging prominence of Greta Thunberg and her climate activism has been widely accredited to her adoption of populism. Scholars have argued that Thunberg's populist appeal has resonated with a significant global population, to the extent to which she has become a household name. However, populism is multifaceted, conceptualised to represent an ideology, a strategy and a style for different scholars. In theorising the relationship between a political actor and populism, there is an increasing scholarly demand to present these varying approaches to populism as complementary to one another, all illuminating different aspects: ideology outlines what populism is, strategy refers to why populism is used, and style encapsulates how populism is done. The combination of these approaches helps paint a fuller picture of Thunberg's relationship with populism.

In light of a gap in the literature regarding how Thunberg does populism beyond her language use, this dissertation draws on Moffitt and Tormey (2014), who conceive populism as a political style. Combining this conceptual approach to populism with a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) on six of Thunberg's speeches, this dissertation seeks to illustrate how she performs populism, beyond just her rhetoric, but also encompassing a wider array of performative features which have been underexplored within the specific literature on how Thunberg does populism.

This research finds that Thunberg heavily resonates with Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) theorisation of populism as a political style, albeit flexibly across different contexts. She resonates with Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) populism as a political style because she performs all three of their set criteria: evocation of the people, performance of crisis and use of bad manners. How she satisfies these elements of populism as a political style is through various verbal and non-verbal performative techniques. These findings help paint a fuller picture of how Thunberg performs populism through a variety of performative features, complementing literature focused on her ideological resonance with populism and her strategic use of populism, which in combination offer a more comprehensive theorisation of her intersection with populism.

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

Following her first protest in 2018 – a solo school strike for climate action outside the Swedish Parliament – Greta Thunberg has since amassed millions of supporters globally, inspiring the foundation of the Fridays for Future activist group (FFF, 2024). Today Thunberg is arguably the world’s most influential climate activist (Mede and Schroeder, 2024: 801). Yet the question arises – how did a then teenager, initially striking alone, cultivate such significant support?

One answer for numerous scholars (e.g. Fu, 2025; Nordensvard and Ketola, 2021; Schmidt, 2021) is Thunberg’s populist appeal – delineating a moral division between “the good people” and “the corrupt elite, while evoking the existential threats posed by the climate crisis.

But what exactly is populism? A consensus has emerged that populism refers to an appeal to “the people” against “the elite” (Canovan, 1999: 3). The scholarship on environmental populism (e.g. Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2021; Huber et al., 2021; Kulin, et al., 2021) - which refers to the intersection between populism and climate politics – offers a slightly expanded insight. Fu (2024: 6) summarises that environmental populism has been broadly characterised by two features: first, the establishment of a dichotomy between “the people versus the elite”, in which nature is positioned as “the people’s” right, while “the elites” have betrayed the preservation of nature; and second, populist movements’ emphasis on climate emergency to stimulate the mass mobilisation of people.

Yet beyond this consensus and broad categorisations, populism has been a contested concept as pointed out by Aslanidis (2015: 88) and Peters et al. (2020: 928). Populism has been approached by scholars as an ideology (e.g. Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013), a strategy (e.g. Barr, 2018; Weyland, 2021) and a style (e.g. Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007).

However, there is a growing demand to perceive the diverse conceptualisations of populism as not contested, but as complementary to one another. Moffitt and Tormey (2014: 382) propose that the plurality of definitions’ captures the complexity of

populism. More specifically to this dissertation, Sconfienza (2022: 231) argues that no one theory of populism can fully grasp the nexus between populism and climate politics. Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson (2017: 1280) help reconcile this perspective by illuminating how each lens expresses different aspects of populism: the ideology approach explains what populist ideas are, strategy refers to why populism is used, while style reveals how populism is done.

Considering this demand to re-consider different approaches to populism as complementary to one another, this dissertation aims to further the study of Thunberg as a populist through an analysis of how she does populism. Analysing how Thunberg does populism offers two critical contributions to the literature on Thunberg's intersection with populism: first, it facilitates a more comprehensive classification of her as a populist by complementing existing literature focused on the ideological and strategic paradigms of populism and Thunberg; and second, analysing how Thunberg may do populism indicates how populist performance yields the potential to galvanise further climate activism. Using Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) approach to populism as a political style, this dissertation argues that Thunberg does populism through a wide array of performative features, which vary contextually across speeches at rallies and international summits.

The dissertation unfolds in six chapters. The remainder of chapter one provides a brief literature review on Thunberg and populism, highlighting an analytical gap regarding how she does populism, and then proposes two research questions. Subsequently, this chapter offers a conceptual framework - Moffitt and Tormey's populism as a political style - optimal for rectifying this analytical gap and answering the research questions. Chapter two sets out a methodological framework. It introduces Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), suitable for operationalising Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) approach to populism. This chapter also introduces and justifies the data used for analysis and discusses the coding of analysis. Chapters three through five are empirical, delving into the results of analysis, arguing that Thunberg does perform populism, and systematically outlines how, albeit in different ways and to varied degrees across different contexts. Chapter six is a conclusion, discussing how Thunberg resonates with

populism as a political style, while also setting out the dissertation's limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **1.1 - Literature Review**

While there is an expanding body of literature on Thunberg and populism, analysis concerning how she does populism remains incomplete, hampering a complete theorisation of her as a populist. Much of the literature has been dedicated to determining whether Thunberg represents a populist ideology, through the analytical lens of Mudde's conceptualisation of populism.

Mudde defines populism as a thin-centred ideology, representing a moral dichotomy between two homogenous camps - the "pure people" and "corrupt elite" – while populist politics is an expression of the general will (2004: 543). Mudde's approach provided the conceptual framework for several analyses on Thunberg. Series (2020), for instance, conducts a critical discourse analysis to argue that Thunberg's rhetoric exhibits a Manichean rhetoric, dividing world leaders and "the people", while she represents the general will of the latter, akin to Mudde's definition. Similarly, Fu (2025: 11) argues Thunberg's language reflects populist ideas, as she attributes "the worsening climate crisis to the nonfeasance of elites", while the "people can achieve positive outcomes by challenging the will of the elites", echoing Mudde's attributes for populism.

Conversely, Zulianello and Ceccobelli (2020) posit that Thunberg's division of elite and people is not based on morality but on generational terms, thus disqualifying her as a populist under Mudde's framework. Yet, while important to discussions of Thunberg and populism, this debate only explores one aspect of populism – what populism is and do Thunberg's ideas reflected in her discourse qualify.

Importantly, scholars have moved beyond the ideological approach to populism when studying Thunberg. Reinelt hypothesises why Thunberg uses populism, arguing that Thunberg is an illustrative case of Laclau's (2005) approach to populism as a logic of political mobilisation, as her populist appeal brings "many young people around the globe together, who in other respects have very little in common" (Reinelt, 2019: 62).

The diversity of approaches has extended to analyses of how Thunberg does populism. Schmidt (2021: 58), using Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discursive approach to populism, which conceives populism as a form of articulation, moving populism beyond content and towards a style, argues how Thunberg's use of language has managed to construct a "global people" versus "world leaders". Comparatively, Nordensvard and Ketola (2022) frame populism as a mode of storytelling and interrogate how Thunberg does perform populism through a discourse analysis.

The diversity of approaches is a key strength of the literature, satisfying the growing scholarly consensus to view different approaches to populism as complementary to one another, illuminating the multifaceted intersection between Thunberg and populism – exploring whether Thunberg's ideas are consistent with populist ideology, explaining why she may use populism, and how she does populism.

Nevertheless, analyses of how Thunberg does populism are overly reductive, exclusively orientated around investigations of her rhetoric alone (e.g. Schmidt, 2021; Nordensvard and Ketola, 2022). Several scholars (e.g. Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Metilo and Zulianello, 2024; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2024) argue that a populist style does not just encapsulate language but also encompasses a wider range of non-verbal performative features. Modern politics is highly mediated and stylised, with media technologies often privileging the image above other forms of communication (Moffitt, 2022: 558), rendering aspects like the visual never more important to political style than now.

Thus, given that Thunberg gained prominence largely through media coverage (Jung et al., 2020), greater recognition must be afforded to non-verbal aspects of her performance. While analyses incorporating a wide array of Thunberg's performativity - surpassing the sole reliance on language analyses - have been carried out (e.g. Carvalho, 2020; Aiolfi, 2025), they do not analyse Thunberg through the lens of populism. One notable outlier is Kissas (2022) who has interrogated how Thunberg does populism on Instagram, analysing the visual alongside rhetoric. Yet such populist analyses have not been extended to Thunberg's speeches, the medium through which she leveraged most of her support (Carrington, 2019).

This provides an analytical gap for research - how does Thunberg perform populism in her speeches through verbal and non-verbal modes - which is the central focus of this dissertation, offering two main research questions:

1. Does Greta Thunberg perform populism within her speeches?
2. If so, how does Greta Thunberg perform populism within her speeches?

By analysing both Thunberg's rhetoric and non-verbal performative features, this dissertation intends to answer these questions to complement the current literature which has hypothesised Thunberg as a populist through ideological and strategy-orientated perspectives, by offering a richer account of how Thunberg may perform populism within speeches, beyond solely her language use.

## **1.2 - Conceptual Framework**

This dissertation draws on Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) approach to populism as a political style. This approach represents a departure from populism as an ideology, moving beyond the supposed content of populism, by exploring how populism is enacted through "the performative repertoires of leaders" (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 388), simply meaning how a leader performs populism through various modes, including language and non-verbal aspects.

Several scholars (eg. Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Higgins, 2017; Bracciale and Antonio, 2023) have highlighted the importance of investigating how populism is performed, as the highly mediated and stylised nature of contemporary politics has elevated the role of form alongside the content of a political actor's message (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 388).

Drawing on the style approach enables this dissertation to move beyond analyses fixated on the ideological content of Thunberg's speeches (e.g. Series, 2020; Fu, 2025) and alternatively interrogate how Thunberg does populism amid mediated and stylised times.

Importantly, Moffitt and Tormey's political style approach distinguishes itself from other style approaches to populism, offered by Taguieff (1995), Kazin (1998), and de la Torre

(2010). Moffitt aligns this style approach with the discursive-performative camp, perceiving populism as “something that is done and expressed by political actors” (Kefford, Moffitt, and Werner, 2021: 1010). This performative turn empathises that populism is enacted through both rhetorical devices and through visual-aesthetic dimensions (Moffitt, 2022: 557). The acknowledgement of the non-verbal alongside the verbal enables a richer analysis of how Thunberg performs populism than previous analyses which have fixated on Thunberg’s use of language (e.g. Schmidt, 2021; Nordensvard and Ketola, 2022).

In proposing this framework for understanding how populism is done, Moffitt and Tormey, based on an inductive study of uncontroversial cases of populism within existing populist literature, identify three discernible features of populism (2014: 390). These features offer a robust model of how populism as a political style should be analysed and how this dissertation can investigate Thunberg’s populist style. Importantly, Moffitt and Tormey explicitly warns that this model should be considered “the sum of its parts, not the parts themselves” (2014: 391), meaning that for Thunberg to be considered as performing populism, all three of these features must be observable. The three features are detailed in the subsequent subsections

### **1.2.1 - Evocation of the People**

The first feature of Moffitt and Tormey’s populism as a political style is the evocation of the people, which is the central element of populist style that differentiates it from other political styles (2014: 391). Moffitt and Tormey argue that the evocation of the people is both the central emphasis of populism, and drawing on (Arditi, 2007) the subject that populists attempt to “render present” through their performance. This typically manifests in three ways (2014: 391):

1. Emphasis on “the people” as a central theme.
2. The presentation of extreme intimacy with “the people”.
3. A dichotomous division between “the people” and a “corrupt other”.

### **1.2.2 - Crisis, Breakdown, Threat**

Moffitt and Tormey (2014: 392) acknowledge from drawing on Taggart (2000) that populism gets its impetus from crisis. In response to crisis, a populist will “simplify

radically the terms and terrain of political debate” and offer seemingly simple solutions to the crisis (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 392). Moffitt (2015: 189) later expands on this by offering a novel perspective that populism doesn’t just get impetus from crisis, but a populist will actively construct and perpetuate crisis, where crisis is not a “natural phenomenon”, but is socially constructed, mediated and performed. Moffitt (2015) usefully offers a six-step roadmap on how populists perform crisis:

1. Identify failure and emphasise it as a matter of urgency, often giving the failure political salience (2015: 199).
2. Elevate sense of failure by the homogenisation of disparate phenomena under one overarching crisis, amplifying the scale of the crisis, and emphasising short-time frames to resolve the issue (2015: 199).
3. Framing those responsible for crisis, usually through the establishment of a moral binary between the victimised people and perpetrators of the failure (2015: 201).
4. Use media as a tool to propagate the failure, often through spectacular performative events (2015: 203).
5. Present simple solutions and project strong leadership, which typically manifests in the tendency to self-present oneself to be a “straight shooter who cuts through all the bullshit” (Moffitt, 2015: 204).
6. Continue to propagate crisis and prevent it from losing impetus by extending the purview and size of the failure (2015: 207).

### **1.2.3 - Bad Manners**

The final aspect constituting an actor as performing a populist style is the use of “bad manners” (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 382). Inspired by Ostiguy’s (2009) high-low axis of political performance, Moffitt and Tormey (2014: 382) describe bad manners as the “low”, in contrast to the norms of style adopted by elites and technocrats, which represent the “high”. The looseness of the term ‘bad manners’ is deliberate and can manifest in many different ways and may look very different across varied contexts (2019: 58). However, what ultimately constitutes ‘bad manners’ according to Moffitt and Tormey is any performance which opposes the behaviour expected within traditional politics and technocracy, what Ostiguy (2009) refers to as the “high” political style.

### **1.3 - Conclusion**

In sum, this dissertation deploys Moffitt and Tormey's style approach to populism. This approach yields the potential for a more comprehensive analysis of how Thunberg does populism than previous literature has explored, encompassing both rhetorical and non-rhetorical features, while it also offers a robust framework through its introduction of three cornerstones for populist performance, which enable this dissertation to exemplify exactly how Thunberg may do populism, and the degree to which she does use a populist style.

## **Chapter 2 - Methods**

What follows is a three-part chapter, consisting of: an introduction to the method of analysis for the dissertation; the data collected; and an outline of a thematic code, all designed to better analyse whether and how Thunberg adopts a populist style.

### **2.1 - Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is the study of language as evidence of aspects of society, used to examine the implications of choosing one word or structure over another (Taylor, 2013: 4). This dissertation deploys a form of discourse analysis – MDA - defined as a field of discourse which deals with the meaning conveyed when semiotic resources, both verbal and non-verbal, such as facial expressions, use of symbolism, tone and clothing (Elsanhoury et al., 2020: 170) combine in a multimodal phenomenon (Jewitt, Bezemer and O'Halloran, 2016).

MDA is well suited for a more complete analysis of whether and how Thunberg performs populism than other discourse analyses. MDA moves discourse analysis towards an “explication of multiplicity of actions that a social actor engages in simultaneously” (Norris, 2004: 101). The acknowledgement of multiplicity facilitates a more holistic analysis of how Thunberg performs populism than previous literature (e.g. Schmidt, 2021), suitable for the conceptual framework offered by Moffitt and Tormey (2014), incorporating both verbal and non-verbal aspects within populist performance.

MDA has been readily mobilised in populist communication analyses - primarily in the context of social media (e.g. Pettersson and Martikainen, 2025; Lorenzetti, 2020). Yet as D'Errico et al. (2025) notes, political speeches are also multimodal in nature. Therefore, MDA is not only methodologically sound for analysing Thunberg's speeches, but necessary to encapsulate the multimodal nature of her speeches, encompassing verbal, aesthetic and visual cues.

Nevertheless, a notable challenge of MDA is its high degree of researcher subjectivity. When analysing semiotic resources, both language and particularly non-verbal

elements, interpretations are very subjective, meaning different researchers may read into Thunberg's performance differently. To mitigate interpretive subjectivity, this dissertation often cross-references its analyses with external sources that analysed Thunberg's performativity more broadly and not through a populist lens, from political commentary, published scholars and other published student dissertations. This is incredibly useful as "triangulation reduces the greater ambiguity of expressions" (Sommer and Bembnista, 2024: 225). Subsequently the observations that arise from the analysis are not solely reliant on individual researcher subjectivity but are supported by a host of other opinions.

## **2.2 - Data**

This dissertation draws on six videos of Thunberg's speeches – three from appearances at global summits and three from rallies – all collected from published YouTube videos.

The sample is as follows:

Global Summitry:

- COP24 (Connect4Climate, 2018)
- UN Climate Action Summit (PBS Newshour, 2019)
- World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2020)

Rallies:

- New York (Guardian News, 2019)
- Milan (Global News, 2021)
- Glasgow (Guardian News, 2021)

Speeches were analysed as these were the medium through which Thunberg gained most of her support due to the immense media coverage around them (Carrington, 2019). Analysing videos over transcripts of speeches was justified as recordings allow for analysts to gain a more complete understanding of performance (Bonsignori and Camiciottoli, 2016), elucidating a variety of semiotic resources adopted by Thunberg, both verbal and visual.

Speeches were selected via stratified sampling, enabling three speeches to be picked from summitry and three from rallies. This is important as Moffitt and Tormey (2014) argue that populist performance can be contextual, maintaining there is a difference between what Panizza (in WoodrowWilsonCenter, 2013) coins “populist interventions” of mainstream politics and “populism”, where the former represents a part-time use of populist style depending on context, whereas the latter refers to a more permanent use of such style (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 393). Thus, selecting Thunberg’s speeches across different contexts enabled a more nuanced analysis as to whether Thunberg performs in interventions dependent on context, or she always adopts a populist style.

However, this analysis has a relatively small sample size, limiting the scope of comprehensive conclusions on Thunberg’s political style. Maintaining a low sample size was necessary to this dissertation as while it may not paint the full picture of Thunberg’s performances, the limited sample size enables an in-depth analysis of each speech, suitable to MDA, incorporating the analysis of the combination of so many performative features, which is of paramount importance to this dissertation. By drawing on various external sources, from academia to news outlets, which discusses Thunberg’s political style more generally, this dissertation can link its findings to other analyses, allowing the dissertation to comment on Thunberg more comprehensively.

In addition, using videos invites ethical concerns – particularly editorial bias. Using videos from various news channels means that the content of analysis was drawn from the focalisation of a camera operator, which may present a bias focus on certain aspects of Thunberg’s speeches. Again, by drawing on external sources, this dissertation does not solely rely on videos for its data, and mitigates the analysis from too heavily being grounded in potentially bias camerawork for its findings.

### **2.3 - Coding of Analysis**

The analysis is coded akin to the three key features of populism as a political style – evocation of the people, impetus on crisis, and bad manners - discerned from Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014) inductive study of what constitutes populist style, as outlined

within the conceptual framework. This coding framework enables a systematic multimodal assessment of whether and how Thunberg performs populism.

By using these themes, this dissertation operationalises the conceptual framework and allows for a thematic analysis of whether and how Thunberg performs populism through the lens of MDA, assessing whether a combination of Thunberg's semiotic resources throughout her speeches culminate to evoke a sense of these themes.

However, important to note, analysis within each of these themes in isolation cannot conclude that Thunberg performs a populist style, just that she satisfies a certain criterion for a populist style, given Moffitt and Tormey's model is a "sum of its parts". Thus, concluding statements on whether and how Thunberg's performs a populist political style will be reserved for final the conclusion, once Thunberg's engagement with all three codes have been assessed.

### **Chapter 3 - Thunberg's Evocation of "The People"**

This chapter argues that Thunberg consistently performs the three ways evocation of "the people" manifests in populist political style: emphasis on people, intimacy with people, and dividing "the people" versus "the elite" (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391), as outlined in the conceptual framework. Thunberg performs these elements both rhetorically and non-verbally. However, her performance varies between global summits and rallies.

When referring to "the people" this chapter builds on Schmidt's (2021) assessment that Thunberg represents a case of transnational populism – where her imagined appeal to the people transcends national borders, constituting a "global people". Therefore, this chapter argues how Thunberg evokes this "globalised people".

#### **3.1 - Emphasis on "The People"**

The analysis shows that Thunberg performs an emphasis on "the people" throughout all six analysed speeches. However, her performance of this varies contextually: at summits Thunberg rhetorically frames a victimised "global people", whereas at rallies, Thunberg enacts an embodied multimodal performance designed to empower "the people" by rendering them present in her activism.

At global summitry, Thunberg verbally emphasises a victimised "global people":

*"We need to safeguard the future living conditions for Humankind"* (World Economic Forum, 2019: 3:19)

*"The climate crisis is the greatest challenge Homo-sapiens have ever faced"*  
(World Economic Forum, 2019: 1:26)

*"Our civilisation is being sacrificed"* (Connect4Climate, 2018: 1:30)

These quotes illustrate an emphasis on a "globalised people", invoking a transnational identity through lexicon such as: "humankind", "homo-sapiens" and "civilisation", threatened by losing "future living", and being subject to "sacrifice". This reading of her

performance is supported by Carvalho's qualitative content analysis (2020: 35), noting that Thunberg casts an emphasis on people in the face of the climate threat. Thus, the MDA, supported by wider reading, illustrates that Thunberg at summits rhetorically emphasises "the people" by framing them as victims of the climate crisis.

Alternatively, Thunberg's rally performances are more multimodal in her emphasis of "the people", while her focus shifts from victimising the "global people", and instead empowers them. For example, when exclaiming in New York:

*"People are striking today in over 150 countries"* (Guardian News, 2019: 1:52)

Thunberg broadly smiles and proceeds to pause, allowing the crowd to cheer – a performative act that enables the crowd to actively engage with her activism. This rejoiceful rhetoric in celebrating the widespread strikes, in combination with non-verbal performative features like smiling and encouraging the crowd to cheer establishes a shared emotional resonance, visually reinforcing and empowering the transnational people to protest with her.

Similarly, at the Milan protest, she declares:

*"We (fellow activists) are unstoppable and now a better world is possible"*  
(Global News, 2021: 1:44)

This line is delivered with a raised fist – a gesture of power – and is followed by a pause, again to allow the crowd to chant. The combination of her language, claiming the people are "unstoppable", with her powerful body language and audience interaction directly resonates with Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) claim, that as part of the populist's aim to emphasise the people, populists aspire to "render the people present". Thus, her rally performances strengthen the people-centricity of her activism, by activating audience participation through verbal and visual cues.

Additionally, through her spatial mobility, Thunberg also performs an emphasis on the "global people". Attending speeches from Glasgow to New York, she symbolically represents a transnational people. Stone (2021) has argued that the spatial diversity of her speeches is crucial for embodying a globalised people, while Time Magazine (as cited in Felsenthal, 2019: 49) claims she "brings a fragmented world a voice that

transcends backgrounds and borders”, reflecting how she aims to represent a global people. Her global appearances to represent the people further entrenches her populist emphasis on “the people” as a transnational collective.

While Zulianello and Ceccobelli (2020: 625) argue that her message is more eco-centric than anthropogenic, this analysis disagrees with this notion. Aligning with Series (2020) argument that her speeches are human-orientated, and Thendra’s (as cited in Nassen, 2021: 12) claim that “Thunberg’s message isn’t about saving rainforests or whales; it is about saving the most vulnerable people”, this section shows that Thunberg does emphasise “the people” within her speeches, and does so by both rhetorically highlighting their victimhood at summits, and empowering them at rallies through an array of performative features. Thus, while flexible in her performance, Thunberg does emphasise the people across all six speeches, as confirmed by wider readings, satisfying Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014: 391) claim that as part of evoking the people, a populist emphasises the people’s centrality within their performance.

However, Thunberg’s combination of language and non-verbal semiotics at rallies suggests that she performs populism as a political style to a greater degree within these settings, more explicitly emphasising the people through several modes of performance. Nonetheless, Thunberg still does perform this aspect in global summitry through her language, thus qualifying her as performing an emphasis on “the people” and not merely intervening this aspect of populist style sporadically.

### **3.2 - Intimacy with “The People”**

While Thunberg is an activist fearful of climate change, rendering her intimacy with “the people” unsurprising, this section moves beyond biography to illustrate how she explicitly and repeatedly emphasises her closeness with the “global people” through a wide array of semiotic resources. However, her most obvious display of intimacy occurs within rallies.

Thunberg often performs her intimacy through personal pronouns, for instance at COP24 and Glasgow:

*“We have not come here to beg world leaders”* (Connect4Climate, 2018: 2:57)

*“We see through their lies”* (Global News, 2021: 0.45)

The pronoun “we” is a collective signifier of the people, used in all six analysed speeches, which positions herself directly alongside the people frustrated with world leaders. This linguistic alignment positions her as not someone externally advocating for the people, but as an integrated participant in their frustration.

However, the most overt display of intimacy comes from her Milan speech, where she hugs several rallying children after her speech. This gesture symbolises her physical and emotional closeness with the people, joined in their collective vulnerability to climate change and their shared fight for climate action. This is perhaps her strongest display of intimacy, moving beyond strategic rhetoric, enacting a bodily expression of collective belonging.

Thus, Thunberg does satisfy Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014) identification that populists perform intimacy with the people, and she does so consistently across all analysed speeches, through language, a notion supported by wider readings. However, the most pertinent display of this intimacy comes from her Milan speech, suggesting she performs this aspect more strongly at rallies.

### **3.3 - “The People” Versus “The Elite”**

This section argues that Thunberg fulfils the final manifestation of evocation of the people – establishing a dichotomy between “the people” and “the elite” (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). Though, once again while evident across all six analysed speeches, she performs this antagonism most explicitly at rallies.

Thunberg, again uses personal pronouns, but this time to mobilise people’s climate anxiety and frustrations against the elite:

*“They (world leaders) cannot ignore our (the people) screams as we reclaim power”* (Guardian News, 2021: 2:40)

*“We (the people) have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You (world leaders) have ignored us in the past and you will ignore us again”*

(Connect4Climate, 2018: 2:57)

These lines juxtapose “we/us” with “they/you”, casting a dichotomy between “the people” and “the elite”. Thunberg’s framing is not merely oppositional but also moral, framing the world leaders as negligent and careless in the face of human “screams” and “begs”.

At summits, Thunberg presents this dichotomy through the frame of a victimised people betrayed by a careless elite:

*“We who have to live with all the consequences”* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 3:12)

*“It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few”*

(Connect4Climate, 2018: 1:44)

This rhetoric frames “the people” as victims, living with “consequences” and “sufferings”, contrasted with the world leaders void of the same vulnerabilities. Her verbal delivery amplifies these lines, as she adopts a solemn tone, highlighting her victimhood as one of “the people”. Aiolfi (2025) supports this reading of tone, outlining how Thunberg’s voice often breaks, and she pauses for emotional effect, highlighting her distress. This performative sadness invites empathy for “the victimised people”, while antagonising a morally bankrupt and careless elite.

Within summitry, Thunberg amplifies this dichotomy by not only presenting a sadness, but also a disdain for the elite. For instance, at the UN Climate Action Summit, she declares:

*“My message is that we’ll be watching you (world leaders)”* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 0:29)

While she stares down the crowd who applaud. At this moment, Thunberg maintains a stern face, defying the crowd’s expectations by not acknowledging their applause. This antagonism reaffirms the division between herself alongside “the people” and distant from the elite, uncomfortably holding them accountable to her accusatory message.

However, at rallies, Thunberg presents this dichotomy as more charged and combative, as she urges for “the people” to fight “the elite”, as for example in New York and Milan:

*“Let’s continue the fight until we are done”* (Global News, 2021: 1:36)

*“We are fighting for our future”* (Guardian News, 2019: 7:39)

These call to arms shifts the people from victims to active agents of resistance, “fighting” for their cause against world leaders. These lines are coupled with emotive hand gestures, as on delivering the above line in Milan, Thunberg slams one fist into another, suggestive of a degree of anger directed towards world leaders. This shifts the framing of the dichotomy from victimhood to militancy, heightening the performative style of the dichotomy.

Thus, Thunberg satisfies Moffitt and Tormey’s last indication of a populist evocation of the people, through language, gestures and crowd engagement. Nonetheless, the sense of antagonism is amplified at rallies, becoming more visually and emotionally intense, culminating in a more adversarial style. Yet she still does perform this manifestation of populism within summits, just in a milder way.

### **3.4 - Conclusion**

This MDA, supported by external sources, finds that Thunberg certainly does perform an evocation of the people, thereby satisfying Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014) first criteria for performing populism as a political style. Across all six speeches, Thunberg shows the signs of all three populist manifestations of evoking the people, albeit in a way that is contextually dependent.

At summits, Thunberg emphasises the people’s victimhood rhetorically. She builds a more subtle intimacy with the people through her language. Her antagonism of the elite meanwhile is present but is framed as producing melancholy through language and tone.

Conversely, at rallies, Thunberg’s emphasis on the people is more impassioned, rendering them as agents of resistance through a more multimodal display. Meanwhile, her performed intimacy is more explicit, physically joining the people in a hug at Milan.

Finally, the sense of antagonism is performed to a greater degree, through her combative rhetoric and emotive hand gestures.

However, while Thunberg adapts her performative style to different crowds, she is not performing the evocation of the people in “populist interventions”, as she does not selectively mediate this aspect sporadically. Instead, she consistently evokes the people, just to different degrees, thus still satisfying Moffitt and Tormey’s first criteria for populist style and not populist style interventions, and how she has done this as illustrated above is through a wide variety of performative features.

## **Chapter 4 - Performing crisis**

This chapter traces Moffitt's (2015) roadmap for performing crisis, to argue through the MDA and drawing on external sources, that Thunberg consistently performs each of the steps for a populist performance of crisis. Unlike her evocation of the people which differs across varied contexts, Thunberg performs this criterion relatively consistently. Thus, through a repertoire of performative features, Thunberg heavily resonates with Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) second criteria for populism as a political style - performance of crisis.

### **4.1 - Identify Failure**

Thunberg does perform the identification of failure – climate action inertia - emphasising its urgency and political salience. How she identifies failure is through a blend of performative features, but she does so consistently across varied contexts.

One method of identifying failure is Thunberg's apocalyptic tropes, evident in her rhetoric in both summits and rallies, as evidenced by her language at the UN Climate Action Summit and Glasgow rally:

*"We are in the beginning of a mass extinction"* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 1:16)

*"An existential crisis that is already taking lives and livelihoods for countless people all around the world"* (Global News, 2021: 1.09)

Deterministic phrases such as "extinction" and "existential crisis" construct a narrative of impending doom, designed to instil fear around climate inertia, emphasising the importance of the failure to resolve climate change. This analysis of her determinism is supported by Murphy (2021: 199), who argues that Thunberg relies on apocalypticism, grounded in "sensibilities of loss, fear, and imaginings of doom". Thus, from the MDA and wider readings, Thunberg does identify a failure and frames it as a crisis, capable of extinction, just as Moffitt (2015) predicts.

Complementing her language, Thunberg's delivery is infused with melancholy. For example, at the UN Climate Action Summit, she is on the brink of tears, an observation

supported by Mackenzie's (2021: 43) reading of this speech. Her delivery, fusing physical displays of sadness with rhetoric reflects that the failure to resolve climate change is a catastrophic tragedy, drawing emotional attention to this failure.

Additionally, Thunberg imbues this failure with political salience. Thunberg highlights the political salience of the failure by rhetorically emphasising a democratic deficiency between the "the people" and "the elite", as exemplified in both Glasgow and the UN Climate Action Summit:

*"The most affected people in the most affected areas still remain unheard"*

(Guardian News, 2021: 0.56)

*"You say you hear us"* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 1:53)

These statements frame inaction as a systematic disregard for people's voices within international summitry, thus outlining a democratic failure, broadening the atrocities of the failure for sufficient climate action.

Thus, Thunberg does fulfil Moffitt's (2015) first categorisation of a populist performing crisis, having rhetorically crafted a failure and presented it as a crisis, underpinned by her emotional appeal, while also giving the failure political salience, designed to evoke people's frustration towards the lack of action to resolve such crisis. This has been consistent across her speeches, as exemplified from consistently drawing on examples from summitry and rallies.

#### **4.2 - Elevating crisis**

This analysis argues that Thunberg satisfies the second step in Moffitt's (2015: 199) typology – elevating a failure by linking it to a broader system of failures and reinforcing its urgency. Thunberg consistently satisfies this step across all six of her analysed speeches, rhetorically presenting climate inertia as emblematic of wider systems and emphasising its temporal urgency.

Thunberg at Glasgow clearly articulates that climate inaction is systematic of other issues:

*“It (climate inertia) is directly tied to other crises in justices that date back to colonialism and beyond”* (Guardian News, 2021: 1:54)

Here Thunberg embeds the failure of climate governance within historical and political frameworks of systemic inequality, elevating the failure into a multifaceted issue. Furthermore, throughout her speeches, she critiques economic structures alongside climate inertia:

*“It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 1:47)

*“Financial success has come with an unthinkable price tag”* (World Economic Forum, 2020: 0:59)

These statements reposition climate inertia, directly linking it to economic systems, complicit in profiteering from environmental destruction, amplifying the scale of the crisis by condemning global capitalism. This analysis is affirmed by Naz (2022: 123), who identifies that Thunberg presents several crises as inseparable from climate inertia. Therefore, Thunberg does, across various contexts, elevate the crisis by presenting it as systematic of other issues.

Additionally, Thunberg heightens the sense of urgency to elevate the crisis, repeatedly warning of a narrowing window for action, through her language which foregrounds a sense of immediacy:

*“We are running out excuses and we are running out of time”* (Connect4Climate, 2018: 3:07)

*“They are discussing a climate emergency that is here and now”* (Global News, 2021: 1:09)

This rhetoric consistently injects a temporal element to the failings of sufficient climate action, elevating the sense of failure. A similar finding was produced by Fonesca and Castro (2021), identifying through their systematic quantitative discourse analysis, that Thunberg constantly calls for the need for urgent action, across numerous speeches.

The combination of linking the climate crisis to economic systems and the emphasis on the urgency with which the climate crisis must be dealt with certainly satisfies Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) categorisation of a populist performing an elevation of crisis, which she has done consistently across different contexts, through primarily her rhetoric.

### **4.3 - People Versus Elite**

Having identified a failure and elevated it, Thunberg then establishes those responsible, just as Moffitt's (2015: 201) roadmap predicts. Thunberg's rhetoric and emotion consistently reinforces a dichotomy, explicitly casting world leaders as culpable for the climate crisis.

There are multiple instances across global summitry and rallies whereby Thunberg frames the world leaders as architects for the climate crisis. For instance, at the UN Climate Action Summit and Glasgow rally, she exclaims:

*"You have stolen my dream, my childhood with empty words"* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 0:59)

*"The voices of future generations are drowning in their green wash and empty promises"* (Guardian News, 2021: 1.06)

This rhetoric constructs a moral binary between world leaders, presented as amoral, and a victimised people – particularly youth, who have been "stolen" from and are "drowning". Thunberg's construction of the people here is not only transnational, but also generational, invoking "future generations" and "childhood", heightening the sense of injustice, as children suffer the consequences of world leaders' actions. This reading of a generational element is supported by Schmidt (2021: 68), who asserts that Thunberg's construction of the people often has a focus on future generations and youth. Thus, by framing the elite as perpetrators of the damage and children as victims, Thunberg explicitly identifies those responsible and highlights their amorality in harming children, society's most vulnerable demographic.

Alongside her rhetorical moral condemnation, Thunberg's emotion amplifies blame placed on the elites. At both the UN Climate Summit and Glasgow, her stern facial

expressions conveyed the gravitas of her claims, while her hand gestures, constantly pointing downwards signified her hammering condemnation of world leaders. Aiolfi (2025) points out that Thunberg persistently draws on emotion to further antagonise the world leaders. Thus, through both language and emotional appeal, Thunberg consistently and explicitly points to the world leaders for the emerging crisis, positioning them as culprits in the harm of future generations.

Therefore, Thunberg does illuminate those responsible for the crisis, as Moffitt (2015) suggests a populist does, by establishing a moral binary between “the people” and “the elite”. While Nodensvard and Ketola (2015: 201) have already argued this point as part of Thunberg’s engagement with populism, this analysis moves beyond rhetoric to emphasise that she carries out this blame through language alongside emotional delivery, effectively framing the crisis as a dualistic one, caused by the world leaders, and disadvantaging the “transnational people” and particularly the future generations.

#### **4.4 - Propagate Media**

This section argues that Thunberg satisfies this next step of a populist performance of crisis (Moffitt, 2015) through propagating media attention. Thunberg explicitly outlines the importance of capturing media attention, problematising that:

*“The media has failed to create broad public awareness”* (World Economic Forum, 2020: 1:22)

However, how she captures media attention differs across protests and global summitry. Through protests, such as in New York, Thunberg’s speeches are often preceded by musical performances, creating a festival-like atmosphere. This not only galvanises grassroots support but also captures media attention due to the huge attendances as illustrated by numerous reports on the event (e.g. Bornstein, 2024; Felix, 2019).

Thunberg also captures media attention through symbolism. In Milan, Thunberg stands in front of children holding protest banners. This iconic symbolism resonates with the visual culture of media, which often privileges the picture, as illustrated by the striking

image of Thunberg joined by protesting children in Milan being used as a thumbnail image for several news articles (e.g. Barry, 2021; Hertsgaard, 2021).

In contrast, within the formal environment of summitry – where Thunberg cannot control staging - she relies on provocative rhetoric and emotional delivery to capture media attention. Her infamous line:

*“How dare you!”* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 0:59)

Contrasts the typically sterile language of technocracy seen in global summitry. The declarative clause reveals a statement of anger, and coalesced with her stern facial expressions, this line has become an emotional spectacle. As Fiadotava (2023: 305) observes, the accusatory tone accompanied with her face of disgust has “began to have a life of its own”, circulating on social media, symbolic of youth-led defiance.

Thunberg’s cultivation of media attention within this analysis aligns with findings from Mede and Schroeder (2024: 803), who argue that Thunberg is incredibly media-savvy, satisfying the idea that a populist uses the media to propagate crisis (Moffitt, 2015). Although her tactics do differ, the impact is consistent, able to capture media attention at rallies and summits, through orchestrating spectacularised and symbolic events at the former and relying on her rhetoric and emotive expressions at the latter.

Considering both formats succeed in capturing media attention, it is insufficient to conclude that she performs the propagation of the media at different strengths contextually, having no control over summit staging. Her ability to propagate the media across different contexts instead serves to illustrate how effective she is in capturing media attention through a diverse range of performative features.

#### **4.5 - Simple Solutions and Strong Leadership**

This section illuminates how Thunberg does present strong leadership, while offering simple solutions to the crisis, akin to Moffitt’s (2015) penultimate step for populist performance of crisis. These elements are performed primarily through her rhetoric across speeches.

Firstly, Thunberg frequently insists that resolving the climate crisis is far easier than world leaders let on, as at the World Economic Forum and New York, she states:

*“The main solution is so simple that even a small child can understand it”* (World Economic Forum, 2020: 2:25)

*“We are doing this for leaders to wake up”* (Guardian News, 2019: 0:56)

Here Thunberg frames the crisis in summits and rallies as easily solvable, rejecting complexity and nuance. This serves to delegitimise the world leaders, caught up in bureaucratic processes, which often result in inaction through attempting to find complex solutions and compromise. Thunberg directly delegitimises the world leaders when claiming in Glasgow:

*“Our leaders are not leading”* (Guardian News, 2021: 2:44)

The juxtaposition between the simplicity of solutions and the inaction of world leaders enables Thunberg to frame herself as an alternative – a “straight-shooter” (Moffitt, 2015: 204), who defies bureaucratic obfuscation, as showcased at UN Climate Action Summit and again in Glasgow:

*“To do what we have to, we must speak clearly, no matter how uncomfortable that may be”* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 0:39)

*“We are tired of their blah blah blah”* (Guardian News, 2021: 2:40)

Here Thunberg clearly has a disdain for vague rhetoric, associating world leaders with empty the signifier – “blah blah blah” and claims they don’t “speak clearly”. This rhetorical style not only condemns the elite leadership but reaffirms her role as a spokesperson for what needs to be said.

Moreover, at Glasgow and COP24 Thunberg positions herself and fellow climate activists as the true leaders for climate action:

*“Our leaders are not leading; this is what true leadership looks (points to the crowd)”* (Guardian News, 2021: 2:44)

*“The real power belongs to the people”* (Connect4Climate, 2018: 3:19)

These statements reflect Thunberg's argument for the necessity for leadership to manifest in the people and their perception that the crisis is simple to resolve. This analysis is supported by analyses from (Murray, 2020: 23; and Sjögren, 2020: 11), who suggest that Thunberg speaks of the climate crisis in a simple way, opposite to typical politicians. Thus, from the MDA and wider readings, Thunberg does simplify the terrain of political debate, while she presents herself and fellow activists as bastions for the necessary simple solutions for climate action, satisfying this stage of a populist performance of crisis.

#### **4.6 - Continue to Propagate the Crisis**

While perhaps too early to determine, as the support for Thunberg's agenda is still pertinent and has not yet become obsolete in political discourse, this section argues that Thunberg seemingly does continue to propagate the crisis by increasing its size and purview. She does so through her rhetoric, broadening the scope of the climate crisis.

Again, Thunberg links the climate crisis to other crises to increase its magnitude at the UN Climate Action Summit:

*"We need to focus on equity"* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 3:46)

*"If solutions within this system are so impossible to find, then maybe we should change the system itself"* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 2:52)

These statements exemplify a shift from climate-specific policy failures to a broader critique of the global political and economic order. However, for the most part, Thunberg has largely maintained a focus on the climate crisis within her speeches, and it is yet to be seen how she will continue to reproduce the sense of crisis, given she is still widely covered in the media. Thus, only time will tell if Thunberg truly does satisfy this criterion for Moffitt's prediction of a populist performance of crisis, as her agenda faces the prospect of losing traction.

Nevertheless, Thunberg's infusion of other crises within the climate agenda certainly has a strong alignment with Moffitt's (2015) last step in continuing to reproduce the

sense of crisis, demonstrating her acknowledgement of the need to sustain the momentum of crisis, by increasing its size and purview.

#### **4.7 - Conclusion**

This MDA, supported by external sources, finds that Thunberg's performative strategies do closely align with Moffitt's (2015) extended framework of Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) theorisation of a populist's performance of crisis. Unlike Thunberg's evocation of the people, her performance of crisis is consistent throughout summitry and rallies.

Across both contexts: Thunberg identifies a failure and elevates it through rhetoric and emotional delivery; fashions those responsible through a dichotomous division between "the people" and "the elite" via language and facial expressions; propagates the media attention by staging spectacular rallies and emotively breaking the sterile nature of summitry; and offers simple solutions and presents strong leadership, while increasing the purview of the crisis through rhetoric. Therefore Thunberg consistently satisfies Moffitt and Tormey's second criterion of populism as a political style.

## **Chapter 5 - Bad Manners**

While bad manners for Thunberg manifests in many ways, as already discussed, such as her directness and slander of world leaders, this chapter focuses on Thunberg's performance of bad manners in two ways: her self-presentation as an outsider to politics; and her colourful and emotional appeal, both of which oppose associations with traditional political style, and thus qualify as bad manners (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014).

While previous chapters have touched on her self-presentation as an outsider, particularly in her establishment of intimacy with "the people", and her colourful and emotional performance throughout, notably within chapters regarding her dichotomous division between "the people" and "the elite", here the analysis pivots toward the deliberate performativity of bad manners through various semiotic resources, positioning herself in opposition to institutional decorum of Ostiguy's (2009) identified "high politics".

However, this chapter suggests that while consistent in her self-presentation as an outsider, her colourful and emotional appeal is less prevalent in summitry than in rallies. Nonetheless, Thunberg still exhibits both aspects in her speeches to some degree, thus categorising her as not "intervening" with these elements, but instead consistently performing them, just to different degrees.

### **5.1 - Outsider**

This section argues that rather than simply claiming outsider status to traditional politics, being a child activist, Thunberg actively embodies it within both summitry and rallies, thus performing bad manners through opposing traditional conceptions of traditional and "high" (Ostiguy, 2007) political style.

Whereas, political figures often dress in formalwear, Thunberg embodies her child-status – from wearing an oversized red coat in Glasgow to a pink shirt at the UN Climate Action Summit – she visually signals her disassociation from world leaders, and

resonance with the people she aims to represent. Not only does her casual wear resonate with the people generally, due its informality, but the colourful and oversized attire represents a youthfulness, aligning herself with young people. Through this visual style in both summitry and rallies, Thunberg presents herself as an outsider to politics dominated by adult world leaders, by reinforcing her youthful and ordinary identity, resonating with the people, and specifically the younger generation.

Another way in which Thunberg draws on her youth to present herself as an outsider is her ephebic rhetoric. This is something she emphasises, when claiming at the UN Climate Action Summit and the New York rally:

*“I should be back in school, on the other side of the ocean”* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 0:47)

*“It is us young people that have taken to the streets”* (Guardian News, 2019: 1:42)

Here Thunberg conveys the absurdity of her as a child having to speak on behalf of climate justice. She frames her very presence as a condemnation of adult leadership and incompetence in handling the climate crisis. Her physical smallness and youthful voice are powerful in symbolising her contrast to the adults in the audience of summits and rallies, reinforcing her lack of belonging amongst world leaders, who are insufficient in their climate action. As Mackenzie (2020) notes Thunberg actively embraces her youthfulness as the cornerstone of her identity within speeches. Thus, according to this analysis and wider reading, Thunberg intentionally embodies a youthfulness, separating herself from politicians.

Further reinforcing her lack of belonging, Thunberg uses child-like slander of the elite, to frame them as fantastical. At COP24, she claims:

*“All you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth”*  
(Connect4Climate, 2018: 0:47)

Thunberg’s use of phrases such as “fairy tales” contrast Ostiguy’s (2009) proposal of high political style, which is more formal and less figurative. Once again, this reading is supported by external sources, as Aiolfi (2025) argues that Thunberg uses her

youthfulness to position herself alongside the ordinary people and children she aims to represent.

Therefore, this analysis agrees with Time magazine's assessment that Thunberg is an "an ordinary teenage girl who, in summoning the courage to speak truth to power, became the icon of a generation" (cited in Murphy, 2021: 196), as she consistently performs her ordinariness across summits and rallies through language and clothing to portray her child-status. In this regard, Thunberg certainly performs a type of Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) identified bad manners, through actively embodying her identity as a child, consistently across summits and rallies, directly opposing what Ostiguy (2009) would expect from a high political style.

## **5.2 - Emotion and colourful performance**

This section argues that a central feature of Thunberg's performance is her emotional and figurative language, in unison with emotive expression. While this aspect of performance is present across different contexts, the levels which her speeches exhibit these characteristics varies contextually. At rallies, she heavily embraces this style, while at summits, she occasionally adopts a technocratic rhetoric, straying away from bad manners. However, even within institutional settings, Thunberg still retains some degree of emotion and colourful performance which constantly erupt and puncture the formality of elite discourse.

Thunberg does utilise colourful language across summits and rallies. For instance, at the World Economic Forum and Glasgow, she exclaims:

*"Our house is on fire"* (World Economic Forum, 2020: 0.04)

*"The voices of future generations are drowning"* (Guardian News, 2021: 1:06)

In conveying the gravitas of the climate crisis, Thunberg uses metaphors, claiming a "house" representative civilisation is on "fire" and that voices are "drowning". Instead of trying to appear objective and scientifically accurate, Thunberg instead intends to appeal through performing colourful language. These metaphors evoke crisis through sensory imagery, designed to promote her sense of emotional distress. This analysis is

supported by Aiolfi (2025), who claims that Thunberg persistently relies on metaphors, idioms or personification, making her speeches not only straightforward, but also engaging. Thus, Thunberg's language resonates with bad manners, not trying to appear objective, but instead prioritising emotionally provocative performance, in contrast to the more sterile "high" style (Ostiguy, 2009) of traditional politics.

Another way in which Thunberg distances her performance from Ostiguy's (2009) high political style is her use of anecdote to evoke crisis. For instance:

*"The year 2078 I will celebrate my 75th birthday. If I have children maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask why you didn't do anything"*  
(Connect4Climate, 2018: 2.05)

Accompanied by her language, Thunberg adopts a softened voice and slower pace, encouraging listeners to visualise this narrative. Unlike scientific advocacy for climate action, Thunberg's use of anecdote over statistics provides a more personal and emotional appeal for climate action, instead of trying to appear objective.

Not only does Thunberg deploy anecdote within her activism, but she reinforces her demand for climate action through non-verbal intensity. At the UN Climate Action Summit, she is on the verge of tears, while at rallies, Thunberg flares her hands and varies pacing of her speeches. These non-verbal performative features are in direct contrast to drier nature of performing Ostiguy's (2009) identification of high political style, which prioritises the appearance of being calm and well-measured.

Nonetheless, there is a noticeable separation between her speeches at rallies, directly performing to "the people" from world leaders at summits. Within summit settings, Thunberg does at times revert to performing Ostiguy's (2009) high political style, adopting scientific terminology, as within the UN Climate Summit she outlines:

*"Tipping points, most feedback loops additional warming hidden by air pollution"*  
(PBS Newshour, 2019: 2.49)

*"To have a 67% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees of a global temperature rise, the best odds given by the IPCC"* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 3.20)

This use of scientific language is more associated with the high axis of political performance and is far more sparsely utilised in the three analysed speeches from rallies. However, while Thunberg does transcend from the low axis of political style here, her emotive demands overshadow this scientific language, explicitly breaking the norms of summitry. For instance:

*“I want you to feel the fear I feel everyday”* (World Economic Forum, 2020: 5.34)

*“If you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you”* (PBS Newshour, 2019: 4.27)

On delivering this last line in particular, Thunberg flares her hands, demonstrating the intense emotion of her performance in holding the world leaders accountable for climate action.

Thus, while she occasionally performs a high political style, her core communicative style aligns far more with emotional and colourful performance through language and gestures. Subsequently, this analysis disagrees with as Zulianello and Ceccobelli's (2020) assessment that Thunberg's performance is technocratic, as while she supports the science advocating for climate action, her performances are far more personalistic and emotional than technocratic and scientific. At rallies, Thunberg repeatedly uses emotional language and furthers the colourful nature of her performance through her tone and gestures. Similarly, at summitry her speeches contain emotional and colourful language, through metaphors, reaffirming her performance is grounded in emotional visibility and the disruption of dry and supposedly objective political style of world leaders.

## **5.4 - Conclusion**

Thunberg's political style, rooted in her outsider status and colourful performance reflects an embodiment of Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) final criterion for populism as a political style. Thunberg performs these aspects of bad manners through her language, clothing and tone.

Although she does occasionally dip into the high end of the political performance axis at global summitry, adopting drier language which delves into scientific evidence, this does not diminish her credentials as performing bad manners. Thunberg joins this scientific rhetoric with anecdotes, provoking emotion, and demands world leaders feel emotion towards the climate crisis, resonating with bad manners, and are elements which stick out in her performance overshadowing her occasional technocratic language.

## **Chapter 6 – Conclusion**

This dissertation aimed to discern whether and how Thunberg performs populism beyond her rhetoric, to complement literature regarding the ideological and strategic paradigms of Thunberg's engagement with populism. In doing so, this dissertation would contribute to a more complete categorisation of Thunberg as populist, helpful for understanding how a teenager accrued widespread support.

By operationalising populism as a political style through MDA and wider readings on Thunberg's performative style, this dissertation builds on analyses produced by Schmidt (2021) and Nordensvard and Ketola (2022), by showing how Thunberg performs populism not only rhetorically but non-rhetorically.

The dissertation's findings show that Thunberg performs the three criteria for populism as a political style: evocation of the people, performance of crisis, and bad manners, and given Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) model is a "sum of its parts", Thunberg therefore heavily resonates with populism as a political style, by satisfying all three criteria. How she does this, is through repertoires of performative features, both verbal and non-verbal, from language use to tone, gestures, clothing and staging.

However, the findings show that Thunberg performs the evocation of the people and bad manners differently and to varied degrees dependent on context. Thunberg performs the evocation of the people more emotively in rallies than she does in global summitry, suggesting her political style resonates more with populism in rallies than summitry. Similarly, Thunberg adopts bad manners more explicitly in rallies, and even dips into elements of the technocratic style in summitry, again suggesting varied degrees of engagement with populism as a political style, dependent on context.

However, Thunberg still retains a high resonance with populism as a political style in each of the three components of Moffitt and Tormey's criteria. Thus, while this dissertation does acknowledge that Thunberg's populist performance varies contextually, this does mean she can be categorised as performing in "populist interventions", but instead she does always perform a populist style, just to varied strengths, and she does so through a rich array of performative features.

## **6.1 - Limitations and Recommendations**

The findings of the dissertation not only help categorise Thunberg as a populist, facilitating an explanation how she has amassed significant support, but also pertains broader benefits. The study of environmental populism has become increasingly prominent, with scholars assessing populism's influence on emerging activist groups like Extinction Rebellion (Marquardt and Lederer, 2022; Sconfienza, 2022) and pro-climate politicians such as Jean-Luc Melenchon (Chazel, 2023; Marliere, 2019). This dissertation offers a framework, combining populism as a political style and MDA, which enables a comprehensive analysis of how someone may do populism when engaging with climate activism, useful for understanding the political style of Thunberg, and if replicated in other studies, may yield potential to illuminate how numerous other political climate activists may do populism to mobilise support.

However, this research may be improved in a few ways. First, only six speeches were sampled, as this offered a balance between an in-depth engagement with each speech and ensured there was a big enough sample to draw conclusions from Thunberg's populist style. However, this dissertation's length limited the potential for increased scope and depth of analysis. To rectify this, future scholarship could use a similar structure but provide a more in-depth analysis of a climate activists populist performances, while incorporating more speeches.

Another limitation was the high degree of interpretive subjectivity within this dissertation, particularly involved in analysing non-verbal semiotic resources. Future research could mitigate this limitation by carrying out primary research, such as interviews from spectators to include other opinions on Thunberg's or other political actors' populist performances, grounding individual subjectivity of an MDA in a broader interpretive consensus.

Nonetheless, this dissertation outlines the necessity to incorporate a wide array of performative features when studying climate activism and populism, while also providing a foundational framework for comprehensive analysis of how populism is done within climate politics.

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